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1. Introduction

There is disagreement in the literature on scalar implicatures about whether implicatures are obligatorily computed. In this paper I introduce intuitions about irony in constructions involving *dürfen* ‘may, be allowed to’ as a new data point in this debate, and argue that the computation of scalar implicatures is obligatory (following Magri 2009). Moreover, I utilize irony to probe into the lexical semantics of German *dürfen* ‘may, be allowed to’ and suggest a novel analysis whereby *dürfen* carries a presupposition that the prejacent is desirable to the permissée. The general view of irony I adopt in this paper is an extension of Grice’s (1975) proposal about irony as an implicature from blatant falsity: by uttering a proposition that she obviously does not believe, the speaker triggers the hypothesis that what she intended to convey is some other, related proposition.

2. The observation

dürfen as investigated in this paper functions as a root possibility modal. As such *dürfen* combines with a realistic modal base f and a normative, commonly deontic (cf. (1)), less commonly goal-oriented ordering source g (see Kratzer 2012, 55ff.).

- (1) Lena hat gehört, dass man in Österreich schon mit 16 wählen darf.
Lena has heard that one in Austria already at 16 vote *darf*
‘Lena heard that in Austria one is eligible to vote at 16.’

I assume the lexical entry in (2) for *dürfen* (to be revised later). Roughly, a sentence *dürfen* ϕ expresses that there are ϕ -worlds among those circumstantially accessible worlds that are best with regard to a salient set of laws (as in (1)) or goals in the evaluation world.

- (2) $\llbracket \textit{dürfen} \rrbracket^{w,a} = \lambda f_{\langle s, \langle st, t \rangle \rangle} \cdot \lambda g_{\langle s, \langle st, t \rangle \rangle} \cdot \lambda p_{\langle s, t \rangle} \cdot \exists w' \in \max_{g(w)} (\cap f(w)) : p(w')^1$

This paper highlights an additional use of *dürfen*, exemplified by (3) and (4), which has thus far been neglected. *dürfen* in this use is characterized by a distinctly ironic flavor.^{2,3} The targeted reading can best be rendered using English *get to*.

- (3) CONTEXT: *The rules at Lena's new workplace require Lena to get up at five, and Lena is known to dislike getting up early.*
 Lena darf in ihrer neuen Arbeit jeden Tag um fünf Uhr aufstehen.
 Lena darf in her new work every day at five o'clock get-up
 'Lena gets to get up at five every day for her new work.'
- (4) CONTEXT: *Martin visits the Russian consulate. He learns that his visa will take at least three weeks to be issued. He is frustrated about the long wait time.*
 Martin darf noch drei Wochen auf sein Visum warten.
 Martin darf still three weeks for his visa wait
 'Martin gets to wait for his visa for another three weeks.'

3. The distribution of ironic *dürfen*

The contexts described for (3) and (4) exemplify two properties that are characteristic of contexts in which *dürfen* triggers an ironic inference: In the described contexts, the respective prejacent proposition ϕ , *Lena getting up at five every day for her new work* in (3) and *Martin waiting for his visa for another three weeks* in (4), (i) is perceived as necessary as opposed to merely possible, and (ii) ϕ is believed to be undesirable to the individual towards which the modal is oriented, Lena in (3) and Martin in (4).⁴

This is interesting, first of all, since it contrasts with contextual properties of ϕ in regular, non-ironic uses of *dürfen*: note that ϕ in (1), *voting at 16 in Austria*, is merely optional and rather desirable.

It seems that necessity and undesirability of ϕ are, moreover, required for *dürfen* to be ironic. Consider the *dürfen* sentences in (5) and (6) with their respective complements: the prejacent in (5), *drinking wine*, constitutes an undesirable possibility for the subject, while the prejacent in (6), *Lena writing a semantics paper at university*, describes a desirable obligation. Neither sentence triggers an ironic inference.

¹The selection function max_A picks out the the best worlds relative to some set of propositions A .

²I variably say that *dürfen triggers irony/an ironic inference, is ironic, receives an ironic interpretation, has an ironic use*.

³I assume that native speakers, just as having intuitions about the grammaticality and felicity of sentences, also have intuitions regarding the presence of irony.

⁴The individual towards which the modal is oriented often (cf. (3) and (4)), though not always coincides with the grammatical subject.

- (5) CONTEXT: A 20 year-old US speaker, who detests alcohol, reports about the legal situation in Austria, where she will spend a semester abroad.
 ??In Österreich darf ich sogar Wein trinken.
 in Austria darf I even wine drink
 ‘In Austria I am/would even be allowed to drink wine.’
- (6) CONTEXT: Lena wasn’t allowed to write a paper in semantics in high school though she would have liked to. Her college program requires her to write one.
 In der Schule durfte Lena keine Semantikarbeit schreiben. An der Uni darf sie eine schreiben.
 ‘In school Lena was not allowed to write a semantics paper. At university she is allowed to write one.’

The observed interaction between contextual properties of the prejacent proposition and the availability of ironic *dürfen* is summarized in table (7) below.

- (7) *Ironic inference attested? (relevant examples in brackets)*

| <i>dürfen</i> ϕ | desirable(ϕ) | undesirable(ϕ) |
|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| $\neg\Box(\phi)$ | no (1) | no (odd, (5)) |
| $\Box(\phi)$ | no (6) | yes (3), (4) |

4. Towards an analysis

I observed that *dürfen* triggers irony in contexts in which the prejacent proposition is perceived (i) as a necessity and (ii) as undesirable to the permittee/obligee, cf. (3) and (4). How does this connect to a Gricean view whereby irony is the result of uttering something that is blatantly false? My response to this as presented in the following sections consists of two ingredients: I argue that each of properties (i) and (ii) renders a given *dürfen* sentence non-true. Moreover, I suggest that irony is sensitive to non-truth rather than falsity.

4.1 Irony via falsity: the case of contextual necessity

4.1.1 The argument

Lena is obliged to get up at five every day in the context described for (3). I propose that the *dürfen* sentence in (3) is thus false because the scalar implicature it triggers, *Lena can get up at five every day but does not have to*, is false in such a context.

I take the link between falsity of the scalar implicature and irony to support Magri’s (2009) view that a scalar implicature cannot be suspended if the scalar alternative it negates is relevant. Magri assumes scalar implicatures to be computed in the grammar by means of an obligatory propositional operator $\text{EXH}_{\mathcal{R}}$ shown in (8): $\text{EXH}_{\mathcal{R}}$ takes a proposition p and returns p conjoined with the negation of its scalar alternatives q that are excludable as well

as relevant according to \mathcal{R} . Scalar implicatures thus constitute part of the assertive content of a sentence.

$$(8) \quad \text{EXH}_{\mathcal{R}}(p) = p \ \& \ \bigwedge_{q \in \text{Excl}(p)} (\neg q \vee \neg \mathcal{R}(q))^5 \quad (\text{Magri 2009, 261})$$

In example (3), the *dürfen* sentence has a stronger scalar alternative based on the necessity modal *müssen* ‘must’, i.e., *Lena muss in ihrer neuen Arbeit jeden Tag um fünf Uhr aufstehen* ‘Lena has to get up at five every day for her new work’. Since this alternative is arguably relevant in the context described for (3) (as well as excludable), exhaustification by means of $\text{EXH}_{\mathcal{R}}$ leads to the strong possibility meaning sketched in (9).

$$(9) \quad \begin{aligned} & \llbracket [\text{EXH}_{\mathcal{R}} [\textit{Lena darf in ihrer neuen Arbeit jeden Tag um fünf Uhr aufstehen}]] \rrbracket \\ & = 1 \text{ iff Lena is allowed to get up at five every day for her new work \& Lena does} \\ & \text{not have to get up at five every day for her new work} \end{aligned}$$

The strong possibility meaning is obviously false of the context described for (3). Crucially, one could not derive falsity for (3) under a simplistic Gricean view, where implicatures only arise if they do not create a contradiction. In the adopted system, however, scalar implicatures, once computed, cannot be suspended regardless of the outcome. This explains why (3) (as well as (4)) are ironic.

4.1.2 Predictions

I argued that uses of *dürfen* that violate the Maxim of Quantity lead to irony. However, nothing in my account relies on the quantificational expression being *dürfen* as opposed to the unmarked possibility modal *können* ‘can’, or non-modal existential quantifiers. In principle, my account predicts irony to occur in any sentence with an existential quantifier in an upward-entailing environment if the sentence has a true and relevant universal alternative. Is this prediction borne out?

(10) suggests that *können* allows for a similar, albeit less conventionalized ironic use in corresponding contexts.

$$(10) \quad \begin{aligned} & (\textit{Assuming the context described in (3).}) \\ & \textit{Lena kann in ihrer neuen Arbeit jeden Tag um fünf Uhr aufstehen.} \\ & \textit{‘Lena gets to get up at five every day for her new work.’} \quad (\textit{ironic}) \end{aligned}$$

⁵Marie-Christine Meyer (p.c.) points out that having a disjunction $(\neg q \vee \neg \mathcal{R}(q))$ be part of the asserted content seems problematic: disjunction is normally observed to license ignorance inferences for both disjuncts. However, given that the relevance predicate \mathcal{R} is thought of as the set of propositions q forming the question under discussion, the speaker is presumably not ignorant about the relevance of a given propositions q , i.e., the truth value of $\mathcal{R}(q)$. Certain ways of thinking about ignorance inferences might still allow us to derive their absence in the case of $\text{EXH}_{\mathcal{R}}$; for example, as they likely involve scalar reasoning, they might be contingent on *overt* scalar items such as *overt or*. (Thanks to Aron Hirsch (p.c.) for helpful discussion on this point.)

Further, the existential quantifiers *ein paar* ‘a couple’ and *manchmal* ‘sometimes’ seem to induce irony in pertinent contexts, as shown in (11) and (12). In both contexts, the respective stronger scalar alternative of the existential quantifier (*viele* ‘many’ or *alle* ‘all’ in (11), *immer* ‘always’ in (12)) also holds true.

- (11) CONTEXT: *All students failed the exam.*
Ein paar Studenten haben die Prüfung verhaut.
 a couple students have the exam failed
 ‘A couple of students failed the exam.’ (ironic)
- (12) CONTEXT: *The listener is a notorious coffee drinker: the speaker knows that the listener never leaves the house without having at least two cups of coffee.*
 Du trinkst in der Früh ja **manchmal** Kaffee.
 you drink in the morning PART sometimes coffee
 ‘In the morning you sometimes have coffee.’ (ironic)

Moreover, my account leads us to expect the existence of similar effects in the domain of universal quantifiers in downward-entailing environments. Does, e.g., *brauchen* ‘need’ give rise to irony in DE environments if its stronger, existential alternative *dürfen* or *können* is also true? The ironic flavor of (13) as a case in question suggests that it does.

- (13) CONTEXT: *Smoking is prohibited at the location of utterance.*
 Lisa **braucht** hier nicht rauchen.
 Lisa need here not smoke
 ‘Lisa need not smoke in this place.’ (ironic)

How does my analysis handle the lack of irony in (6), which, on the surface, seems like another case of understating the facts? Recall the condition imposed by $\text{EXH}_{\mathcal{R}}$ that scalar alternatives be *relevant*. I submit that the universal alternative, *Lena has to write a semantics paper*, is not relevant in context (6), hence it does not get negated. My argument is that (6) contrasts the permission to write a paper as granted by Lena’s program with a prior lack thereof. Correspondingly, I identify the question under discussion with the two-membered set $\{Lena \text{ is allowed to write a semantics paper, } Lena \text{ is not allowed to write a semantics paper}\}$; the scalar alternative *Lena has to write a semantics paper* is not part of this set. Crucially, exhaustification over this two-membered set is vacuous. Thus the strengthened meaning amounts to the weak possibility meaning, viz. (14). But this meaning is consistent with *Lena writing a semantics paper* being a necessity. Therefore, no ironic inference is triggered.

- (14) $\llbracket \llbracket \text{EXH}_{\mathcal{R}} [Lena \text{ darf eine Semantikarbeit schreiben}] \rrbracket \rrbracket$
 = 1 iff Lena is allowed to write a semantics paper.

4.2 Irony via presupposition failure: the case of contextual undesirability

4.2.1 The argument

I asked why undesirability of the prejacent is one of the characteristics of ironic *dürfen*. As part of my response, I propose that *dürfen* introduces a desirability presupposition: I take *dürfen* to presuppose that its prejacent is desirable to the individual targeted by the modal statement. This presupposition is clearly failed in (3).

$$(15) \quad \llbracket \textit{dürfen} \rrbracket^{w,a} (\text{updated}) = \lambda f_{\langle s, \langle st, t \rangle \rangle} \cdot \lambda g_{\langle s, \langle st, t \rangle \rangle} \cdot \lambda p_{\langle s, t \rangle} : p \text{ is desirable to } x \text{ s.t. } x \text{ is the target of the modal in } a. \exists w' \in \max_{g(w)} (\cap (f(w)) : p(w'))$$

As independent evidence for the presence of a desirability presupposition in the lexical semantics of *dürfen*, I note that there are propositions which, on their own, prompt an interpretation of being undesirable to a given individual: for example, the proposition expressed by *Lena pays a fine* will likely be interpreted as undesirable to Lena in a minimal context. However, this default interpretation seems to be affected in the scope of *dürfen*: (16), where the same proposition is embedded under *dürfen*, triggers an inference that Lena has a positive attitude towards paying a fine, which is preserved under negation.

- (16) Lena darf nicht Strafe zahlen.
 ‘Lena is not allowed to pay a fine.’
 \rightsquigarrow *Lena has a positive attitude towards paying a fine.*

A similar inference of desirability can be observed for complement propositions that, on their own, do not favor a particular desirability attitude, cf. *Lena talking to Peter* in (17).

- (17) Lena darf (nicht) mit Peter sprechen.
 ‘Lena is (not) allowed to talk to Peter.’
 \rightsquigarrow *Lena has a positive attitude towards talking to Peter.*

Assuming that the idea of a desirability presupposition for *dürfen* is on the right track, how does presupposition failure connect to irony? I put forward a modified version of Grice’s view and argue that irony is triggered by non-truth rather than falsity. I adopt a trivalent semantics, which comes with a third truth value # for declarative clauses that suffer presupposition failure. In such a system, where both falsity and presupposition failure entail non-truth, there are then two avenues to irony (as blatant non-truth): irony via falsity and irony via presupposition failure. Both are exploited in prototypical cases of ironic *dürfen* such as (3) and (4).

(18) Truth table in a trivalent logic⁶

| S_p | p | $S_p \Rightarrow \neg 1$ |
|-------|-----|--------------------------|
| 1 | 1 | 0 |
| 0 | 1 | 1 |
| # | 0 | 1 |

4.2.2 Predictions

What are the predictions I make by extending the potential to trigger ironic inferences to all cases of presupposition failure by way of non-truth? For one thing, my analysis predicts that in DE contexts, which are contexts that Magri expects not to show hallmarks of obligatory exhaustification, *dürfen* can still be ironic provided that its desirability presupposition is failed. (19a) and (19b) suggest that this prediction is borne out: *dürfen* is in a DE environment (scope of negation in (19a), conditional antecedent in (19b)), yet triggers irony. At the same time, I do not predict irony for corresponding sentences featuring *können*, which, presumably, has no desirability presupposition. That this is on the right track can be seen in (19a) and (19b): with *können* instead of *dürfen*, only the non-ironic reading is readily available. (The provided acceptability judgments in (19) target the intended, ironic reading.)

- (19) a. Martin darf/?kann zumindest nicht jeden Tag um fünf aufstehen.
 Martin darf/kann at least not every day at five get-up
 ‘At least Martin does not get to get up at five every day.’ (NEG > can) car’
- b. Wenn Martin jeden Tag um fünf aufstehen dürfte/?könnte, würde er kündigen.
 ‘If Martin got to get up at five every day, he would quit his job.’

5. Outlook

The proposed analysis could provide a clue as to why *dürfen* makes for an especially “good” case of irony, compared to *können*: *dürfen* sentences like (3) and (4) have two ways of being ironic, via falsity and presupposition failure.

Clearly, the analysis also faces certain questions, one of the most pressing ones being the fact that not all sentences with value 0 or # are ironic. What is a sufficient condition for irony? So far, we have no mechanism to restrict irony to the cases where it is attested. Moreover, while the possibility for 0 and # might be required to make a case of irony especially “good”, occurrences of ironic *dürfen* in DE environments showed us that # is sometimes sufficient to trigger irony. Thus, having both options, 0 and #, seems to be neither sufficient nor necessary for a sentence to be ironic.

Interestingly, ironic *dürfen* in non-UE environments is often (sometimes necessarily) accompanied by modal particles and adverbials, many of them presuppositional, e.g., *zu-*

⁶Read S_p as S presupposing p . If a sentence S presupposes p , the truth (value 1) of S entails the truth of the presupposition p ; by the contrapositive, presupposition failure and falsity both entail non-truth ($\neg 1$).

mindest ‘at least’ in (19a) or *auch noch* ‘in addition to’. Is there a systematic reason for the presence of these elements?

We might also wonder why the phenomenon is attested in some languages but not in others. What are the conditions under which a language allows for ironic uses of permission or possibility modals? Why does English lack a comparable use of the modals *may* and *can*?

While my analysis comes with many outstanding puzzles, it also introduces the interesting possibility that there might be other types of constructions in which the availability of ironic inferences could be used to probe into the construction’s non-suspendable semantic content.

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