The Ironic Internet: an investigation into tweeting what we don't mean

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Abstract

This paper deals with the intersection of internet language and the phenomenon of irony; specifically, it investigates how irony is produced and marked in text-based communication over the internet. This is not a trivial question because irony production is often marked extra-linguistically, such as with tone of voice. Despite the lack of an obvious analogy in text-based communication, irony is often used and (mis-)understood on the internet. In order to investigate how this is possible, this paper uses a pragmatic framework based on previous literature surrounding irony to analyze a case study of irony use. The case study follows the account of a prolific user of Twitter and examines how and when they use irony and which uses of irony are understood and misunderstood. The results of this help put together a better understanding of how irony is used on the internet as well as work towards an idea of why it might be used on the internet, as opposed to in face-to-face communication.

1 Introduction

As an avid internet user, I've noticed that it can be a pretty ironic place — people often don't mean exactly what they say (or, more accurately, what they type), and it can be hard to determine exactly when this is the case and what exactly they are trying to say. For example, when browsing the video sharing app TikTok, I came across a video of a woman describing how happy she was in her relationship. It was a sincere video, but came across as extremely saccharine. I've printed one of the comments under the video as example (1).

(1) "i'm so happy for them and wish them nothing but joy and happiness 😀"

To me, this immediately came across as ironic for a couple of reasons. The comment seems much too exuberant (judging from the intensifier *so* and the use of both *joy* and *happiness* for somebody discussing a relationship where they don't know either party, and the emoji used is one that I commonly read as ironic because of how insincere the expression seems. However, this wasn't the case for everybody I showed the comment to, many of whom read it as sincere.

Undoubtedly, it is difficult to get across irony competently on the internet; in person, we have useful markers like a recognizable ironic tone of voice to show that we're being ironic (Kreuz & Roberts 2009). But on the internet, there is no such obvious marker — some may use emoji, as in (1) (according to my interpretation), some may rely on just context, or, as Gretchen McCulloch discusses in her book *Because Internet*, some may come up with ad-hoc methods of explicit irony marking. These include markers formatted after computer code such as \s, frequently used on forums like Reddit to indicate that the previous sentence is sarcastic. One problem with markers like these, however, is that they make the irony obvious, which can remove a lot of the fun from being ironic. And, even without explicit markers like these, people perform irony on the internet quite frequently. The main goal of this paper is to investigate how people do this and, secondarily, to begin to think about why they may.

My hypothesis is that people do not use explicit markers of irony often; though I have seen the use of \s, it is often met with ridicule and, even when people don't use it, irony is frequently

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understood (though it is frequently misunderstood as well). I believe what is more common is reliance on contextual factors, like reliance on the fact that one's audience knows how one feels about a certain topic; and a kind of parody, where someone will imitate the typing style of a certain person or a certain type of person in order to get across that they are being ironic. Both rely on context quite heavily, which makes some predictions that when this context does not exist, irony may be more often misinterpreted where it might be understood in face-to-face communication based on tone of voice.

In order to examine methods of irony production on the internet, I will be looking at a case study of a prominent Twitter user — Twitter is a useful platform for this because of how analogous tweets are to verbal utterances; they are often unfiltered and are less constrained by conventions of written speech than other, more formal kinds of written language. Observing how a user of Twitter performs irony and when these uses are understood and when they are not should provide a great place to start in terms of understanding the mechanisms of irony on the internet.

To begin, §2 will look at background literature in order to begin constructing a framework for how to analyze irony on the internet. This section will be divided into three parts, each covering different areas of relevant background literature — language on the internet, irony in general, and irony on the internet. Then, §3 will introduce the case study, walking through successful and unsuccessful instances of irony performance by the Twitter user. These will be analyzed under the framework developed in §2. Next, §4 will discuss the implications of the findings in §3. Finally, §5 concludes.

2   Background

The following sections will discuss existing literature on internet language and irony. The first will provide an overview of literature on internet language. Next, literature on irony will be discussed. Finally, the intersection of the two will be discussed — literature related to how irony works on the internet.

2.1 Language on the Internet

Much work has been done on how the internet has shaped our use of language. Perhaps most notable is Gretchen McCulloch's 2020 work *Because Internet*, which discusses a wide variety of language phenomena on the internet, such as emoji and memes (McCulloch 2020). There is research which deals with more specific issues as well, such as Waseleski (2006), which explores how the use of exclamation marks in computer-mediated-communication (CMC) differs across genders. Of particular interest to this paper is Terkourafi et al. (2018), which uses a pragmatics framework to analyze a series of tweets that led to a tenure-track professor's job offer retraction — which meanings of the tweets were understood, and by which audiences? What is it about the internet that allows such catastrophically-divergent views on what an utterance means?

Before beginning the review of literature, it is important to note the scope of this paper — it is not intended to be an explication of the nuances of different kinds of irony; rather, it investigates in an impressionistic way through a case study how irony can be performed and understood on the internet, where one might expect this would be difficult given the lack of tone. Because of this, no sharp distinction will be made between the concepts of irony and sarcasm, for example [1]. Despite the limited scope of the paper, a framework of irony will still be needed to conduct the case study — the rest of §2 will develop this by reviewing existing literature.

2.1.1 Language and Audience on Twitter

In their 2018 paper "Uncivil Twitter," Terkourafi et al. (2018) examine a case study of how a series of tweets led to the retraction of a tenure-track professor's job offer. In doing so, they discuss the communicative space of Twitter and the ways in which it allows for these kinds of communication breakdowns. In this case, the professor, Steven Salaita, tweeted out a series of tweets critical of Israel. Many who saw these tweets were quite outraged at them and this led

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[1]For a discussion of the distinctions between the two, see Dynel (2018)

to the professor's job offer being revoked.

In examining this case, Terkourafi et al. (2018) argue that the tweets made were quite multi-layered, with many different possible interpretations and coded messages. Certain interpretations were antisemitic ones, and these were the interpretations that led to anger about the tweets. The authors argue that these are not the only interpretations, nor even the interpretations that Salaita meant for the tweets to have. Twitter is a space with many potential audiences, and this means that users of the website must have strategies to target certain tweets toward different audiences and to make sure the correct interpretations are available to the correct audiences. However, because of the abundance of audiences, this is a tall task, and Salaita failed — even though he attempted to clarify that he intended his tweets to be critical of Israel but not antisemitic, some of the audiences his tweets reached did not interpret the tweets in the expected way, likely due to the long and fraught history of discourse surrounding Israel where good-faith criticism is hard to separate from antisemitism (and where some believe the two cannot be separated). Ultimately, the authors of the paper argue that this phenomenon is quite hard to avoid on Twitter because of the multiplicity of audiences; this, they say, tends to result in attention being drawn away from the nuances and implicated meanings of tweets towards the directly encoded meanings. Ultimately, although there are strategies for doing so, it is simply not as possible to tailor communication on Twitter towards an audience — this is related to a phenomenon known as context collapse where multiple audiences are flattened into one, as discussed in Marwick & Boyd (2011). This has disruptive effects towards communication — in standard face-to-face communication, people present themselves differently to different audiences, tailoring their communication style to each. Context collapse means that these different contexts in which the self-presentation of a communicator may differ cannot be distinguished from each other because of how wide-reaching the internet is. So, communicating and being understood in a nuanced way is much more difficult.

The fact of context collapse does differentiate Twitter discourses from face-to-face ones, but despite this fact, and in part because of it, Twitter is a useful space to study language.

2.1.2 Internet Language as an Object of Study

The validity of these kinds of papers is predicated on internet language as a linguistically-useful object of study; linguists generally study spoken language because written language often has extra-linguistic conventions imposed upon it that influence how much it can actually tell us about how humans produce and process language. Though the internet is a form of written language, it contains many domains where the language is in an informal enough register that the regular conventions of written language do not apply and the result is something quite akin to spoken language, such as Twitter. This means that these areas of the internet are rife with useful and interesting data to study. This data can help us understand how language works on the internet, of course, but even more than this, it can tell us something about how language works in general. For example, though Terkourafi et al. (2018) is explicitly about language and reaction to language on Twitter, it provides a jumping-off point to ask why these kinds of communication breakdowns seem so much more common on the internet than in face-to-face communication. Internet language does not exist in isolation; it is a reflection of the language we speak, and looking at the reflection can tell us something about the object itself. One such object is irony, which is prevalent on the internet. Linguistically, it is an interesting phenomenon, upon which much work has been written.

2.2 Accounts of Irony

There is a rich wealth of literature on the topic of irony from a linguistic perspective which offers multiple frameworks for analyzing irony — in other words, how a speaker gets the idea of an ironic statement across. Generally, ironic utterances get across a meaning which is counter to the literal meaning of the words in some way. For example, someone uttering (2) after getting a flat tire very likely means the exact opposite of what they are saying.

(2) "Just what we needed."

The question then arises how this can be accounted for linguistically. How is it that someone says something which means the opposite of its literal denotation, and how is it that their meaning is understood? The traditional account analyzes the ironic meaning of a statement as a figurative meaning which is produced in addition to the literal meaning (Sperber & Wilson 1981). The problem with this analysis is that the linguistic mechanism for producing this figurative meaning is unclear; it is an ad-hoc solution to irony which does not truly answer the question of how irony is produced.

H.P. Grice's theory of implicature provides a starting point for developing an answer to this question (Grice 1975, 1978). An implicature is an extra-semantic meaning of an utterance which is produced in context. In other words, it is not derived from the literal meaning of the words spoken, but from the context in which they are spoken. The theory of implicature relies on the idea that speakers in a conversation are cooperative — that they are truthful to the best of their knowledge, that they say what is relevant (and no more), and that they speak according to convention (with regard to length of an utterance, for example). For example, in an utterance like (3), Speaker 2 makes a statement that doesn't directly answer Speaker 1's question but, assuming that Speaker 2 is cooperative and saying something relevant, an implicature arises that the station is open — otherwise, Speaker 2 would not have mentioned it.

(3) a. Speaker 1: Where can I get gas around here?

   b. Speaker 2: There's a station just around the corner.

So, when a speaker says something ironic, such as (2), which is very clearly not true, Grice argues that an implicature arises. Someone hearing (2) will understand that the speaker is clearly not saying the truth, and yet, their statement must be relevant or else they would not have said it. So, the speaker must be trying to get across some statement which is relevant — the most obvious is the direct opposite of what was said; thus, this ironic meaning arises as an

implicature (Grice 1975). It is important to note that Grice does not believe the literal meaning is truly said by the speaker; they only make as if to say it in order to implicate what they mean.

However, Grice does not explain exactly why the opposite meaning is the most obvious — this is one point which future literature attempts to explain. In addition, they attempt to tackle questions Grice raises about affect and polarity — for example, why a compliment can be meant sarcastically and taken as an insult, but an insult cannot very easily be meant sarcastically and taken as a compliment. Also, ironic statements are not made about just anything; one would generally not point out a car's broken windows by ironically stating that all its windows are intact. There is usually a "target" of irony that is put down in a way.

2.2.1 The Echoic Account

Sperber & Wilson (1981) take issue with Grice's account of irony, claiming that it hardly improves upon the ad-hoc nature of the original account and doesn't actually work under a framework of implicature because, among other reasons, the so-called implicature arising from an ironic statement does not add on to what was said; it cancels out the encoded meaning completely and imposes a new, contradictory meaning. They are not satisfied with Grice's idea that the literal meaning is not actually said, but only made as if to be said and consequently they argue that his theory is counter to the accepted account of the mechanism of implicature, where the encoded meaning still exists and is supplemented by the implicature rather than being replaced by it.

So, unsatisfied with this account of irony, Sperber & Wilson (1981) propose their own. They claim that to understand irony from a framework of implicature, the distinction between *using* and *mentioning* a statement must first be understood. Using a statement is the standard, unmarked situation, where (generally speaking) a speaker is committed to the truth of the statement and trying to get it across to listeners (except in obvious exceptions, such as lying). What is relevant in the case of irony is mentioning a statement, where the speaker is not committed to the truth of the statement, but is instead talking about the statement.

With this in mind, an account of irony dependent on the use/mention distinction can be developed. According to Sperber & Wilson (1981), when a speaker is ironic, they are not using the statement, but mentioning it echoically — this means that the statement is either a reference to a salient statement made earlier or a statement that could have been made. This can account for certain concomitants of irony, like the distinctive tone of voice that often goes along with such statements. When somebody hears a speaker mention a statement, they will assume that the speaker is being cooperative and following the Gricean maxims and thus go through a process of reasoning to figure out why the speaker is mentioning the statement. In the case of (1), the reasoning process might proceed something like the following: "Why would the speaker say something like that, when a flat tire is the exact opposite of what we need? They must be mentioning the statement — but why would they do that? It must be to show their attitude towards the idea that a flat tire is what we need. They must think that idea is ridiculous."

The authors argue that their theory can also account for some other features of irony such as the asymmetric polarity — negative statements are worse candidates for irony because there must be past doubts or fears to echo in order for a negative statement to be mentioned in an ironic manner.

In this way, Sperber & Wilson (1981) argue, the idea of irony can be reconciled with a Gricean theory of implicature such that irony is not an implicature which cancels out the meaning of an utterance, but is rather an implicature which adds on to the meaning of a speaker's mention of an utterance. However, the fact that their idea of an "echo" does not actually require a statement that has been said, but one that might have been said, seems to make their claim vacuous. It would not be possible to falsify

2.2.2 The Pretense Theory

Clark & Gerrig (1984) argue against than Sperber & Wilson (1981) — they claim that rather than being analyzed as a case of mention, irony should be analyzed as pretense, drawing on

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similar ideas from classical theories of irony. In other words, when someone says something ironically, they are not mentioning a statement, but pretending to be someone who would say something like that, addressing it to someone who would believe something like that. According to them, this theory can better capture certain elements of irony, like the fact that an ironic statement can make fun of either the potential speaker of such a statement who means it sincerely or the potential addressee of such a statement who naively accepts it for what it is.

The authors also mention the fact that the Echoic Theory does not provide a great theory for what exactly can be echoed, while the Pretense Theory sidesteps this problem by positing that speakers are pretending to be a different speaker rather than simply mentioning a statement. They illustrate this by discussing Jonathan Swift's essay 'A Modest Proposal," which is considered by many to be a prototypical example of irony. The essay puts forth the proposal, written as if it were completely serious, that the Irish should simply sell their children as food in order to overcome poverty. Clearly this cannot be accounted for under the Echoic Theory, Clark & Gerrig (1984) argue, because this is not the kind of proposal that anyone has ever made or would make. However, the Pretense Theory can account for this kind of irony — under the theory, Swift was pretending to be a rich English-person with no regard for Irish life and from this, the ironic intent becomes clear.

In addition to discussing how their theory accounts for uses of irony that the Echoic Theory doesn't, Clark & Gerrig (1984) explain how, under their theory, irony is understood by an addressee. An important concept for them is the idea that irony relies on a "double audience" — one which understands the double meaning of the ironic statement and one which doesn't[2]. The first audience also should be aware that the second audience doesn't understand the double meaning, and this creates a kind of "secret intimacy" between the speaker and the addressee. Importantly, the second audience, who doesn't understand the double meaning, doesn't necessarily actually exist; part of the pretense often is the idea of addressing somebody who would actually believe the surface meaning of the ironic statement. So, in order for a real

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[2]This, too, draws on classical theories of irony, as seen in Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*

addressee to understand an ironic meaning, they must understand this pretense — they must share some common ground with the speaker. Unlike the Echoic Theory, this need not be a proposition explicitly mentioned or potentially mentioned; it can simply be something known by both the speaker and the addressee. To illustrate, imagine a scenario where two friends have just come out of an expensive restaurant which did not live up to expectations. One of the friends, in uttering (4), relies on the fact that both discourse participants understand that the meal was bad.

(4)   "Now that was worth the money!"

From this fact, the addressee can understand that the speaker is pretending to be someone else who is worth making fun of — perhaps someone with less discerning taste in food — and thus picks up on the irony. However, if they had happened to meet a third friend outside the restaurant who did not go with them, the irony may be lost on this friend because the common ground is not shared. In this way, Clark & Gerrig (1984) argue, differences in shared knowledge can create different potential audiences — some who will understand the irony and others who will not.

This idea makes interesting predictions about how irony may work on the internet. Drawing back to Terkourafi et al. (2018), there are many different audiences with different knowledge sets that have the potential to see something on Twitter — this means that, for someone who tweets something, what is common ground in terms of knowledge and beliefs is hard to predict. If irony uptake is indeed predicated on common ground, then it should be quite hard to produce on the internet or, at least, it should be quite hard to produce it in such a way that it is understood by the desired audiences and only the desired audiences. The next section discusses this problem by examining work that has been done which may be relevant for understanding internet irony — to my knowledge, there is no work done specifically on internet irony, but there is work which is important to discuss.

2.3 Irony on the Internet

Although work done specifically on internet irony is hard to find, there has been work done which deals with topics that are quite relevant. In this section I will discuss some of these, such as Hancock (2004), which discusses irony in computer-mediated-communication (CMC), though not specifically over the internet. In addition, I will discuss Dainas & Herring (2021), which is a paper focusing on the pragmatics of emoji.

2.3.1 Irony in Computer-Mediated Communication

One of the papers which first investigated irony in CMC is Hancock (2004). The paper's central question is how much irony is used over CMC compared to face-to-face situations, with the hypothesis that people communicating in CMC situations should use less irony than those communicating face-to-face. Essentially, the main intuition is that irony is not marked overtly as irony, or else it would lose something — its humor, or the "secret intimacy" that Clark & Gerrig (1984) describe. The question that arises then is how listeners understand that a statement is ironic, if it is not marked as such. As the paper describes, we have multiple methods of communicating that we are being ironic. Some of these are linguistic, such as extra use of adjectives and adverbs, but many of them are extra-linguistic (or at least not communicable over text) — tone, as described in Kreuz & Roberts (2009), facial expressions, or a clear disparity between a situation and its description. So, Hancock hypothesizes, because these methods of communicating that irony is marked are not accessible in CMC, participants in these conversations should use irony less.

In order to test this hypothesis, Hancock conducts an experiment in which participants are paired up and then assigned to either a face-to-face condition or a CMC condition. Then, they are asked to talk to their partner — in person in the first condition and over a text-based computer chat in the second — about an irony-laden situation, like a fashion event full of terrible outfits. Contrary to the author's expectations, people in CMC situations actually used

significantly more irony than those in face-to-face situations, despite marking this irony less and receiving less feedback that their irony was understood (though post-experiment surveys suggest irony in both treatments was understood at similar levels). In the CMC condition, irony was often marked with exaggerated adjectives and adverbs and ellipsis, but was overall marked explicitly less often than in the face-to-face condition. Interestingly, the author noted that emoticons (representations of faces made out of standard symbols, such as the smiling face :)) were used quite infrequently to mark irony, which does not line up with my intuition concerning emojis.

As for reasons why it might be the case that irony is so prevalent on the internet, the author offers a possible explanation: in face-to-face situations, politeness is a lot more important because the participants may come across each other again, so irony may actually be less likely because it can be seen as rude. This can explain why understatement was more common than in CMC: because it is a more polite way to communicate negative thoughts. In CMC, however, the discourse goal of making a good impression on the other party relies a lot less on politeness due to the factor of anonymity, so being funny or memorable may be more important — hence, irony. This seems plausible, and it provides a good starting point to think about throughout the case study.

2.3.2   Emoji Pragmatics

Emoji are becoming an increasingly common modality of communication, and Dainas & Herring (2021) seize on the linguistic implications of this fact. In their paper, they set out to describe the pragmatic meanings carried by emoji, which are colorful iconographic text characters often representing a face, such as 😃. Although the semantics of emoji had been written about previously, emoji are quite multi-faceted and context-dependent, so the authors of this paper realized that they should be examined within discourse contexts.

In order to do this, the authors created a typology of possible functions for emoji, such as tone modification, reaction (i.e. embodying a physical reaction of the speaker to something in

the discourse), and decoration (emoji used simply to affect the aesthetics of the text). Then, they collected instances of emoji being used in context on Facebook, formatted them as a survey, and asked participants to identify what the function of each emoji in context was.

The authors found that, of the functions they identified, tone modification was chosen significantly more than any other function. This means that emoji were most frequently used to alter the intended tone of a written message. This is an important finding in terms of the subject matter of this paper, given that lack of tone in text may be one of the big hurdles to communicating irony on the internet. There are some questions which remain to me about the potential utility of emoji as irony markers, such as their overtness; one idea which keeps resurfacing in the background literature is how irony is meant to be covert. Even if emoji are used often to mark tone and are understood as having that purpose by readers, how can they truly work as irony markers that retain the "secret intimacy" between speaker and listener? My intuition is that they can, but there should be a potential mechanism for this, which will be discussed in the next section.

2.4 Intermediate Conclusion

In this section, I have examined background literature related to irony, language, and the internet. Multiple theories of irony have been looked at, as well as general theories about how the internet can affect interpretation of utterances. Finally, I touched on the intersection of the two, including a paper on the pragmatics of emoji.

At this point, before discussing the case study, I believe it is pertinent to discuss possibilities for analysis based on this background literature. To start with, I will elaborate upon the idea of emoji as irony markers because this conforms well to my intuition of a common way irony is marked on the internet. As mentioned in the previous section, emoji may seem a counterintuitive way to mark irony because of their overtness. However, I believe that when taking into account the theories of irony discussed, an explanation arises. First, some context for how emoji may be used ironically should be laid.

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As discussed in Dainas & Herring (2021), although there is significant agreement on emoji function, there is also quite a lot of disagreement. Because of this, use of an emoji in a certain context can signal that someone belongs to a certain group who has a certain shared understanding of that emoji. For example, people from one age demographic may view a certain emoji as carrying a certain meaning while a different demographic reads something differently into it. For example, the face with tears of joy emoji — 😂 — is one of the most frequently used emoji and was at one point mainly used sincerely, to indicate that the user found something funny. However, possibly due to oversaturation, younger internet users tend not to view it this way; they see it as insincere and users of the emoji as out of touch.

Internet-users who are aware of this fact may then use the face with tears of joy emoji as a kind of marker that they are being ironic — that they don't actually consider something funny. This kind of use relies on a shared common ground between the user of the emoji and their audience that the emoji is no longer in vogue. In addition, it relies on a shared knowledge of the kind of person who would use the emoji sincerely — ultimately, the kind of person that an ironic use of the emoji is poking fun at. Because of this, the Pretense Theory of irony seems to fit the potential use of emoji as irony markers quite well. Under this framework, the user of an ironic emoji would be pretending to be the kind of person who uses the emoji, and they have one audience which understands this mocking and another audience which does not, contributing to the humor. This allows for a good understanding of what the purpose of the irony is, past simply communicating a hidden meaning or getting a laugh — the kind of person that the emoji-user pretends to be is the target of the joke. On the other hand, under the Echoic Theory, it seems harder to account for who the butt of the joke is. One could formulate an ironic emoji as the mention of a emoji's use by somebody perceived as worth making fun of. However, this person will almost always be imagined due to the lack of shared discourse context on the internet, which diverges heavily from the theory in Sperber & Wilson (1981), where irony often comes from the mention of something said or potentially said by a specific person. Because of this, I believe the Pretense Theory works better for analyzing how emoji

could mark irony and, potentially, how irony on the internet works in general. In addition, its focus on common ground makes interesting predictions about how irony may function differently on the internet, given the multiplicity of audiences that exist and the phenomenon of context collapse.

The Pretense Theory of irony focuses heavily on the "shared intimacy" between the speaker and the hearer. Based on the work by Terkourafi et al. (2018), this intimacy seems much harder to achieve on the internet. What does this mean? Quite possibly, it may be that irony serves different purposes on the internet than it does in face-to-face communication. For example, even when common ground does exist, it is between one speaker (e.g. a Twitter or Facebook poster) and a potential audience of hundreds, thousands, or even larger. As discussed, this makes catering messages to certain audiences difficult because if it is taken the wrong way by an audience, the consequences could be undesirable. Irony may be a strategy to deal with this.

Consider the face with tears of joy emoji — someone who wants to signal to one of their audiences that they don't find a television series funny but doesn't want to alienate another audience who may be fans of said series could make a tweet with the face with tears of joy emoji, if they believe that the audience who understands that said emoji is out of fashion correlates highly with the audience who dislikes the television series. Of course, this comes with certain risks, like the fact that a target of the ironic tweet could manage to figure out the ironic meaning, either by reading replies to the tweet, or because they happen to not be part of the intersection that the speaker assumed. It would take someone skilled in discourse to successfully and consistently walk the fine line of communicating the correct things to the correct audiences through irony. In order to determine how this might happen, I will look at the case study of a prolific Twitter user — Natalie Wynn, commonly known as Contrapoints.

3 A Case Study

In order to empirically determine how irony is marked on the internet, it would be useful to follow Hancock (2004) and conduct a similar experiment which would likely have different

results given that 17 years have passed and the internet evolves incredibly quickly. However, conducting an experiment of this scope would not be feasible given time constraints and pandemic restrictions. Conducting a study based on a corpus is another possibility, but finding a way to search for ironic statements when irony so frequently goes unmarked online is problematic. So, I've decided to use a case study as a frame to discuss the ways that irony is marked and understood online, in the vein of Terkourafi et al. (2018). Of course, this will limit the perspective and generalizability of the results, but it will serve as a jumping-off point for further research and a way to test, at least in part, the hypotheses developed in this paper.

In order to pick a useful Twitter personality to conduct a case study on, I had some criteria. First, it should be someone who frequently uses irony, for obvious reasons. Most very famous celebrities are excluded by this criterion, likely because they are curated by PR teams more heavily, and possibly because common ground is harder to find in a huge audience, so the intimacy of irony is hard to find. Second, it should be someone who has had controversies based off of tweets they have made — this is because examining when irony is not understood should be just as useful as examining when it is understood, if not more, in determining how irony works on the internet. Lastly, it should be somebody who I'm familiar with — because irony is often hard to grasp on the internet, I would likely miss more meanings and ironic intent when focusing on a figure unfamiliar to me. With these criteria in mind, I settled on Natalie Wynn, or Contrapoints.

3.1 Introducing the Case

Wynn is most famous for her YouTube channel, where she has 1.5 million subscribers and produces longform content discussing a variety of topics from an artistic, left-leaning perspective, such as gender identity, masculinity, and beauty. Her videos are stylish and often filled with biting satire, so her audience is primed to expect irony from her. Her Twitter account has half a million followers, and she makes tweets about once a day. She has been the subject of some controversies in the past, some of which have involved her YouTube videos and

some of which have involved her tweets. These controversies have resulted in Wynn having, in addition to fans, a base of detractors, who may serve as an audience that frequently does not understand the irony behind Wynn's tweets, either because they intentionally misread her tweets or because they do not follow her as closely as her fans.

This section will discuss uses of irony by Wynn, some well-understood and some not as well understood. Further, it will discuss how these uses may be understood in pragmatic terms — what about these tweets makes the use of irony clear or unclear? If there is no explicit marking, is there context that makes it clear, or does a lack of context make it clear? How can the Pretense Theory and/or the Echoic Theory explain the marking that occurs, if they can?

Because context is so central to both theories of irony I have discussed, for each tweet I will first discuss a possible context within which the tweet could be read as ironic — in other words, I will lay out the pieces of knowledge that are likely being considered by Wynn and by the audience in writing and reading the tweet. This is impressionistic, as there is obviously no way to get in the head of Wynn or her audience, but it should provide a good-enough place to analyze from.

Then, after analyzing a tweet of Wynn's, I will bring in another tweet from a different person which displays a similar kind of irony or reception to irony. This is to demonstrate that these phenomena are not localized to Wynn's page or her grammar of irony, and also to demonstrate how — even given the similarities — there are differences between users in how irony is marked online.

§3.2 describes a tweet of Wynn's where emoji plays a central role in marking irony and a tweet using a dedicated sarcasm marker. §3.3 describes a tweet of Wynn's which achieves irony without extralinguistic marking as well as a tweet where irony is understood even without common ground shared between tweeter and audience. §3.4 describes a tweet of Wynn's which uses the quote-tweeting function to an ironic affect, as well as a tweet which uses direct quotation through quotation marks to achieve irony. §3.5 describes a use of irony by Wynn which was not well-understood due to a lack of audience-knowledge surrounding Wynn's true

beliefs on a topic, as well as a tweet where a user's uncharacteristically political tweet led to a similar effect. §3.6 describes a tweet in which Wynn combines irony and controversial politics resulting in a divided audience, as well as a tweet where controversial politics led to an audience willfully ignoring irony.

3.2 Emoji-aided Irony

Example (5) shows a tweet of Wynn's which uses emoji.

(5) —"define womanhood"
     —the origin of all things 🧍 🙂   (November 22, 2021, 8:10 PM)

Without context, this tweet may be inscrutable. With some context, a picture of irony may begin to take shape. Wynn is a trans woman and has thus been privy to and taken part in many discussions about gender and womanhood. Many people who are trans-exclusionary use the sanctity of womanhood as part of their rationale for excluding trans women from womanhood — this context is especially salient for Wynn and for her audience, who are aware of her gender identity.

In the tweet, Wynn sets up a fictitious dialogue between an outside character (the use of quotation marks indicates that Wynn is quoting somebody other than herself) and the speaker character (the lack of quotation marks makes the second line come across as an utterance from the Twitter user herself, reacting to the quote). Consequently, the quoted material is, in a way, neutral to irony — Wynn doesn't intend for it to look as if she herself has said it, whereas to make an ironic statement the statement must come from the speaker or at least plausibly appear to come from the speaker. However, the second line of the tweet has no such quotation marks clearly demarcating that the words aren't meant to be read as coming from Wynn's mouth (that is to say, fingers). So, this statement could be read as ironic or as sincere. Looking at the replies to the tweet can give an idea how the statement was taken — example (6) comes from user @alltidfl19 and example (7) comes from user @SOLID_PYTHON.

(6) It's a pink garment used to cover the head of the human female.
                                                        (November 22, 2021, 8:12 PM)

(7) define *concept whos definition and meaning has been debated for eternity*

<div align="right">(November 22, 2021, 8:11 PM)</div>

It seems that these two Twitter users both read Wynn's statement as ironic, given that both of them continue the joke — they poke fun at the idea of defining womanhood as some essentialist concept. So, how did these users decide that Wynn was being ironic, and how can that irony be analyzed?

3.2.1 Analyzing the Irony

When the Twitter users who replied to Wynn with (6) and (7) read her tweet, they viewed it as ironic. In order for them to have done so, they must have had an understanding of the context Wynn imagined when she posted the original tweet. Because they likely follow her or are familiar with her gender idenity and politics, these users can make a guess at Wynn's true beliefs surrounding essentialist definitions of gender — that they are reductive and harmful. From this vantage point, Wynn's tweet can be seen as pretense: she is acting like a gender-essentialist, and saying things that a gender-essentialist may say — women are defined solely by their potential role as childbearers. Also important are the emoji Wynn uses, which are notably often absent from her tweets. This fact — that using emoji is a divergence from her regular patterns — certainly points to the idea that the tweet is aping the style of a different kind of Twitter user. These emoji, in combination with the context of Wynn's identity, make it easy for someone familiar with Wynn to be ushered into the shared intimacy created by her irony. From there, Wynn and her readers can laugh at the kind of person who believes that womanhood can so easily be boiled down to a single definition; they can laugh at the kind of person who would use such passé emoji.

The potential irony of this tweet could potentially be analyzed under the Echoic Theory, but this is not as convincing. Under an echoic analysis, Wynn's statement should be echoing a specific statement or argument that has been made about womanhood. Certainly similar arguments have been made that womanhood is the origin of everything; even if there is not

an exact use of that argument by a specific person which Wynn is echoing, the potential for this kind of statement to be made should be enough for the Echoic Theory to function. But a theory of irony should, in addition to describing the linguistic mechanism of irony, describe where the humor in irony comes from. For the Pretense Theory, there is the shared intimacy between speaker and listener that allows them to laugh at a third person (who may or may not actually be present). Under the Echoic Theory, a statement is mentioned in a certain context to point out how ridiculous that statement is within that context. However, in analyzing this tweet with the Echoic Theory, it is unclear where the humor would come from. One notable feature of the internet — or at least Twitter — is that there does not have to be any immediate context, as is the case with this tweet. This means that there is no context which can make the mentioned statement appear ridiculous, and so the Echoic Theory fails on this front.

Example (5) got across its irony partly through the use of emoji, but emoji are not the only form of non-linguistic irony signalling. One other possible option is a dedicated sarcasm marker, which the next tweet uses.

3.2.2 Irony with a Dedicated Sarcasm Marker

The tweet discussed in this section comes from the Twitter user Neurotypicality Research Inc, which is a dedicated joke account[3]. Its goal is to satirize the way that neurodivergent people are talked about by pretending that the account represents an institute devoted to studying neurotypical people. Because the conceit of the account is clear to most of its followers (there is a pinned tweet which is always visible at the top of the feed explaining the idea of the account), one might think that dedicated markers for irony would not be needed, but the following tweet, example (8) uses /s, which is a marker indicating that the previous statement is sarcastic.

(8) In neurotypical culture (subset: corporate), it is very rare for someone to say they don't know the answer to a question, as this is considered a form of losing face. This "honesty deficit" is one of the reasons it is so difficult for neurotypical people to be good leaders. /s   (January 24, 2022, 3:31 PM)

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[3]Thank you to Hana Galijasevic for pointing me towards this account

The tweet is clearly sarcastic — the account is not honestly suggesting that neurotypical people can't be good leaders. As per the conceit of the account, the tweet is pointing out through irony that many of the arguments made against neurodivergent people being leaders could have analogous arguments made about neurotypical people. This interpretation is buttressed by the use of the sarcasm marker. There is a potential parallel here with phenomena like the retro-NOT, as discussed by Horn (1992), in which a statement is retroactively negated when the speaker exclaims "NOT!" at the end. This allows the hearer to be fooled into thinking the speaker is being sincere until the rug is pulled out from under them and they are made aware that the speaker was being ironic the whole time. In a way, this is similar to a dedicated sarcasm marker, which also has the potential to retroactively switch how a statement is read. However, the dedicated sarcasm marker seems more kindhearted, in a way — whereas the retro-NOT is meant to make a fool out of someone for naively believing in the speaker's sincerity, the dedicated sarcasm marker seems to be more frequently used to clue somebody in to the irony, as demonstrated by example (8).

The Pretense Theory fits an analysis for the irony of this tweet very well, as it fits the whole account, which is predicated on a pretense: that the account represents a real research institute. However, the sarcasm marker does not exist as a part of this pretense; it exists outside of the imagined research institute's statement in order to show that said statement is not sincere. This is a divergence from how emoji operate — in Wynn's tweet, the emoji exist within the pretense. For some, this may result in a funnier use of irony; the existence of a marker outside of the pretense breaks the illusion in a way and removes the "shared intimacy," allowing it to be seen by everybody. But for some, this intimacy may be inaccessible without an explicit marker. The next section deals with exactly this kind of irony — the kind without extralinguistic marking.

3.3 Irony without Extralinguistic Marking

The previous section of the case study dealt with tweets which marked irony, at least in part, through the use of extra-linguistic symbols like emoji or a dedicated sarcasm marker. However, the following tweet by Wynn, example (9) uses neither of these.

(9) Pinkcoin, crypto for her   (November 19, 2021, 11:50 PM)

This tweet relies on the context of corporations marketing products towards women by making them pink and thus "feminine" and supposedly more likely to be used or appreciated by women – the phrase "for her" is an echo of these kinds of advertisements. In addition, cryptocurrency is mentioned, which is a concept that has become increasingly salient in discourse on the internet recently with the controversial rise of NFTs (non-fungible tokens), which many people see as yet another artifact of extreme capitalism[4]. In addition, cryptocurrency is often seen as something which is more popular among men, to the point where it is often condescendingly explained to women who are assumed not to understand it[5].

This tweet plays on both these contexts by imagining a world in which even currency is marketed along gender lines — it is an intersection of the ways in which "crypto-bros" discuss cryptocurrency with women and the ways in which corporations market products towards women. In the tweet, Wynn satirizes products which are marketed towards women by playing on gender-essentialism. She does this by (implicitly) pointing out how ridiculous this tactic is, or could eventually become, by setting up a scenario where cryptocurrency is marketed in this way. However, there is no clear marking of irony through emoji or a sarcasm marker, so without the context of Wynn's politics and attitude towards gender essentialism and extreme capitalism, this tweet could potentially be read as a sincere suggestion of a new kind of cryptocurrency. However, because readers of the tweet are, by and large, in on Wynn's true feelings towards these kinds of marketing schemes, they can surmise that what she means is not what the tweet literally says. This can be seen by looking at the most-liked reply to the tweet, exam-

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[4]https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/04/nfts-werent-supposed-end-like/618488/
[5]https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/fashion/article/crypto-bro-style

ple (10) from user @CrypticJacknife, which is a joke grounded in the same context that allows Wynn's tweet (9) to be read as ironic.

(10)   gaslight gatekeep girlcoin   (Nov 19, 2021, 11:50 PM)

This tweet is a derivation of the popular internet meme "Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss" which relies on the juxtaposition of two malicious behaviors popular in the zeitgeist with the idea of "Girlbossing." This originated as a term used to describe women who achieved success in the working world, e.g. who made a lot of money, reached high positions in corporations, or held a lot of power. More recently, the term has been coopted to describe the way in which neoliberal feminism does not truly strive towards women's liberation, but towards the success of a small minority of women under the limited purview of capitalism. This is clearly satirized with "Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss," which is often portrayed as a positive slogan, making fun of the idea that it is okay to display toxic behavior as long as one achieves capitalistic success. The tweet which responds to Wynn, example (10), plays on this idea by deriving "girlcoin" from "girlboss," thus playing into a very similar context of disillusionment with capitalism. This indicates that Wynn's audience has read her tweet as ironic.

3.3.1   Analyzing the Irony

So, how can this irony be analyzed? The Pretense Theory seems to work quite well. In this framework, Wynn is pretending to be a corporate executive or cryptocurrency advocate who is earnestly proposing Pinkcoin because they believe it will sell well. The bite of the irony comes from how ridiculous Wynn and her followers find the idea of a Pinkcoin, but also from the fact that it is a believable idea for a corporate executive to have (in fact, one of Wynn's followers points out that Pinkcoin already exists!). Imagining these words/this marketing scheme coming from a corporate talking-head allows Wynn and her followers to revel in a shared but secret joke — they know how ridiculous this is, but the imagined talking-head may not. Even without an emoji or a marker of irony, the shared context is salient enough that the performance and comedy is clear.

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The Echoic Theory, again, seems to be less well-suited. Under this framework, Wynn is echoing a real or imagined ad campaign talking about a potential cryptocurrency for women, or perhaps she is echoing any of the many ad campaigns which used similar "for her" language. However, overall, the Echoic Theory doesn't seem to work as well. For one, it seems unlikely that Wynn is echoing a real statement, given that the actual Pinkcoin isn't targeted explicitly towards women. But, if Wynn is echoing an imagined statement, I struggle to find where the bite of the irony lies. On its face, the tweet is incredibly benign, making no value judgements about Pinkcoin — there's not even a verb in the tweet; it is simply a statement of existence. What could be funny or biting about echoing a statement of existence? As discussed in §3.2.1, the role of context seems more important for the Echoic Theory; the bite of echoing previous statements comes from the juxtaposition of that statement with a very immediate context, and the context in a Twitter conversation (at least on Wynn's feed) is, for the most part, much less immediate. One might argue that Wynn is echoing a "for her" campaign rather than a specific Pinkcoin campaign, but this analysis does not seem to solve the problem; the tweet still seems to lack sufficient context to understand the target of the irony. Maybe echoing a statement of existence could be a piece of biting irony, but this would likely require a clear context which reveals something ridiculous or contradictory about that statement of existence. On Twitter, this is often hard to achieve. And yet, irony is often achieved in a way that the Pretense Theory can easily analyze. The next tweet provides another example of this, with even fewer cues used to signal irony.

3.3.2   Irony without Common Ground?

The next tweet comes from Twitter user wint, whose real identity is not known. Just that piece of information seems to suggest that their followers will have less understanding of their true beliefs; they will share less common ground. Common ground is central to the theories of irony that have been discussed, yet wint is frequently ironic on Twitter, as in example (11).

(11)   MKOprah   (January 9, 2022, 5:11 AM)

Like Wynn's tweet (9), this tweet provides no overt marking of irony. Unlike Wynn's tweet, however, wint's anonymity makes it such that their audience does not know their true beliefs. Perhaps wint is truly suggesting that Oprah Winfrey is somehow involved in a grand governmental conspiracy akin to Project MKUltra, during which the CIA attempted to use psychoactive drugs to develop mind control and brainwashing capabilities. But given how ridiculous a conspiracy this would be, this seems unlikely, and wint's audience tends to agree; they read the tweet as ironic. But without knowing where wint truly stands on conspiracy theories and without any extralinguistic marking, why do they read the tweet as ironic?

Even if wint's followers may not know what common ground they share with them, they are familiar with their tweeting patterns, and these patterns are that wint reliably tweets surreal, absurd statements; there is never a hint of sincerity on their page. Irony is par for the course from wint — the kind of tweet that would make people question their interpretation would be an unusually understated one, not an outrageously ridiculous one. This is possible because of the unique structure of the internet and Twitter; completely anonymous people can exist without anybody getting a sense of their interiority; irony can be a default because the true beliefs of a person like wint are completely inaccessible.

Although, as the example of wint shows, Twitter is often a place that dramatically lacks context, it does have mechanisms in place that can reintroduce immediate context, such as quote-tweeting, where a person directly embeds a tweet within their reply to said tweet. This introduces interesting possibilities for irony.

3.4   Quote-tweets

Unlike the previous tweets from Wynn, the next one directly replies to a tweet. Wynn's tweet is reproduced as example (12).

(12)   I myself, out of abject terror, have defaulted to the gender-neutral pronoun "you" when speaking to possible transgenders   (October 27, 2021, 4:18 PM)

This tweet relies on the context of the discourse which surrounds transgender people and pronoun choice. Many pundits have decried the queer liberation movement and, specifically, the idea that transgender people should be referred to by the pronouns they choose. Some of this extends into supposed fear of backlash for using the incorrect pronouns when speaking to somebody [6]. This tweet relies on that context, which is quite accessible for Wynn, as a transgender woman, and her audience, who is familiar with her work. In addition, there is the immediate context of the tweet Wynn is responding to. Said tweet contains an image of a pair of tweets made by Twitter user Gad Saad, detailing an experience Saad's wife had. The text from the two tweets has been combined into example (13)

(13) My wife walked up to the server at our local cafe. The person was possibly transgender. She wanted to engage the individual but was frozen in fear that she might use a pronoun that might offend. Therein lies the problem with this language policing. It takes perfectly natural social situations and in the quest to not offend an extraordinarily small minority (who of course deserve to live fully dignified lives like anyone else), everyone is walking on egg shelves. (October 27, 2021, 12:52 PM)

Wynn's tweet could be seen as commiserating with Saad's; adding on to his wife's example of being scared of addressing a (potentially) transgender person. However, her audience does not read it this way, as example (14) from user @the_story_well shows.

(14) egg shelves 😭 (October 27, 2021, 4:19 PM)

This reply, like many of the replies to Wynn's tweet, makes fun of Saad's typo changing "eggshells" to "egg shelves." In focusing on the comedic mistake in Saad's tweet, these users are signalling that humor and making fun of Saad's tweet is a salient aspect of the conversation. This indicates that they likely view Wynn's tweet as also making fun of Saad's tweet — through irony. §3.4.1 details how this irony may be analyzed.

3.4.1 Analyzing the Irony

Under the Pretense Theory, the irony in this tweet may be analyzed as Wynn pretending to be a conservative pundit bowing in the face of supposed pressure from the transgender community,

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[6]https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37875695

in the vein of other salient examples of this kind of discourse around pronouns. The comedy would come from Wynn's character completely missing the difference between pronouns of reference, such as "he," "she," and "they," which are gendered in English, and pronouns of address, such as "you," which are not. The situation which Wynn's character is worried about — addressing a transgender person with the wrong pronoun — simply would not occur in English because of this difference. When analyzed like this, the humor of the tweet is clear — people being confidently incorrect is funny — which is an important benchmark for a theory of irony, but the Pretense Theory does seem to miss the mark slightly; there is a very immediate context accessible in which Wynn's tweet can be situated and in which the comedy becomes even more clear, but the Pretense Theory misses this.

The Echoic Theory allows the irony of this tweet to be analyzed much more convincingly. Under this framework, the statement that Wynn echoes is clearly Saad's tweet, but Wynn paraphrases Saad's story to illustrate how ridiculous she finds it. She makes explicit what is only implicit in Saad's story — that Saad's wife is scared of addressing a potentially transgender person with an incorrectly-gendered pronoun despite there being no gendered second-person pronoun in English. She ramps up the intensity of the language in Saad's tweet, turning "frozen in fear" into "abject terror," again highlighting her viewpoint that Saad's tweet is overdramatic and fearmongering. Ultimately, this tweet is a good example of a loose kind of mention — as described by Sperber & Wilson (1981) — which is not word-for-word but is a plausible paraphrase. In addition to being plausible, Wynn's echo of Saad's tweet introduces her viewpoint implicitly in the way that she reframes his words. This is something that the Echoic Theory can capture easily, but the Pretense Theory cannot — under the former, there is a much clearer connection between the ironist's words and the words they are making fun of. Under the Pretense Theory, it is much harder to define the connection between the two, such that it would still be able to analyze the tweet's irony if Wynn had not included a quote tweet. However, this means that it is not good at analyzing why Wynn has included the quote-tweet, whereas the Echoic Theory can do this. Ultimately, the Echoic Theory includes a clear mechanism by

which Wynn would be making fun of Saad's statement: her specific mention (or paraphrase) of his words. Through the quote-tweeting function, a clear humor arises through the juxtaposition of Wynn's paraphrase with Saad's actual words. Thus, the Echoic Theory does seem to function better than the Pretense Theory for at least some kinds of tweets. The next section looks at another tweet which can be analyzed with the Echoic Theory.

3.4.2 Irony through Direct Quotation

Example (15) comes from Ben Shapiro, a prominent right-wing pundit. In his tweet, Shapiro quote-tweets example (16) from the official Oreo Twitter account, which also includes a two and a half minute long advertisement for Oreos in which a young man comes out as gay to his family.

(15)   Your cookie must affirm your sexual lifestyle   (April 4, 2022, 9:00 AM)

(16)   Coming out doesn't happen just once. It's a journey that needs love and courage every step of the way. Share our new film 👇 and let someone know you're their #LifelongAlly.
(April 4, 2022, 8:00 AM)

Like Wynn, Shapiro does not directly echo anything from the quote-tweet, opting instead to essentially paraphrase what he sees as objectionable content from the tweet or advertisement in such a way that his attitude toward that content is made clear. The Echoic Theory serves well to analyze this. Even without knowing Shapiro's politics, it is clear that he is against the idea of corporations using sexual orientation inclusivity as a marketing tactic — this comes through in his paraphrase and exaggeration of Oreo's tweet; no one would sincerely claim that a cookie is a necessary part of feeling comfortable with one's sexual orientation, so by framing his tweet as if this is what Oreo has done with their marketing, Shapiro reveals his stance. By quote-tweeting, he frames his comment as an echo, using the context to make it clear that he believes, for one reason or another, that it is ridiculous for corporations to use sexual orientation as a marketing tactic. This reading of the tweet is reinforced by an understanding of Shapiro's politics which, as mentioned, are distinctly right-wing, but this understanding is not completely necessary to

derive the ironic reading.

The uses of irony in this section have both been accessible partially because of the immediate context created by the quote-tweeting function, but also because of the personal context which audiences understood about the tweeter. The next section deals with examples of irony in which the personal context is less revealing — this causes some issues in the uptake of irony.

3.5   Lack of Personal Context

The tweets discussed in this section, as well as the one discussed in §3.6, contain uses of irony which were not well-understood by an audience or were not received well. I will discuss why this may have been. Was there a different kind of marking, or no marking at all? Is it an issue of audience? Is there a way to explain these misfires in terms of the Pretense Theory or the Echoic Theory? In this section, one of the obvious issues is the lack of knowledge audiences have about the tweeter's true views on what they tweet.

It is important to note that most of Wynn's tweets are generally received well; this makes sense as most replies to her tweets will come from followers who are likely fans of her work. However, some tweets have highly visible negative responses or responses which overlook possible irony, which will be focused on here.

One such tweet is (17).

(17)   Maybe we all just need a better attitude. COVID could be a blessing in disguise. Maybe loneliness is good, actually. Sadness—underrated. To an optimist, despair is opportunity. I love death   (January 19, 2022, 12:21 PM)

Unlike many other tweets in this paper, (17) does not have much content which requires niche context. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to be what the tweet revolves around — specifically, loneliness and sadness driven by pandemic-induced isolation. By the nature of pandemics, COVID-19 is common ground to everybody on the internet, as is, likely, the negative effects it has on physical and mental health. What could also be relevant (and what may be missed by some), from my standpoint, is the concept of toxic positivity, which is a concept that in the wake of COVID has come into vogue and which describes the phenomenon of relentless

positivity even in the face of terrible tragedy or adversity — positivity which gets in the way of actually confronting the root of the issue[7] .

Taken at face value, this tweet appears to be espousing some kind of incredibly nihilistic worldview driven by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is so nihilistic that it seems unlikely to truly be a sincerely held belief — "I love death" is a statement that would require an incredibly uncommon worldview to utter without irony. But the pandemic has been a traumatic experience for many, and it seems plausible, even if not likely, that someone could sincerely tweet something such as (17) if they were in a particularly fragile state. And, in this case, it appears that some of Wynn's audience, such as example (18) from user @Fishcak18433002, read the tweet as an earnest expression of despair.

(18)   Those kids are still in cages.
       Immigrants are still getting deported in record numbers.
       People have no health care.
       They are stuck in student debt.
       No police reform.
       Start fighting, let's all have a common purpose.   (January 19, 2022, 12:23 PM)

This user is trying to convince Wynn that she should start fighting for the social causes she cares about. This presupposes that she has not been doing so, indicating that the user likely believes Wynn's expression of accepting despair is sincere.

On the other hand, some members of Wynn's audience, such as (19) from user @EveryHumanLoves, read her tweet as ironic.

(19)   If you weren't being sarcastic, that would make great cult doctrine.
                                                              (January 20, 2022, 4:22 PM)

In this case, the user outright says that they have read the tweet as sarcastic. How do two users arrive at these different conclusions regarding Wynn's sincerity? The next section analyzes.

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[7]https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/toxic-positivity-mental-health-covid/2020/08/19/5dff8d16-e0c8-11ea-8181-606e603bb1c4_story.html

3.5.1 Analyzing the Irony

Given the lack of immediate context, like a quote-tweet, analyzing this use of irony under the echoic framework proves difficult. In attempting to analyze Wynn's tweet as an echo of a (potentially hypothetical) similar statement, there is simply not enough context to allow for clear irony to arise.

The Pretense Theory proves more useful in this case. Given the idea of toxic positivity, which is a popular idea in the zeitgeist, it is possible to imagine how irony may arise in this case. With this idea in mind, a user might see Wynn as imitating someone espousing toxic positivity. This idea is established as plausible with the first sentences of Wynn's tweet: "Maybe we all just need a better attitude. COVID could be a blessing in disguise." Without the rest of the tweet, these sentences could sincerely be uttered by a well-meaning if tactless optimist. However, as the tweet goes on, the sentiment becomes more and more unbelievable, ending with calling despair an opportunity and proclaiming to love death. When a user reads this, if they have the idea of toxic positivity in mind, which has often come up in relation to the Covid pandemic, an element of satire can be read. Toxic positivity is criticized for stymieing actual attempts to address the root of an issue; in Wynn's tweet, her initial optimism becomes acceptance of the tragedy around her. If this tweet is read as ironic, it is read as a tweet where Wynn has parodied those who espouse toxic positivity by following their worldview to its logical (or at least possible) conclusion. Then, she and her audience can share a laugh because they both have experience or knowledge of toxic positivity.

But not all of her audience shares in that common ground, or weighs it that heavily in reading her tweet. If this is the case, then they very likely will not find the tweet ironic. Compared to other tweets of Wynn's, this tweet has comparatively few markers of irony, such as emoji or clear exaggeration; there are unbelievable statements in the tweet, but given the heavy subject matter, a Twitter user could plausibly read them as sincere. In addition, the tweet does not deal overtly with political subject matter, as many of Wynn's other tweets do. For these other

tweets, Wynn's audience usually knows where her true beliefs lie because they are familiar with her ideological stances. For (17), all that her audience is given is one linguistic utterance, from which they must determine Wynn's true feelings. When the utterance itself doesn't give that much in the way of clues, it will inevitably lead to disagreement.

The next tweet which will be examined is similar to (17) in that audiences are confused by it because they don't know where the tweeter's true beliefs lie. It differs in that it is a step into politics for the tweeter — unlike Wynn's tweet, where most users understand her politics but may not understand how she thinks in different areas.

3.5.2   An Irony-laden Step into Politics

The next tweet comes from Anthony Fantano, a music critic popular on the internet. Because of his profession, he mostly tweets about music, but (20) is a tweet mostly about politics — a diversion from his usual tweeting material.

(20)   Once again, Cardi B's geopolitical takes are more valid than half of what you'll see on cable news.   (February 22, 2022, 7:04 PM)

The tweet is referring to comments Cardi B, a popular rapper, made about the Russia-Ukraine situation. Even without knowing what her comments were, on the face of it, this seems a likely case of irony — what are the odds that someone whose profession has nothing to do with politics has more reasonable opinions that someone whose profession revolves around politics? However, distrust of mass media is high [8]. Perhaps it is plausible that someone would trust a rapper over a pundit — or at least view some of their opinions as more well-measured. In this case, it seems quite possible that the "half of what you'll see on cable news" Fantano refers to is the radically conservative half, which both Fantano and Cardi B disagree with, even if neither may be trained in politics. Ultimately, however, it seems that Fantano's audience does not find it clear whether his tweet is meant to be ironic or not. Some members continue the joke that they interpret his tweet to be, asking to hear the opinions of

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[8]https://news.gallup.com/poll/321116/americans-remain-distrustful-mass-media.aspx

other musicians not known for their political acumen. Others read Fantano's tweet as sincere and either criticize it, focusing on the idea that Cardi B is uninformed, or agree that FOX News, for example, is less reputable than a rapper.

This appears to be another case where an audience does not have enough knowledge about a tweeter's true beliefs to make a decision about their sincerity. The tweet could be analyzed as ironic using the Pretense Theory; Fantano could be pretending to be a mass-media skeptic who only gets their news from celebrities, expecting his audience to be in on the joke and laugh at such a person with him. On the other hand, he could be sincerely criticizing certain elements of mass media for having less understanding of world affairs than a celebrity. Ultimately, it is the lack of knowledge, or common ground between Fantano and his audience, regarding his attitude towards mass media, that drives this confusion.

The tweets in this section were inconsistently read as ironic by audiences because information about the tweeters' true beliefs was not held by audiences. The next section discusses similarly contentious tweets, but the contention in these stems from what knowledge the audiences do have about the tweeters, rather than their lack of knowledge.

3.6   Irony about Contentious Topics

The following tweet from Wynn, example (21), was controversial among her audience.

(21)   Comedians are not slapped often enough   (March 28, 2022, 6:20 PM)

This tweet must be taken within the context of the events of the 2022 Academy Awards, where actor Will Smith slapped comedian Chris Rock, who was introducing an award, after the latter made a joke about Smith's wife's baldness. It is unclear what Wynn's beliefs about who was in the right and wrong in this situation are, but people who are familiar with her work have some knowledge about some factors which may be relevant. For example, Wynn has frequently spoken about the idea of cancel culture and its relation to comedians; she is not pleased with comedians who tell tired jokes and then complain about cancel culture because of student protests while still performing to sold-out audiences. However, in videos she has

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made, she has also often satirized militant leftist activists in a kindhearted way — though she may agree with their end goals, she does not believe that violence is the correct or most efficient way to achieve them. In addition, she has criticized toxic masculinity, which has often been pointed to as an issue at the root of Smith's violent response to Rock's joke[9]. These pieces of context appear to collide with this tweet, and Wynn's audience consequently does not have a unified interpretation of the tweet.

Some responses to Wynn's tweet take it as ironic, such as (22) from user @SugarBombChar.

(22)   (March 28, 2022, 6:28 PM)

The tweet is an image of the videogame DOOM, in which the player must violently kill demons in order to save the world. By overlaying this image with the phrase "Where is Dave Chappell?", the tweeter is playing into what they read as a joke by Wynn. Though Dave Chappelle has been the subject of controversy for his jokes about transgender people, the escalation from the idea that comedians should be slapped to the idea that comedians should be hunted down as if they were demons in the videogame DOOM is so outlandish that it reads as comedic rather than sincere. However, some of Wynn's audience read her tweet as sincere, such as (23) from user @NegaMega5.

(23)   Initiating violence is never good, no matter what someone says.
(March 28, 2022, 6:28 PM)

This reply reads Wynn's tweet as sincere. It assumes Wynn is coming from a place of actually wanting to slap comedians or wanting others to slap comedians, whereas the other kind of reply assumes Wynn does not truly believe comedians should be slapped. So, the question

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[9]https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/30/opinion/letters/will-smith-chris-rock-slap-oscars.html

arises how these two different kinds of replies can read the same tweet in such different manners — one as ironic and the other as sincere. In order to answer this question, the way in which this tweet could potentially be read as ironic should be analyzed.

3.6.1 Analyzing the Irony

Analyzing the tweet under the Echoic Theory seems less than optimal, for similar reasons as previous tweets — there is no immediate context which can create irony from an echo.

Under the Pretense Theory, on the other hand, an analysis easily arises: Wynn's tweet is ironic in that she pretends to be somebody who would earnestly say (or tweet) (21), and she and her audience can laugh together at how ridiculous such a person would be. In order to understand where the humor comes from under this kind of analysis, the reader has to understand what kind of person Wynn is aping so that they know who they're laughing at. In this case, given what audiences know about Wynn, perhaps readers would believe Wynn is pretending to be somebody with deeply ingrained ideas of toxic masculinity who believes that awkward or emasculating jokes should be responded to with violence. Readers can then understand the tweet as poking fun at exactly this kind of person; Wynn gives her audience a chance to laugh at this kind of overly-macho man by pretending to be one.

At this point, the question arises why the tweet could have such a different reception from a different portion of the audience. It's impossible to say exactly, but I believe context and common ground play a large role — in other words, it seems unlikely that this portion of the audience is simply failing to consider an ironic reading. It seems more likely that they have a certain piece of knowledge or that they are weighing a certain piece of knowledge more heavily than other audience members. In this case, it may be the fact that Wynn has discussed comedians negatively in the past and the fact that there is still the salient example of Dave Chappelle's transphobia which audiences might imagine is affecting Wynn's thought processes[10].

Different audiences have different knowledge or belief of what Wynn truly thinks. In other

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[10]https://www.vox.com/culture/22738500/dave-chappelle-the-closer-daphne-dorman-trans-controversy-comedy

words, they share different common ground with her, and this can drastically affect the way that different audiences read her tweets. It appears that some audiences weigh Wynn's criticism of violence more heavily, and thus read her tweet as ironic — or, potentially, they are not aware of her negative feelings towards comedians (though this seems unlikely for example 22 given the choice of Dave Chappelle). On the other hand, some audiences make the opposite calculation, or are not aware of her criticism of violence, causing them to read the tweet as sincere. In this way, differences in common ground heavily influence how different audiences read a tweet.

The next section looks at a tweet which, similarly to (21), is reacted to negatively, but it is a case where irony is clearly willfully ignored rather than overlooked.

3.6.2   Another contentious tweet

This tweet, example (25), comes from Ben Shapiro and deals with the Russia-Ukraine war.

(24)   Putin should just tell them the invasion self-identifies as a domestic security arrangement and to respect the pronouns.   (February 22, 2022, 9:48 AM)

Clearly, Shapiro does not mean this in earnest — such a tactic would never be successful. His audience could easily pick up on this and continue the joke. However, the tweet is a derivation of a joke targeted towards transgender people [11]. Some may use the joke without knowing its origins, but Shapiro includes language about pronoun use in the tweet and has a history of being unaccepting towards transgender people [12]. This has resulted in the replies to his tweet largely being made up of people criticizing Shapiro for using a tired and transphobic joke as well as for not condemning Russia. The latter point is important because, when irony is read into Shapiro's original tweet, it could be read as saying that calling Russia's interaction with Ukraine anything but an invasion is preposterous. But because of the method of delivery, this point is ignored by Shapiro's audience, such that he posted (25) as a follow-up tweet.

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[11]https://medium.com/@eaton/youre-not-an-attack-helicopter-you-re-just-an-asshole-1c0cda89cbd3
[12]https://www.glaad.org/gap/ben-shapiro

(25) Dude, it's a joke. Stop posturing for just a second. I've been shouting since 2002 about the threat of Russia and Putin, and if you check my Twitter feed, it's all about the evils of Putin and how NATO must be upheld. (February 22, 2022, 1:58 PM)

Clearly, there was enough pushback to Shapiro's original tweet that he felt he needed to clarify his comedic intent with the original tweet. However, his audience knew he was being ironic, as shown by the fact that they criticized the joke his irony was predicated on — they simply found the joke so distasteful that they refused to engage with what Shapiro claims he was saying. This is quite different from the reception to Wynn's tweet (21), where the source of diverging readings of the tweet was diverging sets of information about Wynn's beliefs.

Having looked at a wide variety of tweets and uses of irony, the next section discusses what these may tell us about how irony works — on the internet and in general.

4   Discussion

Now, having conducted a brief case study on irony use on Twitter, what can we say about our use of language on the internet and our use of language in general? One unsurprising take-away is that, as in face-to-face communication, common ground is incredibly important for uptake of irony by an audience. §3.5 describes two cases of users on Twitter making tweets dealing with topics they do not usually discuss. In other words, these are topics about which the audience — the user's followers — does not know how much common ground they share with the tweeter. They do not know what assumptions about the topic are shared between themselves and the tweeter, and this leads to confusion and mixed readings of the tweet — some audience members may read a tweet as ironic and some as sincere. This is an expected outcome; common ground is foundational to irony because understanding irony requires understanding what is not said by the ironist; a listener must have some idea of what the ironist's true beliefs are in order to see past the literal meaning of an ironic statement and find the intended meaning. In other words, there must be common ground. So, it is unsurprising that when common ground is hard to find on the internet, uptake of irony is harder.

There do seem to be exceptions to this, as discussed in §3.3.2 — because of the potential for anonymity on the internet, internal beliefs are often hard to access, so common ground is hard to gauge. And yet, irony seems to be possible, perhaps exactly because of the inaccessibility of internal beliefs. One potential way of describing this situation is that an audience may interact with an anonymous user's tweets as if the anonymous user does not have true beliefs — as if everything is ironic. So, in a way, there is a context or common ground that exists — that irony is expected. This could be compared to a comedy club, where the context primes members of the audience to expect jokes such that they might laugh at things they wouldn't in a different context. However, these conclusions regarding the interaction of irony and anonymity are impressionistic — this is a potentially interesting area where further research could occur, though.

In contrast to digital communication, in verbal communication, a salient physical environment can provide enough common ground for irony to be successful — for example, if in a rainstorm, somebody utters "Beautiful weather we're having," listeners will not need to know much, if any, of the speaker's internal beliefs in order to pick up on the irony. The physical surroundings provide enough common ground. In a digital space like Twitter, this is impossible. However, there are mechanisms on Twitter which are somewhat analogous to a surrounding environment, such as the quote-tweet. As §3.4 describes, this function allows for an immediate context — an utterance — to be made salient. In these kinds of tweets, it seemed that the Echoic Theory worked well to analyze the irony used. However, this was not always the case.

4.1   Echoic Theory vs. Pretense Theory

One of the large takeaways from this case study concerns the theories of irony I used for analysis — going into the case study with two theories, I expected that perhaps one would fit the uses of irony better and this would lend credence towards one theory over another. However, it turned out that for some cases, the Echoic Theory captured something that the Pretense Theory did not, or the other way around — namely, one often had a better mechanism for

explaining the humor of the ironic remark, which both Clark & Gerrig (1984) and Sperber & Wilson (1981) cite as an important component of irony that a theory should be able to explain. Furthermore, though this is a case study and these results are not empirical, the kinds of ironic tweets which were analyzable by each theory seem to fall into a pattern; it was only when there was a direct linguistic context — a quote-tweet — that the Echoic Theory served better than the Pretense Theory, whereas in the tweets without clear context, the Pretense Theory worked better. One possible explanation for this is that there is a fundamental difference in the types of irony that the echoic and pretense theories describe.

Pretense Theory assumes that an ironic statement relies on the existence of a certain kind of person who would say something like the ironic statement, whereas the Echoic Theory assumes that an ironic statement relies on the existence of a certain statement. This difference has can be seen easily in this case study; the Echoic Theory easily described cases where quote-tweets provided linguistic context, whereas Pretense Theory was able to describe the cases where linguistic context was unavailable and audience members needed to have some familiarity with the tweeter to understand what kind of person they were imitating. However, perhaps this difference is larger than a disagreement on the best theoretical framework to describe irony; this case study seems to suggest that there is a difference in the kind of ironic acts which each theory describes. There may be some overlap, as seen by the attempts to fit each theory to each tweet, but there seems to at least be a foundational difference in the target of each kind of irony: one makes fun of a set of words, while the other makes fun of a certain person or perhaps an attitude.

4.2 Further Research

The apparent difference in pretensive and echoic irony could be bound to just the internet domain, or it may be that the space of Twitter makes it especially easy to see the difference because context is so sparse but can easily be added with functions like quote-tweeting. This is a potential area for further research, in both face-to-face and computer-mediated-communication

domains. Is there a functional difference between echoic and pretensive irony in face-to-face communication? Perhaps, as this case study has suggested, echoic irony may be easier to pick up on even in face-to-face situations because immediate linguistic context is more accessible than other kinds of common ground which pretensive irony relies on. In the online domain, can other functions of Twitter which add context, like hashtags, prompt the same kind of echoic irony? None of the tweets I found contained hashtags, but Scott (2015) describes how hashtags can make contextual assumptions accessible, which has the potential to make clear echoes accessible even without a direct quote-tweet. It may also be useful to look at how different language conceptualize irony — if other languages have different words for what I have described as echoic and pretensive irony, this would be good evidence that both of them being called "irony" in English is coincidental.

Though this paper has not delved deeply into the nuances of the different forms of irony, it may be fruitful in the future to consider these — might different kinds of irony, such as understatement vs. sarcasm, be more easily accounted for by the different theories of irony?

More work on the role of emoji in internet irony could also be useful. Given the work in Dainas & Herring (2021) showing how emoji can modify tone, it seemed to me that emoji might function somewhat like irony markers — sort of analogous to the ironic tone of voice. However, that role seems to be more analogous to the kind of marker described in §3.2.2 — a dedicated sarcasm marker. On the other hand, the tweet with an emoji, analyzed in §3.2.1, seemed to be using the emoji more as a continuation of the pretense rather than a marker of the pretense. In other words, the emoji were themselves ironic rather than telling a reader to read the preceding statement as ironic. In this way, they differed from the dedicated sarcasm marker. But does this difference hold among all users of emoji? Some may use it similarly to a dedicated sarcasm marker — one could imagine the winky face emoji being used in this manner. Is there a pattern to when different kinds of emoji are used in relation to irony, and how they are used in relation to irony? In addition, work could be done on the potential difference between emoticons and emoji — Hancock (2004) notes that emoticon were not used to convey

irony, which seemed wrong to me given what I know about emoji. But perhaps there is simply a difference in the usage of the two.

Another area of further research concerns politeness, which this case study did not touch on, though the background literature section did discuss the seeming lack of politeness requirements on the internet as a potential factor in the frequency of irony online. Investigating failed or controversial irony usage further may be enlightening in this case — when do people feel compelled to retract their ironic statement or elaborate on it further, and how do they go about this?

Lastly, I'll briefly return to the question of why irony is used on the internet.

4.3   Why might irony have been used when it was?

In §2.4 I theorized that irony may be used on the internet in order to communicate certain things to one audience and different things to a different audience. This would be useful because of the multiplicity of audiences on the internet. However, I don't believe my case study has come to a conclusion on whether this is a common function of irony on the internet. We have seen examples of audiences reading tweets in different ways, some as sincere and some as ironic, but it is hard to tell what the intent of the tweeter is. Ultimately, anything said on the internet has an incredibly wide reach, so it does seem possible that irony could be used as a strategy to manage multiple audiences. This is somewhat reminiscent of work by Kenyon & Saul (2022), who describe how certain utterances can be bald-faced lies towards one audience and deceptive lies towards another. In other words, an utterance could be sincere towards one audience but ironic towards another, though it is unclear to me whether a speaker can truly be both ironic and sincere at the same time. Instead, a speaker may mean a statement to be taken as sincere by one audience and ironic by another. This is reminiscent of Camp (2022), who discusses insinuation. One of the key points of insinuation that Camp describes is being able to say something to one audience and something else to another. Perhaps one type of insinuation could be relaying one ironic message and one sincere message. This is likely more

possible on the internet because of the wide audiences it reaches; the chance is much higher that there is actually a dual audience. In addition, thinking of irony in these terms raising the possibility that the shared intimacy of irony is defined along in-group lines. This seems quite likely, given the importance of common ground for understanding irony — people in an in-group will naturally share more common ground than those in the out-group. This could have interesting implications for phenomena like insinuation, bullshit, and their intersection with irony. A potential method to see what effects this may have would be to use network graphs between users on Twitter — essentially, see who often replies to whom and thus build a map of different in-groups and out-groups[13]. How might irony be responded to differently by members of the in-group versus members of the out-group?

5 Conclusion

This paper asked how irony is performed and understood on the internet. In order to answer, it explored multiple theoretical frameworks of irony and described research regarding language on the internet. Then, it described and analyzed a series of tweets demonstrating irony in a variety of forms. These tweets showed that irony on the internet does not require explicit marking, but that context is extremely important for uptake of irony. This context can come in multiple fashions: direct linguistic context, such as a quote-tweet; or personal context of the tweeter that allows an audience to understand what common ground they share. The two different theories of irony presented, the Echoic Theory and the Pretense Theory, each seemed to be able to describe different kinds of ironic tweets. This led to the conclusion that these theories may be describing different kinds of ironies. Ultimately, because of the preliminary nature of this paper, these results should be seen as a springboard for further research rather than a definitive answer to the questions posed.

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[13]Thanks goes to Jackson Petty for this idea

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