
“Great job!” - The prosodic marking of ironic attitude in two German regional accents

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In most ironic utterances, the lexical content mismatches with the communicative intent of the speaker, which may, for example, express a disapproving or mocking attitude. This sarcastic form of irony is typically encoded by a lower overall fundamental frequency (f0) [2, 5, 6], a lower intensity [6], and a longer duration [1, 2, 5, 6], compared to sincere speech. Comparative studies furthermore revealed that the acoustic marking of irony differs across languages (e.g., [3]). We hence investigated whether the prosodic marking of irony also differs across regional accents (of German), focusing on Moselle Franconian (Trier region) and Low Alemannic (Freiburg region). We analyzed 16 utterances, produced in a sincere and sarcastic mode, by 20 speakers from Trier and Freiburg each (N = 1280).

Results show that ironically intended utterances in both speaker groups were overall lower in f0, less loud, and longer than those intended to be sincere, corroborating previous research [1, 2, 5, 6]. These cues were used in parallel, rather than being traded against each other. The intonational analysis revealed that, irrespective of mode, differences across regions occurred in the use of pitch accent types (more H* in the Trier region and more L*+H in the Freiburg region overall, cf. [4]), and in the phonetic implementation of the pitch accents (tonal alignment in Freiburg tended to be later). To mark irony, speakers from both regions used accent *position* as a cue by placing an additional prominence in the prenuclear region (e.g., on “das” in *Das klappt ja super!* ‘That works PRT well!’). In nuclear position, the pitch range of the accentual movement (e.g., on *super*) was reduced in ironic utterances (phonologically encoded by H* in ironic vs. L+H* in sincere utterances). The present study thus provides initial insights into the intricate interplay between regionally specified prosodic patterns and the encoding of ironic attitude. In the talk, we will also discuss the implications for irony decoding (recognition and interpretation), in particular from a cross-regional point of view.

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