

Defining Features of Verbal Irony

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Abstract

Verbal irony is commonly used and frequently discussed, yet relatively poorly understood. Many theorists have tried to determine the defining features of irony, but a conclusive answer has not yet been found. In this study, a corpus of 76 ironic *Tumblr* messages was created and analysed. Each item in the corpus was checked for the presence or absence of nine features, which were taken from existing theories on irony. Evaluative allusion and pragmatic insincerity were found in all items in the corpus. These features seem to be essential to the communication of irony, while the other features tested in this study are not. This is supportive evidence for the allusion pretence (Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995) and the implicit display (Utsumi, 2000) theories of verbal irony. The pretence theory (Clark & Gerrig, 1984/2007) and the echoic account of irony (Sperber & Wilson, 1981; Wilson & Sperber, 1992; Wilson, 2006) are not supported.

Contents

Introduction	4
Theoretical Framework	5
Pragmatic Theories of Irony	5
Experimental Evidence	7
Computational Studies	8
Tumblr	9
Method	10
Corpus Creation	11
Questionnaire	11
Participants	11
Questions	12
Analysis	12
Corpus Analysis	12
Results	13
Discussion	16
Conclusion	20
References	21
Appendix	26

Introduction

People readily use irony in conversations. Most people intuitively understand what should be understood ironically and what should not. A great challenge lies in making the mechanisms underlying these intuitions explicit. Irony is a natural part of human language and pragmatic theory should ideally be able to account for it. Wilson and Sperber (1992) still felt the need to lament the lack of scholarly attention for verbal irony. More than two decades later, they seem to have got their wish. Irony is a widely researched topic, which has received careful scrutiny from many scholars. However, much about it is still not understood. Among other things, there is uncertainty about which features characterise verbal irony.

Most studies of verbal irony fall roughly into one of three categories: theoretical, experimental or computational. In studies from the first category, the concept of irony is analysed theoretically and by means of constructed examples. The second category tests theory in controlled experiments. The third consists of more recent computational attempts to capture irony by using algorithms and machine learning. Fairly little attention has been paid to linguistically analysing irony in natural language data. Doing this is useful to determine which theories correspond best with reality and which features are most common to verbal irony. This study will attempt to fill this gap by analysing a novel corpus of ironic language from the microblogging website *Tumblr*.

This paper will start with a theoretical framework discussing the most important theories of verbal irony, and research that has been done to test these theories. The website *Tumblr* will also be described in this section. Subsequently, the methodology of the current study will be explained. This consists of corpus creation, the creation of a questionnaire to obtain irony ratings on the items in the corpus, and data analysis. After this the results will be presented. The results will then be analysed and related to the theory in the discussion section. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn.

Theoretical Framework

Pragmatic Theories of Irony

Using his Cooperative Principle, Grice (1975; 1978) gave an influential early account of irony. He says irony is an example of flouting his first maxim of quality, which states: “Do not say what you believe to be false” (1975, p. 46). In his view all cases of verbal irony contain an opposition between what is literally said and what is meant. He theorises that when someone makes an obviously false statement, the audience will understand that something other than the literal meaning is meant. According to Grice, (1975, p. 53) the most obvious alternative meaning is the one opposite to the literal meaning of a statement, which creates an ironic interpretation. Grice (1978) adds the requirement that irony contains an expression of “a feeling, attitude, or evaluation” (p. 124). He dismisses the necessity of an ironic tone of voice as a requirement for the expression of irony, a viewpoint supported by other studies (Gibbs & O’Brien, 1991). Finally, he suggests that a part of irony is pretending (Grice, 1978). Grice’s comments on irony were brief and unable to encapsulate the concept fully, but have laid the groundwork for many later discussions of irony.

Grice’s definition of irony, in which an ironic utterance simply means the opposite of what is literally said, fails to account for types of irony that do not contain a false statement, such as rhetorical questions and understatements (Sperber & Wilson, 1981, p. 309). The echoic account of irony (Sperber & Wilson, 1981; Wilson & Sperber, 1992; Wilson, 2006) interprets irony instead as an echoic use of language. This type of language use implicitly refers to something based on a similarity in content. Simultaneously, it expresses an attitude towards the referent. Wilson (2006) mentions the following examples. After someone who has clearly lost a game said he almost won, another person says:

(1) *He almost won* (p. 1733).

This statement clearly echoes a previous statement and expresses a mocking attitude towards it. This example is straightforward but irony can also echo less obvious things like thoughts and commonly held beliefs. An example of this kind of echo is found in (2).

(2) *The bank clerk helpfully shut the door in my face* (p. 1722).

In the example in (2) the “general norm that people should behave helpfully to each other” (p. 1731) is echoed.

Building on Grice’s ideas, Clark and Gerrig (1984/2007) propose an alternative theory based on pretence. They say an important function of irony is the distinction it creates between people in the inner circle, who are aware of the irony, and people in the outer circle, who are not. They believe this is best accounted for when irony is characterised by an act a speaker is putting on. Irony is subsequently created when speaker and listener both realise that the speaker is pretending based on a shared common ground. The theory is successful in explaining a common feature of irony, namely the presence of a target. The target of the critical evaluation in Clark and Gerrig’s (1984/2007) theory is the person, or type of person, a speaker is pretending to be.

Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg and Brown (1995) propose a more comprehensive definition of irony. The most important features of their allusion pretence theory are an allusion to a failed expectation or violated norm, and pragmatic insincerity. They claim their concept of allusion is broader than Sperber and Wilson’s (1981; 1992; 2006) concept of echo because it includes any verbal act that makes the listener aware of a failed expectation or violated norm. Likewise, pragmatic insincerity includes violations of Grice’s (1975) maxim of quality, but is not limited to it. Pragmatic insincerity is described as a violation of at least one of the felicity conditions for speech acts. This includes false statements, but also things like

overly polite statements that are not meant politely. The insincerity can be used to simultaneously draw attention to a failed expectation and express an attitude towards it.

Implicit display theory (Utsumi, 2000) makes similar claims. In this theory irony is described as implicitly displaying an ironic environment. The ironic environment comprises a failed expectation on the part of the speaker. An utterance then alludes to this expectation, includes pragmatic insincerity, and indirectly expresses the speaker's attitude to the failed expectation. Utsumi (2000) adds that irony is a prototype-based category and that the ease of recognition of irony is dependent on the degree to which each element is present.

Experimental Evidence

Several experimental studies have been conducted on the communicative functions of irony. Knowledge about these functions can aid the understanding of how irony works. Dews, Kaplan and Winner (1995) and Colston (1997/2007) tested the social functions of ironic criticism in a series of offline experiments using native-speaker judgements. Both looked at ironic criticism in comparison to literal criticism. The main conclusions of the first study are that irony can be used to save face and is perceived as equally critical as, but less insulting and angry than, literal criticism. Additionally, ironic criticism is perceived as more humorous. Colston (1997/2007) set out to test the claims of Dews et al. (1995) and obtained seemingly contradictory results. He found that ironic criticism was rated as less sympathetic and more condemning. His main explanation for the difference is that the utterances in the experiments by Dews et al. (1995) were presented auditorily while the stimuli in Colston's (1997/2007) experiments were read by the participants. In other words, the prosody in the first study was fixed while in the second study the participants could imagine it themselves. The mode in which an ironic utterance is presented thus seems to influence how it is perceived.

Additionally, irony can be used to fulfil both strengthening and softening pragmatic functions, depending on the context.

Colston (2000/2007) tested certain features of irony and provided experimental evidence for a form of allusion, but not pragmatic insincerity, to be a necessary condition for irony comprehension. He did this by testing whether examples that did not contain an allusion to a failed expectation and examples that were pragmatically sincere were still judged to be ironic by native speakers of English.

Gibbs (2000/2007) analysed the irony used in conversations between 149 students and their friends. His study sheds some light on which features of irony are present in natural conversations and gives an indication of their frequency. He concluded from his data that neither an echo of a previous statement nor pretence are necessary requirements for irony. He found that irony is used frequently and is an important conversational device. The 289 ironic utterances he analysed were generally used mockingly and achieved humorous effects. Only about a third were used to criticise something or someone. This undermines the idea that irony is typically used to express a negative attitude. In addition to criticising, Gibbs find irony can also be used to strengthen relationships between people.

Computational Studies

Irony is important to computational linguistics because it can be a large obstacle to natural language processing. For instance, word sense disambiguation is hindered when the intention of a phrase is turned on its head. For this reason many recent studies of irony have focussed on the automatic detection of irony, and specifically sarcasm, in computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Carvalho, Sarmiento, Silva, & de Oliveira, 2009; Filatova, 2012; González-Ibáñez, Muresan, & Wacholder, 2011; Hao & Veale, 2010; Justo, Corcoran, Lukin, Walker, & Torres, 2014; Khattri, Joshi, Bhattacharyya, & Carman, 2015; Kunneman,

Liebrecht, van Mulken, & van den Bosch, 2014; Liebrecht, Kunneman, & van den Bosch, 2013; Lukin & Walker, 2013).

Using linguistic information for the automatic detection of irony is challenging. Computational studies of irony have thus far not been able to incorporate linguistic theory of irony to a large extent. However, they have been able to reveal that paralinguistic cues are often important for signalling irony in CMC. Research has shown that CMC uses specific paralinguistic cues, such as punctuation and letter repetitions (Darics, 2013; Gunraj, Drumm-Hewitt, Dashow, Upadhyay, & Klin, 2015). These cues serve similar interpersonal functions as nonverbal cues in spoken communication. However, these cues are unique to this mode of communication in form and function (Kalman & Gergle, 2014; Vandergriff, 2013). Carvalho et al. (2009) found that quotation marks, expressions of laughter, heavy punctuation and positive interjections were efficient indicators for detecting irony, while syntactic and morphological information were not. González-Ibáñez et al. (2011) also found that paralinguistic information (emojis and references to other *Twitter* users) are better predictors than lexical information. Liebrecht et al. (2013) found hyperbole to indicate sarcasm by use of intensifiers and exclamations.

In a different vein, Filatova (2012) analysed Amazon product reviews and found that irony was used most often in negative reviews (reviews that gave one out of five stars). Conversely, when it was used in five-star reviews it was often used to be humorous in cases where the reviewer thought a product was strange or unusual. This observation supports the idea that irony can be used to intensify or soften negative criticism as well as being used for humorous effects.

Tumblr

A social networking website that has received relatively little scholarly attention and has not yet been used to study irony is *Tumblr*. *Tumblr* is a microblogging platform home to 287.8 million blogs and 131.9 billion posts as of April 2016 (Tumblr, Inc., 2016). The website is different from comparable ones in several aspects. It allows for multimedia posts and has no post length limitation like *Twitter*. *Tumblr* allows for text, image, quote, link, chat, audio, and video posts. Image posts are the most frequent of these (Chang, Tang, Inagaki, & Liu, 2014). The content of image posts is generally more emotional and positive, while the content of text posts is generally more personal, negative, and often expresses sarcasm (Bourlai & Herring, 2014). Chang et al. (2014) did a statistical analysis of the website's users and its content. They found that compared to more traditional blogging websites the network density of *Tumblr* is much higher, meaning that a large amount of connections between users is reciprocated. The network structure is also more similar to that of *Twitter* and *Facebook* than to that of other blogging platforms. A power-law distribution of followers can be observed: most users have a small amount of followers, but a few have an extremely large amount of followers. The website's network also has a small degree of separation: all users are connected to each other in a limited amount of steps. As such it combines elements of blogging, social networking and social media.

Tumblr text posts are an interesting source to use for analysing irony. Since *Tumblr* posts are reblogged without contextual information like hashtags, all information needs to be communicated within the boundaries of a post. This means a corpus consisting of isolated text posts can be used to study the mechanisms of irony. This study will use such a corpus and carefully analyse it for the presence or absence of certain features taken from the theories on irony discussed above. The aim of this is to discover which theories are most successful at explaining the characteristics of verbal irony.

Method

Corpus Creation

To analyse the use of irony on *Tumblr* a corpus of ironic text posts was created. A total of 85 posts containing irony were gathered from *Tumblr* between 23 February 2016 and 17 March 2016. Nine posts were excluded from the final analysis because they had become unavailable or because they were not reliably ironic. For each post the text was copied into a database with its formatting (boldface, italics, underlining, and spacing) preserved. Additionally, the URL to each post was saved. The posts were selected manually in two ways. Firstly, posts were gathered by reading through the *Tumblr* dashboard, a page that shows all posts that are made by the blogs a user follows. Secondly, they were gathered by reading through the text posts on the explore page, a page which contains posts that are receiving a large amount of traffic on *Tumblr* at a given moment in time (Tumblr Staff, 2014). The resulting corpus contains a mixture of popular posts, which have been shared by up to hundreds of thousands of blogs, and posts with a smaller reach. This sample reflects the type of text posts a typical *Tumblr* user might encounter over the course of a few weeks.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was constructed to measure the perceived degree of irony in each post. A crucial function of the survey was to check whether all posts were judged to be ironic by nonpartisan judges. Additionally, the results were used to test whether there is a relation between certain features of ironic language and the perceived degree of irony of an utterance.

Participants. The survey was filled out by nine participants, including the author. They all self-reported to be highly proficient in the English language. Additionally, they were all familiar with *Tumblr*. Their ages ranged between 18 and 26 years, with a mean age of 22 years. There were six females, two males, and one nonbinary person. To test inter-rater reliability Cronbach's Alpha was calculated using *IBM SPSS Statistics* version 22 (*SPSS*).

This measure can be used to determine consistency between raters. Two participants were excluded because their ratings decreased reliability. This resulted in $\alpha = 0.71$, which is reasonably reliable.

Questions. The questionnaire contained 79 text posts which were presented as URLs linking to each post on *Tumblr*. Six posts from the corpus could not be included because the users had removed the posts from their blogs or the blogs that hosted them had been deactivated by the time the survey was distributed.

The participants were asked to rate each post on a five-point Likert scale. A rating of 1 corresponded to “not ironic” and a rating of 5 corresponded to “very ironic”. The participants were encouraged to base their answer on the part of the post they thought was most ironic. They were able to add a comment to each question if they wished. The questionnaire could be completed in about twenty minutes.

Analysis. First the results from the questionnaire were used to establish if all posts in the corpus could reliably be regarded as ironic. A one-sample t-test was performed on each question in *SPSS* to establish if the rating differed significantly from 1 (“not ironic”). This was the case for 76 of the responses. Three posts did not receive a score significantly higher than 1 and were subsequently excluded from further analysis. The mean ratings were calculated for the remaining posts.

Corpus Analysis

The corpus was analysed to create an overview of the mechanisms used in irony on *Tumblr*. The analysis should provide insights into which existing theories are best suited to explain the irony in this sample. Each post was annotated for the presence or absence of the features in Table 1. Feature 1 (echo) was taken from the echoic theory of irony (Sperber & Wilson, 1981; Wilson & Sperber, 1992; Wilson, 2006), feature 2 (pretence) and 3 (target) were taken from

the pretence theory (Clark & Gerrig, 1984/2007), features 4 (allusion) and 5 (pragmatic insincerity) were taken from the allusion pretence theory (Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995) and the implicit display theory (Utsumi, 2000), and feature 6 (negative attitude) was also taken from the implicit display theory (Utsumi, 2000). features 7 (humour) and 8 (criticism) were included to facilitate a comparison with Gibbs (2000/2007). Feature 9 (paralinguistic cues) was included to test whether cues used in computational studies (Carvalho et al., 2009; González-Ibáñez et al., 2011; Liebrecht et al., 2013) are also present in this corpus. For feature 3 it was recorded who was targeted: the writer of the post, a specific person, or a third party. The subcategory *third party* includes groups of people and nonhuman targets, such as societal constructs. For feature 9 it was recorded which cues were present, for instance: bold text, emoticons, nonstandard spelling, punctuation or capitalisation.

Table 1

Features of Irony used for Annotation

<u>Feature</u>	<u>Literature</u>
1 Echo	Sperber and Wilson, (1981), Wilson and Sperber (1992), Wilson (2006)
2 Pretence	Clark and Gerrig (1984/2007)
3 Target	Clark and Gerrig (1984/2007)
4 Allusion	Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995), Utsumi (2000)
5 Pragmatic insincerity	Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995), Utsumi (2000)
6 Negative attitude	Utsumi (2000)
7 Humour	Gibbs (2000/2007)
8 Criticism	Gibbs (2000/2007)
9 Paralinguistic cues	Carvalho et al. (2009), González-Ibáñez et al. (2011), Liebrecht et al. (2013)

Results

The mean rating of irony from the questionnaire is 3.7 (SD = 0.65). There is no significant effect of any of the features on the ratings. The results of the corpus analysis are summarised

in Table 2. An overview of the entire corpus and the features observed in each item can be found in the appendix.

Table 2

Number and percentage of items (N=76) that contain each feature

<u>Feature</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
1 Echo	76	100
2 Pretence	39	51
3 Target	62	82
3a <i>Target: themselves</i>	14	18
3b <i>Target: specific person</i>	9	12
3c <i>Target: third party</i>	39	51
4 Allusion	76	100
5 Pragmatic insincerity	76	100
6 Negative attitude	60	79
7 Humour	63	83
8 Criticism	59	78

Echo, allusion, and pragmatic insincerity are present in all items. A negative attitude, a target, humour, and criticism are also very common. Pretence is used in about half of the posts in the corpus. The most important features will be discussed in detail and illustrated in the section below. Figure 1 shows an overview of the frequencies of the features.

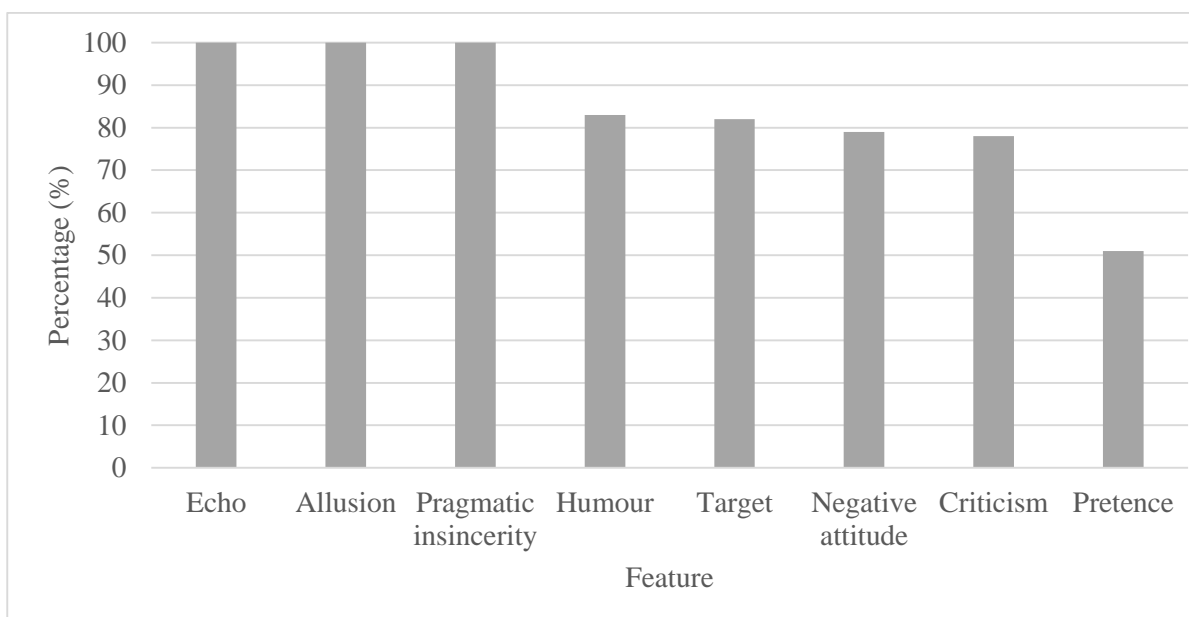


Figure 1. Percentage of items (N=76) that contain each feature.

Table 3 shows the frequency of the paralinguistic cues present in the corpus. A cue was only counted if it was used in a nonstandard way that could potentially aid the communication of irony. None of the items contain explicit mentions of irony or sarcasm.

Table 3

Number and percentage of items (N=76) that contain each paralinguistic cue

<u>Cue</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Lack of punctuation and capitalisation	22	29
Nonstandard spelling or grammar	15	20
Lack of capitalisation	14	18
All letters upper case	7	9
Emoticons	7	9
Exclamation marks	5	7
Question marks	5	7
Ellipsis	4	5
First letters upper case	4	5
Quotation marks	3	4
Boldface	2	3
Italics	2	3

The most frequent paralinguistic cue is a lack of capitalisation (47%). This is often combined with a lack of punctuation. Conversely, emphatic use of letter case also occurs. This is done

by typing all letters of words in upper case or by typing the first letter of each word in a sentence in upper case. Nonstandard spelling and grammar are also common. Emoticons and certain punctuation marks are occasionally used. Boldface and italics are rare. None of the cues were used exceedingly often, but in most posts at least one paralinguistic cue was present (79%).

Discussion

The features echo and allusion are present in all items in the corpus. While Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995) claim differently, these features are indistinguishable in their application. Both features consist of an implicit reference to something outside the ironic utterance. It is crucial that this reference is evaluative, expressing some feeling or opinion. Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995) and Utsumi (2000) claim the referent needs to be a failed expectation or a violated norm. In many cases this expectation or norm is simply someone's desire for a happy life, or the expectation that people behave according to the same norms and values. On *Tumblr* irony is often used to highlight the discrepancy between these desires and reality. This often happens light-heartedly by combining criticism with humour. In (3), for example, the common phrase *all that matters is that you tried your best* is echoed.

(3) “all that matters is that u tried ur best”

me: *instantly flashes back to every moment i procrastinated and wasted*

me: ha hah haahah..... yeah..... my best..... that is the thing i totally did

The rest of the post makes it clear that the writer does not live up to this expectation. The post contains self-mockery and a negative attitude, but at the same time it is humorous and relatable. Relatability is an important aspect of many *Tumblr* posts. People share moments from their lives and other people respond to this because they can empathise. Gibbs

(2000/2007) did not find echo in all ironic utterances in his study. This is explained by his narrow definition of echo. He only counted something as an instance of echo if it referred to something that was previously mentioned in the same conversation. Based on the current research the broader concept of an evaluative allusion does seem to be a necessary feature of verbal irony.

Another feature that seems to be crucial to the expression of irony is pragmatic insincerity, as predicted by Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995) and Utsumi (2000). Pragmatic insincerity is present in every item in the corpus. Certain posts are insincere in the way Grice (1975) interpreted irony: flouting his first maxim of quality. An example from the corpus is shown in (4), where the opposite of what is said is meant.

(4) I have no confidence as it is. I love it when my family makes it even worse.

(5) just-shower-thoughts:

In Japan, radiation creates monsters (Godzilla) and in America radiation creates superheroes

mallemerok:

Shockingly, it's almost like Japan and America have very different narratives surrounding nuclear fallout. Now, if we all think very very hard, maybe someone could think of why this might be.

In the example in (5), on the other hand, the maxim of quality is not flouted. In this post *Tumblr* user mallemerok responds to a post by *Tumblr* user just-shower-thoughts. Mallemerok does not say anything that is technically false. However, the text is still insincere. Mallemerok is not actually shocked and does not mean for readers to think *very very hard*. Instead mallemerok draws attention to the naivety of the original post and criticises it, by using an

insincere speech act. Colston (2000/2007) did not see pragmatic insincerity as a requirement for irony. This is again due to a difference in definitions. Colston only labels statements that flout Grice's maxim of quality as pragmatically insincere, but this definition is too narrow. He does, however, believe that flouting one of Grice's four conversational maxims is a likely condition for irony.

Pretence, which is crucial to Clark and Gerrig's (1984/2007) theory of irony, was only found in about half of the items in the corpus. The example in (6) shows a specific type of pretence in which the target of the pretence is made explicit by formatting the post as a fictional mono- or dialogue. In this case a *Tumblr* user pretends to be a male writer to criticise male writers that display such behaviour. This type of pretence is rather frequent (12%). Pretence lends itself well to the expression of irony but the results do not support Clark and Gerrig's (1984/2007) theory as pretence is the least frequent feature in the corpus.

(6) **Male writer:** This female character that I'm writing has a deep dark secret.

Male writer: Something so horrible that she can't tell a soul...

Male writer: This female character has literally the saddest back story anyone could ever imagine and no man could ever love her because of it and she cries herself to sleep every single night because she's such a monster.

Male writer: She's..... infertile.

A number of other features are also very common to irony, but not required, namely: a negative attitude, humour, criticism, and a target. Though not all items in the corpus contained these features, in every item at least one of them was present. Perhaps irony requires one or more of these, but not necessarily a certain one. Further research could determine whether the presence or absence of certain features facilitates or hinders the recognition of irony. No

significant relation was found between the irony ratings and these features. This may be due to the method used in this study. Some utterances fit the requirements of a feature to a larger extent than others. It could be useful to mark the degree to which each utterance exhibits a feature instead of making a binary decision. If this were done it would be possible to see if there is a correlation between the overall irony rating of utterances and the ratings for specific features. There might also be some third necessary feature that has not yet been considered.

The frequency of certain features in the sample of *Tumblr* text posts is slightly different from frequencies in the ironic utterances Gibbs (2000/2007) analysed in conversations among friends. The frequencies of pretence (Gibbs: 59%, here: 51%) and humour (Gibbs: 79%, here: 83%) are comparable. Contrastingly, Gibbs's data was less negative (Gibbs: 56%, here: 79%) and less critical (Gibbs: 34%, here: 78%). It also contained less self-mockery (Gibbs: 5%, here: 18%). This is consistent with Bourlai and Herring's (2014) finding that *Tumblr* text posts are often negative. Some of the differences between studies may be due to differences in annotation criteria. However, based on this comparison humour seems to be an important feature of irony regardless of medium (live conversations compared to CMC), while pretence is less frequent regardless of medium, and negativity and criticism are less consistent.

Finally, the use of paralinguistic cues was considered. While most posts in the corpus made use of nonstandard formatting in some way, the use of these cues is highly inconsistent. The example in (3) for instance contains ellipsis, nonstandard spelling, and no capitalisation. These features together create an unserious tone suitable for irony. It seems likely that paralinguistic cues play at least some role in the processing of irony in CMC. In order to establish whether these cues are essential to irony or simply a fringe phenomenon, at least two things could be done. The cues observed in this corpus may simply display the general writing style on *Tumblr*, not a writing style specific to irony. To test this a corpus of ironic utterances

should be compared to a corpus of nonironic utterances from *Tumblr*. Additionally, the corpus of ironic posts could be rewritten to contain no paralinguistic cues. It would then be possible to run an experiment to see if people still recognise the irony in these posts as easily. From previous studies on CMC cues it seems likely that these cues will influence interpretation (Darics, 2013; Gunraj et al., 2015; Kalman & Gergle, 2014; Vandergriff, 2013). However, it has not yet been tested if these cues directly influence the recognition of irony. Paralinguistic cues are often used in methods to automatically recognise irony (Carvalho et al., 2009; González-Ibáñez et al., 2011; Liebrecht et al., 2013). However, since the use of these cues is rather inconsistent, a perfect irony predictor will have to take content into account.

Conclusion

The analysis of a corpus of ironic *Tumblr* text posts has shown that two features, an evaluative allusion and pragmatic insincerity, are essential to the expression of irony. A range of other features were frequent, but not essential. These findings are most consistent with the allusion pretence (Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995) and the implicit display (Utsumi, 2000) theories of verbal irony. The echoic account of irony (Sperber & Wilson, 1981; Wilson & Sperber, 1992; Wilson, 2006) is not as precise, and the pretence theory (Clark & Gerrig, 1984/2007) cannot account for all cases of irony. Several questions about verbal irony are left unanswered, for instance the exact role of the nonessential features in the recognition of irony. Since this study only analysed a corpus of ironic language it has also not been determined how, and if, certain features help an audience distinguish between irony and nonirony. Further research could help clarify this.

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Appendix

<u>Text post</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Echo</u>	<u>Pretence</u>	<u>Allusion</u>	<u>Pragmatic insincerity</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Humour</u>	<u>Criticism</u>
You: What's your favorite video game genre? Me: Character creation screen.	2.5	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no
<u>redpancla:</u> did dr. dre even attend medical school?	3.7	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no
<u>iguanamouth:</u> i havent shaved my legs in a really long time and while i was babysitting my skirt edged up a bit and the seven year old i was watching said "ew you should shave that hairs not supposed to be there" and i said "well if its not supposed to be there then why does it grow there?" and he was really silent for a long time and then finally said "lets watch sonic the hedgehog" <u>dinogatorr:</u> tumors grow, are they supposed to be there? its called "evolution", just because its there doesnt mean its useful or wanted. <u>geekandmisandry:</u> Local Man Compares Leg Hair To Cancer, Genuinely Thought It Was A Smart Argument. More At Six.	3.7	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	person	yes	yes
"I Like Hanging Out With Guys Because There's Less Drama." Translation: whenever I spend time with my female friends, we always end up doing an unabridged reading of Hamlet, and I'm salty because they always make me play Polonius.	3.7	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
Teach a man to fish and you feed him for life; teach a man to google and you never needed to teach him to fish in the first place	2.7	yes	yes	yes	no	no	third	yes	no
At my future wedding: "Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband" Me to the groupchat: omg do I say yes or is that desperate	3.0	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	self	yes	no
i, personally, love to straddle that fine line between "fandom blog" and "record of complete psychological breakdown"	3.5	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	self	yes	yes

<u>Text post</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Echo</u>	<u>Pretence</u>	<u>Allusion</u>	<u>Pragmatic insincerity</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Humour</u>	<u>Criticism</u>
my workout routine: - jumping to conclusions	3.0	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	self	yes	yes
premiering this week and probably a slightly different version next week, the new movie/tv show “White Guy Acts Like A Dick To Everyone But He’s Like Super Smart or Something So Everyone’s Just Kind Of Cool With It And Much Younger Hot Chicks Want To Sleep With Him And Stuff” , written and directed by Joe McWishfulfillment	3.6	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
me: i hate drama im gonna stay out of it :/ someone: guess what happened me: WHAT HAPPENED BITCH 🙄👂👂👂👂👂👂	3.2	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	self	yes	yes
Male writer: This female character that I’m writing has a deep dark secret. Male writer: Something so horrible that she can’t tell a soul... Male writer: This female character has literally the saddest back story anyone could ever imagine and no man could ever love her because of it and she cries herself to sleep every single night because she’s such a monster. Male writer: She’s..... infertile.	3.7	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
Some crusty adult: This generation is so entitled! Me: *Fantasizes about sharing a 2-bedroom apartment with a roommate and having a kitchen I can cook in*	3.8	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
alycya debnam carey: *blinks in character* me: WHERE IS HER FUKING OSCAR??? WHERE’S THE DAMN ACADEMY AWARD???? ARE YALL PAYING ATTENTION WAKE TF UP	2.5	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	self	yes	yes
sorry i’m depressing, it’s the depression	4.3	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	no	yes
i hate when adults make fun of u and ask if u bought ur jeans with all the holes in them.... why don’t u go fix the holes in our economy robert	4.3	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes

<u>Text post</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Echo</u>	<u>Pretence</u>	<u>Allusion</u>	<u>Pragmatic insincerity</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Humour</u>	<u>Criticism</u>
<p>Brits:*colonize and subject India and Pakistan to famines that coasted the lives of 100 million people, run the country like a megacorperation, and continues to rob the labor and resources of the country till today which makes them want to travel to the UK for a less horrible life*</p> <p>Brits:Why can't Indians go back to their own country?</p> <p>Germans:*Invite Turkish workers as part of a program to help rebulid infrastructure in the 60s*</p> <p>Germans:Who let all these Turks in?</p> <p>Americans:*literally conquers mexico*</p> <p>Americans:why there so many Mexicans here?</p>	4.5	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	no	yes
my fashion sense is called I am cold and pissed off	2.5	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
millennial dreams: to have enough money for a 1 bedroom apartment, bills, and groceries.	2.5	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
my talents include avoiding difficult conversations and getting really sad over things i saw coming	4.0	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	self	yes	yes
<p>Geek Boys: *quiz us mercilessly over the smallest minutiae when we do something as small as wearing a marvel T-shirt or mentioning a video game*</p> <p>Geek Boys: *negatively freak the fuck out in shock over pansexual deadpool as if this is something new*</p>	3.5	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
<p>who thought “ah yes, I will get some wood and I will carve some cute little f’s into it and I will put four strings on it and then I will place it under my chin to achieve maximum discomfort, and then I shall rub a hairy syrup stick on it to make noise”</p> <p>whoever invented the violin was definitely high on something and nothing can convince me otherwise</p>	3.2	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	third	yes	no
<p>me: goodnight moon :)</p> <p>moon: should’ve been saying goodnight 5 hours ago its 4am asshole get your life together</p>	3.2	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	self	yes	yes

<u>Text post</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Echo</u>	<u>Pretence</u>	<u>Allusion</u>	<u>Pragmatic insincerity</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Humour</u>	<u>Criticism</u>
there are so many conflicting messages in the lyrics of Kelis's "Milkshake" and it really stresses me out. First she tells us that she can teach us, but she has to charge, but then after confirming that we need her to teach us the techniques that freaks these boys, she tells us "it can't be bought", and also tells us "thieves get caught", so not only is she not able to teach us, but if we try to learn on our own, we'll be in trouble. But then she says "watch if you're smart", presumably encouraging us to take notes on said techniques. I don't understand.	3.5	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no
It's so unfair, that I, as a regular human with no goals or ambition, cannot just call up Taylor Swift and hang out with her	2.8	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	self	yes	yes
gravity falls teaches us a lot of important lessons; for example, dont be a dick abt grammar or your family could be almost brutally murdered by a space demon	3.2	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no
how come there isnt a single college professor out there that realizes the address bar on chrome doubles as a google search. every time i see a professor open chrome and then type in google.com i lose 2 days off my life span	3.0	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
me: im kind of uncomfortable with the way marvel is marketing captain america: civil war with "choose your side" etc, and i feel like its detracting from the overall moral conflict of the movie. if its anything like the comics, both sides make huge mistakes, both sides go too far, both sides contribute to the death and destruction. marvel should not be encouraging people to choose between cap and iron man, because neither of them are completely right in this. also me: lmao #teamcap all the fucking way	3.7	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	self	yes	yes
can y'all believe clarke is gonna fuck lexia For Her People? she must really love HER PEOPLE a lot. look how far she would go. to SAVE them. to PROTECT them. grabbin a tit: FOR HER PEOPLE. gettin eat out: FOR HER PEOPLE. she ALWAYS puts them first!!! so SELFLESS!!! gotta love her	3.7	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes

<u>Text post</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Echo</u>	<u>Pretence</u>	<u>Allusion</u>	<u>Pragmatic insincerity</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Humour</u>	<u>Criticism</u>
Jeff Davis: "let's completely forget about stiles and lydia's character development they've just been through in the last couple of episodes and force her and that piece of burnt toast I just dropped on the ground together. Sounds good, right?"	4.2	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	person	yes	yes
did you know: there are people who can lie down, at a reasonable hour, and just sleep? fall asleep, easily? regularly? on a regular basis? roughly every night? wild	4.3	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes
relatable twenty one pilots lyrics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • i'm insecure and i care what people think • go away • leave me alone • now we're stressed out • wow, i probably shoud've stayed inside my house • ew • an old man's hair receding • [screaming] josh dun!!! • that weird choked noise tyler makes before the chorus in fairly local 	3.2	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
iced coffee is the pinnacle of human existence no man made invention will ever surpass the idea of iced coffee	3.5	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no
White People: Beyoncé & Kendrick Lamar are racist White People: Trump just tells it like it is. No politically correct bs.	4.0	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	no	yes
me, rereading texts I sent during a meltdown I had ten minutes ago: lol that was so fuckin extra wtf thank god I've changed, that's never happening again	4.3	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	self	yes	yes
Priest : Do you read to your children from the holy book? Me : yes Priest : What is their favourite part? Me : when frodo destroys the ring.	3.2	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no

<u>Text post</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Echo</u>	<u>Pretence</u>	<u>Allusion</u>	<u>Pragmatic insincerity</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Humour</u>	<u>Criticism</u>
College is cool because if you relax for a minute then you're all of a sudden failing 11 classes even though you're only taking 5	4.2	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
After much research, consideration, and experimentation, I have decided that adulthood is not for me. Thank you for the opportunity	4.2	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
using microsoft word *moves an image a mm to the left* all text and images shift. four new pages appear. paragraph breaks form a union. a swarm of commas buzzes at the window. in the distance, sirens.	3.0	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
detective: *takes picture of my body after i've been murdered* me (dead): omg no u'd better delete that...omggg im serious i look so bad in that 😊😊😊	4.0	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	self	yes	yes
reblog if you AREN'T homophobic!!! (16 glee gifs) (gif of dumbledore dancing) OMG THE NOTES!!!! (gif of a person with a rainbow coming out of their mouth) (gif of spongebob with a rainbow) IF YOU DON'T REBLOG THIS, GET OFF TUMBLR (picture of girl with rainbow hair) (80 more glee gifs)	3.5	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
Me: I'm gay All the straights in the whole room: oh I didn't know you thought of me this way! Me: well actually I hate to break it to you but we the gays actually don't crush on every single person of the same gender! Who would've known? that I a gay have standards?? High enough standards to know you are all ugly fucks	3.8	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
the floor is a shelf for everything	3.5	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes
oh Darth Maul's an alien I always thought he was just really committed to his aesthetic	3.2	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no

<u>Text post</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Echo</u>	<u>Pretence</u>	<u>Allusion</u>	<u>Pragmatic insincerity</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Humour</u>	<u>Criticism</u>
it's funny because even online i find it hard to be social and make friends	2.5	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no
wait... if <i>you</i> have social anxiety... and <i>i</i> have social anxiety... then who's going to order the food?	4.0	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no
so nasa opened up applications to be an astronaut and all u have to have is a degree in the "right" field like ok nasa i see how it is u think an english lit major cant go to space well then tell me whos gonna analyze homoerotic subtext in space??? i kno theres homoerotic subtext in space ive seen star wars AND star trek	4.0	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no
you ever hoist a big laundry basket on your hip and feel like the great tragedy of your life is that you weren't born a hearty peasant girl in medieval england who'd die at 22 from an abscessed tooth	3.3	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no
<u>fuckveahmelancholy:</u> Tumblr is so awful. You have all these people making up obviously fake stories for attention and no one pays any mind to the real heroes, like me, who beat up a volcano. <u>dikubutto:</u> why is nobody talking about this	4.5	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
<u>yaobutts:</u> I love how potato in French is pomme de terre, which pretty much means "earth apple." like what stupid frenchman saw this: and said "zis petite légume looks like a, how you say, APPLE! hmmm... but it grows in ze earth... HON HON HON! MAIS OUI! C'EST UNE POMME DE TERRE!" <u>michaonthemoon:</u> j'adore comment ananas se dit pineapple en anglais, ce qui veut littéralement dire "pomme de pin", genre quel type anglais a vu ça: et s'est dit : "ow cette étrange big fruit ressemble à une, how do you say, POMME! hmmm... mais plutôt une pomme qui	4.5	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	person	yes	yes

<u>Text post</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Echo</u>	<u>Pretence</u>	<u>Allusion</u>	<u>Pragmatic insincerity</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Humour</u>	<u>Criticism</u>
pousse dans les pins... HU HU HU! OH YES, IT'S A PINEAPPLE!" (z'avez vu, on peut le faire aussi... hon hon hon!)									
#tbt that time i was raving about an all women shakespeare company and some fuckboy butted in with "i hate how you never hear about all men shakespeare productions" that has honestly been the highlight of my university career so far	4.3	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	person	yes	yes
instead of a uterus can I have money	2.7	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
In Japanese, they don't say "moon," they say "tsuki," which literally translates to "moon," and I think that's how language works.	4.7	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
in latin instead of saying "i love you" you don't say anything because it's a dead language. nothing. i think that's beautiful. just shut the fuck up	4.7	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
Okay, that was a fun five minutes of social interaction, but I've run out of scripted small talk and I'd like to go home now	2.7	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	no	yes
Anonymous says: i can't breathe call an ambulance???	3.2	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	person	no	no
cow: *is given the opportunity to act naturally and not be abused and treated like a milk machine* everyone: omg this cow thinks it's a dog!! so cute!!	4.3	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	no	yes
You'd think, if you were THAT bothered about people touching/moving your stuff, you wouldn't leave it lying around in everyone's way all over the house so other people touching it is unavoidable.	3.7	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	person	no	yes
all that matters is that u tried ur best me: *instantly flashes back to every moment i procrastinated and wasted* me: ha hah haahah..... yeah..... my best..... that is the thing i totally did	3.7	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	self	yes	yes

<u>Text post</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Echo</u>	<u>Pretence</u>	<u>Allusion</u>	<u>Pragmatic insincerity</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Humour</u>	<u>Criticism</u>
proof that the sun is fake if the sun is real then y is it winter and the snow cold my house and i am crying????? nice try atheists	4.2	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
i love north america but europe is my favourite condiment ♡ the history ♡ the culture ♡ the australian accent ♡ love it :)	4.8	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
Neurotypicals have systematically killed and abused neurodivergent people throughout history but they can go from justifying that to blaming us for all violence in society in the same fucking breath. Amazing.	3.2	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	no	yes
My fave recent new features on the tumblr app - Not being able to view, send, receive etc any instant messages - Not being able to read anything under a read more, the post just cuts off and looks like it doesn't exist - Logging onto the desktop version and getting notified that the video I posted a week ago, through the app, has now finished uploading. Although it still hasn't actually posted and probably never will. - Not being able to tag people Thank you staff	4.3	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
DO YOU HATE 1. HAVING TIME? 2. HAVING MONEY? 3. YOURSELF? If you answered yes to any (or even all!) of the above, then COSPLAY is right for you! Be prepared to drive yourself mad with uncountable amounts of caffeine, no sleep, and an endless amount of craftwork! Be prepared to rip your hair out, cry uncontrollably, and inexplicably injure yourself to be a giant NERD and go to a convention DRESSED AS A FICTIONAL CHARACTER , where your costume will undoubtedly break and you may suffer heat exhaustion! Trust a long-time	4.7	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes

<u>Text post</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Echo</u>	<u>Pretence</u>	<u>Allusion</u>	<u>Pragmatic insincerity</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Humour</u>	<u>Criticism</u>
<p>cosplayer, it'll be the MOST FUN you're EVER HAD IN YOUR LIFE!</p> <p>Cosplay.</p> <p><i>For the strong</i></p>									
<p>life is honestly the worst rpg ever the classes are completely unbalanced, quest rewards are way too low, and its pay to win fuck this</p>	4.2	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
<p><u>toddsfall</u>: the reason why europe is never in any dystopian novels, is bc we already got a solid system to work out our problems</p> <p><u>youmakemelikecharity</u>: it's so funny when you guys act like you aren't plagued with fascist white supremacist political parties and a violent history of imperialism and genocide</p>	4.0	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
<p><u>moetpapi</u>: someone make a meme about how literally every girl uses the dog filter on snapchat to be fake cute</p> <p><u>weedstoner</u>: someone make a meme about how literally every man complains about completely benign things that women do in order to give themselves a false sense of superiority</p>	4.3	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	person	yes	yes
<p>Anonymous asked: "lgbtqapzxrjsi+" hmmm yeah.... You're just another cishet white girl probably pretending to be queer. Stop pretending you support us.</p> <p>Haha, oh boy, you got me! Thanks for helping me figure out my identity based off of no information! I guess I just had intimate emotional and sexual relationships with girls in private settings for the attention and so I could infiltrate the gay, members only, fan club that you are apparently queen of!</p> <p>How dare I talk about how there should be more positive films where gayness is not a struggle, tragedy, or a punchline as any type of person, how horrible of me! :) :) How dare I make a</p>	5.0	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	person	no	yes

<u>Text post</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Echo</u>	<u>Pretence</u>	<u>Allusion</u>	<u>Pragmatic insincerity</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Target</u>	<u>Humour</u>	<u>Criticism</u>
silly joke about how many add-ons lgbtqap+ has during a rant about how I wish there was better representation!									
<u>dateagirlwhosuggestion:</u> date a girl who fucks everything up <u>kingdomheartsddd:</u> My time to shine	3.2	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	self	yes	yes
I have no confidence as it is. I love it when my family makes it even worse.	4.2	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	no	yes
<u>just-shower-thoughts:</u> In Japan, radiation creates monsters (Godzilla) and in America radiation creates superheroes <u>mallemerok:</u> Shockingly, it's almost like Japan and America have very different narratives surrounding nuclear fallout. Now, if we all think very very hard, maybe someone could think of why this might be.	4.7	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	third	yes	yes
eat spicy food while pregnant. your baby will become a fire mage. yes i am a doctor	4.2	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no
Clark Kent could have been a doctor, using his x-ray vision to detect life threatening tumors. But no, we really needed another journalist.	4.3	yes	no	yes	yes	no	third	yes	no
gay person: being gay is punishable by death in my country mogai hell discourse asshole: okay sweetie uwu but at least people know u exist (: they might want to brutally murder you, but you have your visibility uwu	4.7	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	no	yes
isn't :) it :) funny :) how :) jroth :) apologized :) for :) mistreating :) a :) character :) but :) not :) for :) bullying :) ricky :)	4.2	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	person	no	yes
me, a sensitive and very emotional person who cries easily and can't take any criticism: i wanna fight someone	3.5	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	self	yes	yes
sure, a mature and intelligent 14 year old girl isn't allowed to know she's queer because she's a "child" but my 4 month old nephew reaches out his hand towards a woman and he's "a real ladykiller already"	4.4	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	third	no	yes