Grammatical Restrictions on Ironic Interpretations of Nominals in St'át'imcets, John Lyon

Irony is implicitly assumed in the literature to be a linguistic or cultural universal. This study approaches the issue from a new direction: Rather than assuming an implicit universality, I propose that the grammar of a language can limit the availability of irony as a rhetorical strategy. This approach is motivated by data from St'át'imcets (a.k.a. Lillooet), a Northern Interior Salish language, which suggests that the absence of certain types of presuppositions in St'át'imcets blocks ironic interpretations of nominals. This new perspective may give insight into the nature of irony.

Determiners in St'át'imcets encode an assertion of existence (a.o.e.) distinction (Matthewson 1998). A.o.e. determiners assert the existence of an individual which satisfies the nominal in the speaker's discourse situation (Matthewson 2008), while non-a.o.e. determiners do not assert the existence of any such individual. For contexts that in English would be considered ironic, the St'át'imcets a.o.e. determiner may not be used (1a):

(1) Context: You're over at my house for coffee. I have one bowl and one cup. You really want to use the cup, but I don't want you to. In the end, I decide to give you the bowl.

a. **#nilh ti7 ti zew'áksten-sw=a**
FOC DEM DET cup-2SG.POSS=EXIS
Here's your 'cup'.
Consultant's Comment: No, because it's not a real cup. *assertion of existence*

b. **nilh ti7 ku zew'áksten-su**
FOC DEM DET cup-2SG.POSS
Here's your 'cup'. *non-assertion of existence*

It seems that (1a) in only interpretable as an assertion, and that the speaker is bound to the truth of the expressed proposition. Sperber & Wilson (1981) posit a distinction between language use, where a speaker is committed to the asserted content of his expression, and language mention, which 'echoes' a previous assertion and where the speaker is not bound to the truth of the expressed proposition. Irony involves such mention. Crucially, the hearer must be aware that the speaker is mentioning a proposition, and not asserting it (e.g. For (1), there must be previous discussion involving cups, in either language). This theory correctly predicts that in cases where either a suitable proposition is not in the common ground, or cannot be accessed, an ironic interpretation will not be available to the expressed proposition.

Matthewson (1998) proposes a Common Ground Parameter (CGP), which states that languages may (e.g. English) or may not (e.g. St'át'imcets) have presuppositional determiners which access the common ground (Neither determiner in (1) is presuppositional). She later extends this analysis (2008), saying that there are no lexical items in St'át'imcets which access the common ground. The prediction is an absence of semantically encoded Stalnakerian presuppositions (i.e. those assumptions that the speaker *supposes* are shared) (cf Gauker 1998). Ironic mention requires these presuppositions, since a speaker must suppose that the addressee will interpret his speech act as a mention, not an assertion. Because of the absence of necessary presuppositions, the addressee of (1a) will not presuppose that his own beliefs concerning what assumptions are shared will be relevant to the speaker. The addressee will therefore not interpret the speaker as mentioning a common ground proposition, and he will not interpret the speaker's act as mention. (1b) would seem to be ironic, but it is also interpreted as an assertion, albeit one in which the speaker is not bound to the truth of the proposition that the referent of the demonstrative is an actual cup, since a non-a.o.e. DP is used. (1b) is not a case of mention, since the requisite presuppositions which access the common ground are absent, just as in (1a). The felicity of (1b) in this context is achieved by predicating the property 'cup' of the referent within a context which may *itself* be ironic, but *not* by a volitional act of mention on the part of the speaker. The difference is subtle but important, and implies that while situational irony (i.e. finding an utterance to be ironic in a situation) is present in St'át'imcets, ironic mention (i.e. verbal irony) is absent, and overt morphology like the non-a.o.e. determiner is instead necessary for a speaker to disassociate himself from the asserted content of an expression.