

**“MORAL IRONY”:  
MODAL PARTICLES, MORAL PERSONS AND INDIRECT  
STANCE-TAKING IN SAKAPULTEK DISCOURSE**

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**Abstract**

This paper presents an ethnographically sensitive account of a family of modal constructions in Sakapultek, a Mayan language spoken in highland Guatemala. The constructions in question share many characteristics with those that have been analyzed as ironic in English and are dubbed “moral irony,” due both to their similarities to irony in other languages and to their primary interactional function. The morphosyntactic composition and semiotic processes involved in moral irony are described and the proposed account of these semiotic properties makes use of Goffman’s distinction between author, animator and principal as dimensions of the speaker role. The indexical properties of moral irony are demonstrated and it is argued that they play a greater role in determining ironic meaning than speaker intentions. Using extended examples from naturally-occurring talk, the paper also demonstrates how irony functions in evaluative stance-taking in Sakapultek. Such examples illustrate both the relatively presupposing and entailing aspects of moral irony’s indexical meaning. Moral irony is argued to be modal in that it projects hypothetical or unreal possible worlds and ironic in that it indirectly and negatively evaluates the stances of an imagined principal. Finally, on the ethnographic level, moral irony is examined in light of what it reveals about Sakapultek notions of moral personhood.

**Keywords:** Irony; Modality; Stance; Footing; Personhood; Mayan languages.

## **1. Introduction**

My analytic focus in this paper is a variety of irony in Sakapultek Maya<sup>1</sup>, which I analyze as a stance-taking strategy that acts to indirectly index “shared community values” as it criticizes stances of unspecified social actors. Sakapulteks use a family of related ironic modal constructions in negatively evaluating stances. These constructions, always morphologically marked, translate most closely to ‘as if *p*’ in English, where *p* is not an imagined utterance but rather a stance. For example, in Sakapultek one might say ‘as if being a witch doesn’t matter’ when they mean to warn their addressee that her activities might arouse suspicion in the village that she is studying witchcraft or hiring a witch<sup>2</sup>. Thus they bear a surface resemblance to ironic constructions in English,

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<sup>1</sup> Sakapultek is a K’iche’ branch Mayan language spoken by approximately 5-7,000 people in highland Guatemala. With the exception of a small group of Sakapulteks living in Guatemala City, Sakapultek is primarily spoken in the municipality of Sacapulas, in the Department of Quiché. Sakapultek is mildly agglutinative and displays morphological – and some syntactic – ergativity. For a descriptive grammar of Sakapultek see Du Bois 1981.

<sup>2</sup> One of my Sakapultek hosts did, in fact, say this to me, as an implicit directive not to continue to visit our neighbor, a shaman, quite so frequently.

although their morphologically marked modal nature makes more explicit some of the indexical properties that characterize irony generally.

My semiotic functional analysis draws upon Goffman's (1981) model of production formats to argue that Sakapultek moral irony is semiotically much more complex than most treatments of irony and sarcasm in English would lead us to believe and that ironic meaning is not best analyzed in terms of a hearer's retrieval of speaker intentions. My aim in choosing irony from among a range of Sakapultek stance-taking resources is to draw attention to the role of indirect stance-taking in the negotiation of moral norms and performance of moral identities. In other words, through such stance-taking resources as those discussed in this paper, I argue that social actors not only evaluate other actors and events (thereby negotiating the moral code), but also position themselves as moral authorities. In doing so they can be said to be negotiating moral personhood, a concept that encompasses local, morally-evaluated, notions or models about the relationship between the individual and the social order, as well as conventional subject-positionings. The concept of personhood originated with Mauss' classic 1938 discussion of the person as an object of anthropological inquiry - a historically and culturally situated category (see also Taylor 1989). As Agha explains, models or "ontologies" of personhood are "schemes...grounded in cultural frameworks of person-reckoning having a particular history" (2007: 241). I also draw from Watanabe's (1992) coinage of "moral personhood" in his work among the Mam in Guatemala, as this collocation highlights how models of personhood always implicitly characterize "moral" concepts, such as agency, authority, responsibility along axes of evaluation.

Using ethnographically-situated discourse data from a range of naturally-occurring Sakapultek speech events<sup>3</sup> - from casual conversation to ritual advice - I outline and present an analysis of the morphosyntactic and semiotic characteristics of Sakapultek "moral irony" in order to demonstrate how it provides a vital resource in Sakapultek for indirect stance-taking and what this reveals about Sakapultek moral personhood.

## 2. Approaches to irony and the interpretation of indirection

Irony has received much attention in pragmatics largely because of its indirect nature. It is considered indirect in that there is said to be a mismatch between utterance and "meaning" (a distinction captured in Grice's 1989 definition of non-natural and natural meaning). This purported mismatch has been of great interest for cognitive reasons - and has led to many studies that have probed how hearers are able to discern and interpret the unspoken aspect of ironic messages (e.g., Brown 1995, 2002; Giora 1995, 2003). According to traditional linguistic approaches to irony, the indirect nature of irony is accounted for by asserting that ironic utterances "mean" the opposite of what they say. For example, Searle (1991: 536) writes "...the most natural way to interpret it is as meaning the opposite of its literal form," (cited in Clift 1999: 524). Similarly Brown (1995) analyzes Tzeltal Mayan irony as 'NOT *p*,' where *p* is the proposition that is uttered. This approach to irony as oppositional is also represented in Haiman's more

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<sup>3</sup> I emphasize "naturally occurring" in order to highlight that the data which I analyze come from indigenous speech events and are not the response to elicitation or informal interviews with the researcher.

refined assessment of the linguistic (or, more appropriately, semiotic) function of sarcasm and irony: “Whatever our social or psychological purposes in being sarcastic, **from a purely linguistic or grammatical point of view**, we are doing two things at once: We are communicating an ostensible message to our listeners but at the same time we are framing this message with a commentary or **metamessage that says something like ‘I don’t means this: in fact, I mean the exact opposite’** (Haiman 1998: 12, emphasis added).”

Although researchers have increasingly suggested defining irony in ways that go beyond arguing that ironic utterances simply mean the opposite of what is propositionally stated as *p*, most of these redefinitions do not arise from examination of the social significance - or discourse functions - of irony in naturally-occurring interaction. Much of the recent debate and advances about the nature of irony center on the cognitive processes purportedly involved in interpreting meaning and pose such questions as whether the “literal” reading of irony is processed in addition to the “figurative” or ironic meaning, etc. (for a thorough discussion of cognitive and experimental approaches to irony see Giora 2002, 2003). Other, generally psychological, studies focus on whether, and in what situations, irony or sarcasm are considered to be humorous or more or less critical than direct statements (Colston 1997; Matthews et al 2006). Many of the more recent linguistic and psychological studies that problematize traditional approaches to irony on cognitive grounds rely on English data, and when other (non-“exotic”) languages are mentioned the studies nonetheless seem to assume that all languages have irony and that ironic utterances serve similar functions cross-linguistically. Furthermore only experimental studies (surveys in which respondents are asked to choose between “ironic” and “direct” evaluative utterances for various hypothetical situations) explicitly address the social significance of ironic utterances as one type among a variety of stance-taking resources (see Colston 1997; Dews et al 1995).

Of the existing literature on irony, the work of Rebecca Clift is the most similar to the approach that I will develop here. In a 1999 paper, Clift draws from a corpus of naturally-occurring talk to propose a novel analysis of irony and critically appraise the prior linguistic literature on the topic. Her study is methodologically innovative, as most of the preceding linguistic treatments of irony (with the notable exception of Brown’s [1990, 1995] work) had primarily analyzed isolated sentences (e.g., Sperber 1984; Sperber and Wilson 1981; Wilson and Sperber 1992); constructed texts (e.g., Dews et al 1995; Giora 1995, 2003; and see the other experimental studies cited above); or literature and other mass-mediated genres (e.g., Giora 2003; Haiman 1998; Refaie 2005). More recently, several authors have begun to utilize naturalistic discourse data. These studies, despite welcome methodological innovation, are still in pursuit of what have emerged as more or less perennial questions surrounding speaker intentions in the linguistic literature on irony. For example, Eisterhod et al 2006 turn to an oral corpus to present a neo-Gricean analysis and Kotthoff 2003 employs naturally-occurring interaction data on reactions to irony in order to probe the cognitive processing of intentions in irony.

The primary aspect of Clift’s approach that I will draw upon and adapt (in addition to methodological similarities between our studies in that both consider naturally-occurring talk) is her deployment of Erving Goffman’s (1981) notion of participant roles, most notably the distinction between speaker as animator (person who animates the message); author (person who composes message); or principal (the person

responsible for the stance expressed in the message). Clift uses these dimensions of Goffman's participant roles and the related concept of footing to examine examples of irony from British English conversation. In her account, and the present analysis, irony has more in common with reported speech than it does with metaphor or negation (with which it is often treated in the cognitive semantic and pragmatics literature). Irony indicates, much like reported speech, that the speaker role is divided. More precisely, the ironist is merely the animator of the ironic expression, which may bear another author or principal. She thus fleshes out a similar and earlier approach, Sperber's (1984) "echoic mention" account, in which ironic utterances are claimed to rest on a separation of the utterance from the current speaker (or animator, in Goffman's terms). In Clift's application of Goffman, she is able to provide a more refined analysis that centers not on a use/mention distinction, but rather one that considers footing, while avoiding some of the problems associated with distinctions that have been made between echoic ("intended") irony vs. non-echoic irony (see also Giora 2003: 64-65 for a refutation of Sperber's echoic mention account). For instance, Clift claims that the "original speaker" whose words irony seems to echo is often irretrievable and thus the identifiability of the alter author cannot be crucial to the interpretation of the irony<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, we will see in an upcoming example that the potential for ambiguity in the identity of the "alter principal" (significantly, in Sakapultek, unlike Clift's analysis of English, an alter *author's* words are unimportant) is what contributes to the power of Sakapultek irony in moral discourse.

Before moving to the description and analysis of Sakapultek irony, it is useful to review the relationship between irony and personhood that has been proposed in the literature, which will allow us to focus more closely on what issues are at stake for ethnographic description in analyzing irony.

## 2.1. Irony, divided selves and personhood

Among treatments of irony, John Haiman's *Talk is Cheap, Sarcasm, Alienation and the Evolution of Language* has offered the most elaborate and sophisticated argument linking irony to models of personhood (in addition to being a phenomenally exhaustive account of the resources for cueing sarcasm "and its neighbors"). Haiman illustrates, mainly through mass-mediated English examples, the many ways that irony can be cued, observing that there does not appear to be a grammatical construction (in any language) that serves only to indicate irony. Although the focus of the book is on sarcasm, which is defined as "overt irony intentionally used by the speaker as a form of verbal aggression" toward either the addressee, a clichéd phrase, or non-present speaker (1998: 20); many of his claims regarding sarcasm can, on the face of it, apply to what has traditionally been treated as irony (utterances such as nice weather we're having spoken during a blizzard, etc.) as well as morphologically "marked" ironic constructions (e.g., like I care). While sarcasm is perhaps more "aggressive" and negative, and is treated in his analysis as a subspecies of irony, Haiman claims that sarcasm and other

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<sup>4</sup> One criticism Clift raises toward the work of Sperber (1984), who considers irony a type of "echoic mention," is that it suggests the necessity of finding whose utterance is being "echoed." While I do not agree with Clift that the analysis proposed by Sperber views irony as literally echoing the words of an identifiable author, the failure to ethnographically situate his examples of irony produces an account that is unable to clarify what the cultural origin and significance of the apparently echoed utterances is.

seemingly dissimilar forms of indirection stem from, and give expression to, what we might call a model of personhood:

What is common to sententiousness, affectation, sarcasm, ritual language, and politeness, and what distinguishes them from metaphor, is the idea of the speaker as a divided self: more specifically the speaker's self-conscious alienation from the actual referential content of his or her message...What is common to all these genres, *including self-conscious plain speaking*, is a marked degree of speaker's *detachment from* (which is the same thing as "awareness of") the social role which he or she is performing, as well as from the message which he or she is ostensibly delivering (Haiman 1998: 10, emphasis in original).

This alienation from the self, he argues, consists in people "repressing" their "private spontaneous genuine selves and play[ing] instead a public role" or roles (Haiman 1998: 62, 1989). Thus, underlying his discussion of irony is a model of personhood: Beginning with the idea that individuals can have (or feel themselves to have) divided or alienated selves.

Haiman's book is extremely suggestive, and a notable contribution to the linguistics literature in that it addresses irony as related to the self without employing a politeness analysis. However, his definitions of sarcasm and linguistic indirection (versus irony and "plain speaking" respectively) share a core weakness with that of most philosophers of language and psycholinguists who have addressed irony, in that their definitions of irony all hinge upon the notion of sincerity. The notion of sincerity is itself related to Western notions of personhood in that it predicates qualities that individuals convey through language. According to Haiman, sarcasm, a variety of irony, is distinguished by aggressive or malicious speaker intentions. Similarly, in his account, irony is distinguished from "plain speaking" - presumably talk in which all speaker roles are aligned - by the fact that the speaker doesn't "mean" the literal content of her utterance. Indeed, the opening chapter describing sarcasm is rife with allusions to speaker intention and interiority, through repeated mention of speakers' "wishes" and markers of speakers' "insincerity," etc. As has been argued by linguistic anthropological refutations of Searlean speech act theory (as expounded in Searle 1969 and 1983), the invocation of sincerity as a criterion for interpreting meaning implies that the "true meaning" of an utterance is located in the subjective (and non-empirically observable) states of an individual (e.g., Lee 1997) and therefore is implausible on methodological grounds. Furthermore, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that, considered from a cross-cultural perspective, such accounts of meaning do not adequately capture what people do (and think they do) with words and thus are based on ethnocentric assumptions and are best understood as a Western folk model relating persons to utterances (Duranti 1985, 1992; Keenan 1976; Rosaldo 1982; see also Herzfeld 2001, an anthropological approach to irony that does not rely on intentions). As Duranti notes, such "personalist" views of meaning often fail to explain certain apparently successful interactions among speakers of non-SAE languages<sup>5</sup>. He demonstrates that in the case of Samoan interpretive practices, more importance is accorded to responsibility than intentions. He could just as aptly be describing Sakapultek lingua-culture when he writes, "Samoans typically see talk and interpretation as activities for the assignment of responsibility rather than as exercises in reading 'other minds,'" (Duranti 1992: 24).

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<sup>5</sup> I borrow Whorf's (1956) acronym SAE, Standard Average European, to refer to middle class North American and Western European lingua culture.

To be fair, Haiman is aware of the issue of ethnocentrism and entertains the idea that the use or even availability of irony and sarcasm is culture-specific (albeit his recognition of this is oddly couched in evolutionary terms). For example, he states that

...we should not be surprised to find that sarcasm correlates with some other kinds of 'sophistication' or to find that it is far from universal even among human beings. If language is what defines humanity, then irony and sarcasm may conceivably define a 'higher' or 'more decadent' type of culture or personality or at least a geographically and temporally restricted use of language to perform verbal aggression or other kinds of work (Haiman 1998: 12).

Despite the problematic evolutionary assumptions underlying it, I do not wish to assess the ethnographic validity of Haiman's description of the "postmodern sensibility" underlying the North American notions of personhood that contribute to the particular uses to which irony is put in the forms he investigates. He deftly and convincingly isolates one of the local preoccupations, as it were, of Anglo-American mass-mediated uses of sarcasm and irony - "anxiety of influence" - which he recognizes as a spatially and temporally situated fetishization of originality in expression and a rueful recognition that nothing is "new;" a resignation to the fact that all social forms are ritualized and thus (in this view), insincere, even tiresome, masquerades (see Keane 2002 for a more refined version of this argument with respect to Protestantism, modernism and sincerity). As Haiman says about the use of sarcasm and other ironic expressions that metalinguistically say "I mean the opposite" of what is uttered, "we are using language to talk not about the world but about itself" (Haiman 1998: 12). For example, Haiman argues that literary excerpts such as (1) display such a stance.

### **(1) Example of sarcasm from Haiman**

- "Is the pundit you are looking for, not so?"  
 → The taxi driver said, "Nah. We come all the way from Port of Spain just for the scenery." (excerpted from Naipaul 1959: 8, cited in Haiman 1998: 12)

According to Haiman's analysis, the taxi driver really means something like "Yes, of course, we didn't come all the way to the Port of Spain just for the scenery." Two issues are at stake for Haiman's analysis. First, what is the status of "irony"? Are ironic utterances purely metalinguistic, consisting solely of comments (e.g., "I mean the opposite of what I just said") upon language (use) itself? Is the only thing left unstated in irony "I don't mean this, I mean the opposite?" Second, irony and related utterances raise the general ethnographic question of how indirect stance-taking resources such as irony - a form Haiman characterizes as primarily an indirect metalinguistic message - are related to personhood in other cultural contexts. These two issues lead us to the question of whether the linkage between varieties of irony and what Haiman takes as their "grammatical meaning" (meaning the opposite of what is said) and the idea of a divided self is a cross-culturally valid one<sup>6</sup>. For instance, the concern for originality that

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<sup>6</sup> Haiman's own position with respect to the universality of a "postmodern sensibility" or model of divisible, alienated personhood, is not particularly clear. He briefly traces this ideology from 2000 B.C. to present times, claiming that "it is older even than Ecclesiastes has been held by all manners of people at various times" (1998: 14), strongly indicating that this ideology is a pervasive, if not a universal, one. On the other hand, he states that "the very possibility of this kind of alienation from oneself, however

Haiman finds in his data displays not only a culturally-specific valuing of originality in expression but also an idea that “self” expression is necessarily spontaneous and sincere<sup>7</sup>.

Having introduced some of the conceptual issues related to subjectivity that irony and other indirect forms raise, in the following discussion I will present examples of ironic forms in Sakapultek, which like its distant cousin, Tzeltal (as described by Brown 1995) has straightforward morphological marking of ironic utterances. In examining Sakapultek moral irony we will turn to another set of more specific questions: Does moral irony (setting aside the distinction between irony and sarcasm that Haiman draws) stem from a concern with sincerity or “anxiety of influence?” Does Sakapultek moral irony imply a “divided self?” What does the deployment use of moral irony tell us about Sakapultek notions of personhood and ideas about an individual’s relationship to speech and a moral landscape?

### **3. Irony as indirect stance-taking in Maya discourse**

Part of the claim that I will make about Sakapultek irony is that it serves “moral” purposes; specifically that it is a resource for indirect evaluative stance-taking. The role of irony in stance-taking and what distinguishes it from other stance-taking resources is precisely what is missing from Haiman’s analysis. In the social site Haiman spends the most energy describing, the mass-mediated representations of the discourse of American middle-class “postmodern” elites, irony is argued to be exploited because of its indirectness. Speakers resort to a roundabout way of saying what would be too clichéd and unoriginal to say directly, and may even choose their exact phrasings because of how clichéd they are - in what he argues is a self-conscious display of the difficulty (post-)modern Americans have with reconciling sincerity and routinized language<sup>8</sup>. If what is being mocked are conventionalized expressions and common interactional scripts (as Haiman argues), the indirection afforded by irony does little to mask these as the “identity” of the target being mocked. For example, if someone says “Nice weather” during a dreadful thunderstorm, Haiman would argue that the target of mockery is trite conversation about the weather. What ironic utterances like this “leave out” in their indirection are the sources (authors) of clichéd words and exchanges, and

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ancient and widespread it may be and however self-evident to ourselves, is perhaps not a priori a universal of human conceptualization nor of social behavior” (1998: 62) and recognizes that Rosaldo (1984) and Duranti (1985), among others, have found that such a contrast is not relevant among the Ilongot and Samoans. Yet this acknowledgment of relativity is directly followed by a subtle dismissal of such claims, suggesting that in order not to manifest a divided self these cultures must also lack theater, play-acting, “concealment” and “hypocrisy,” and states that the relativistic conclusions of these anthropologists are indulging in an “implicit glorification of the sincere medieval peasant or Ilongot tribesman, Riesman, Read, and Rosaldo are following in the footsteps of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies” (1998: 64), misreading Duranti and Rosaldo’s arguments about non-personalist interpretive practices as claims about a sort of blanket sincerity on the part of the “natives,” akin to nineteenth century perceptions of noble savages.

<sup>7</sup> I would like to refer once more to Keane (2002) and Shoaps (2002) for a discussion of the linguistic effects of such an ideology of an “earnest,” sincere speaking subject on religious language among Protestants.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, this is not strictly a “postmodern” concern: Bauman 1983 documents concerns about the perceived dangers routinized language presented to sincere religious expression among 17<sup>th</sup> Century Quakers.

authorship is at stake because the very “point” of irony is that the ironist/actor is not the original author of the words.

In contrast to this (as well as Clift’s [1999], Dews et al.’s [1995], and Giora’s [1995, 2002, 2003]) depiction of English irony - wherein it is argued to be a resource for humor, softening criticism and for aggression - Sakapultek irony is not used humorously nor does it imply a “alienated,” “hip” or divided sense of self. While my Sakapultek consultants said that irony was “gentler” than some other ways of expressing criticism (they did not characterize it as “aggressive”), they pointed out that it always has something of a scolding or critical sting to it. Furthermore, authorship of particular words is not at stake in Sakapultek because irony does not play upon clichéd phrasings or words so much as on negatively evaluating alter principals who are responsible for unformulated stances. Little cultural importance is placed on “sincerity” and virtually no importance is placed on originality in speech. Although a full discussion of this topic is due for another, longer study, the other “direct” stance-taking resources that Sakapultek moral irony stands in contrast to include assessments and first-person marked verbs of speaking and cognition (such as *kimb’aj* ‘I say [she lied],’ which is rather like *I think* in English, *nigaan* ‘I’d like [the police to arrest him],’ *kwaaj* ‘I want [her to go away],’ etc.). In analyzing my corpus of transcribed recordings of Sakapultek conversations I was struck by the fact that aside from relatively “low stakes” sorts of evaluations (such as positive comments upon things rather than negative comments about the social landscape and human behavior) in Sakapultek discourse, evaluative stance-taking packaged as propositional assessments (e.g., *he’s a jerk*) is relatively rare and tends to be restricted to conversation among co-resident kin and other intimates. Similarly, stances prefaced by first person verbs of speech or cognition are also restricted in usage. The pragmatic and formal relationship between these direct forms and moral irony is illustrated by the fact that my consultants were able to provide “direct” ways of putting ironic utterances - in the form of directives and, less commonly, assessments - however, notably these direct versions of ironic utterances were not the “opposite” of what was said in the ironic frame.

Both the lack of frequency of “high stakes” propositional assessments and complement-taking predicates of cognition and desire make sense when viewed within the context of Maya sociality. Maya interaction has been widely noted for its “indirect” nature (see Brody 1991: 89 for a compilation of Mayanists’ observations on the value of indirection) and in Sakapultek, first-person complement-taking predicates of desire and cognition, as well as evaluatively weighted lexical items (e.g., *lazy*, *liar*, *whore*) are seldom found in gossip, scolding, advice or any of the other moral discourse genres where we would expect to find evaluative stance-taking.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, I was drawn to investigate moral irony by way of responding to the following question: If assessments and locutive forms, which explicitly name a particular stance-taking action and/or are marked for first-person semantic experiencers or agents, are not commonly preferred resources for moral stance-taking, what are the stance-taking resources used among communities that value indirectness in expression?

Brown (1990, 1995, 2002) and Brody (1991) have explored the discursive manifestations of the importance that the linguistic ideologies of two different Maya groups, the Tzeltal and Tojolab’al, place on indirection (see Brenneis [1986] and Brody

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<sup>9</sup> This observation is based on the analysis of a corpus of over 30 hours of recordings of naturally-occurring Sakapultek talk, representing a range of speech genres and social categories of participants.

[1991] for a breakdown of criteria for categorizing varieties of indirection). They each examine talk among women, the social category in both groups that is held to the strictest standards of avoiding conflict or public emotional expression. Conversational norms in Sakapultek closely resemble what they describe; indirection - for instance through strategic use of ambiguity - is a favored strategy both in verbal art and everyday talk. And similar to what they describe among the Tzeltal and Tojolab'al Maya, Sakapultek women are particularly constrained with respect to the degree of negative evaluation or contention that is considered appropriate to express in public contexts.

The emphasis these Maya groups place on indirect expression suggests a particular idealized model of moral personhood - or conception of how the individual fits within a moral landscape. In Sacapulas one model of moral personhood (which is now being contested by Protestantism and changes in political economy) locates moral authority in adherence to tradition (Shoaps 2004). An individual's moral worth is evaluated by how well he or she fulfills his or her social and familial role as a parent, first son, daughter, etc. (see also Watanabe 1992 for an insightful exposition of a similar model of moral personhood among a Mam community). In the ontology of Sakapultek moral personhood, one does not "create" one's own social niche or destiny so much as do an admirable job at meeting or exceeding pre-existing expectations for one's age, ethnicity, gender and relationships with kin. Despite the fact that, in practice, new social roles are being negotiated as more women go to school and get jobs outside the home, and as men shift from subsistence farming to other income-generating strategies, in rural Sakapultek communities the core set of recognized age-graded, gendered, and family-defined social roles and expectations is still fairly fixed. Most importantly, social roles and expectations are still considered to exist outside of - rather than be defined by - particular individuals. Even as people adopt newer roles and sets of expectations, such as successful student, professional woman, etc., there is tension around, and an effort to (at least publicly) meet or satisfy expectations of what are felt to be the more "traditional" roles as well, particularly those based upon gender and age. Furthermore, one's authority to rebuke others, draw from or contest what are taken to be traditional community values is indexed by indirect rather than direct strategies. I argue that moral authority, felt to derive from adherence to tradition, is asserted linguistically through indirect means of stance-taking such as moral irony because they allow "traditional" values to be indexed without being directly stated (Shoaps 2004b). In contrast, "I" prefaced assessments, or directives (the glosses Sakapulteks most frequently supply for expressions involving moral irony), index a subjective or egocentric basis for authority - that the speaker asserts that his or her own opinions are sufficient basis for taking negative evaluative stances.

The changing moral landscape of contemporary Sacapulas prompts us to approach these briefly sketched ethnographic findings about Sakapultek moral personhood by questioning how moral values are perpetuated and enacted in practice and how new values are negotiated in real-time interaction. With these questions and observations in mind, the following sections will turn to how the Sakapultek model of personhood is embodied in interaction through moral irony and how its semiotic properties make it uniquely suited for indirect evaluative stance-taking of the sort that indexes "traditional" grounds of moral authority.

### 3.1. Conflict as a site for evaluative stance-taking

A prime location to look for strategies of moral stance-taking, even among communities that value indirection, is the expression and discussion of conflict. For example, in order to locate discursive strategies used by Tzeltal women in confrontation, Brown (1995) investigated court disputes, one of the only public local contexts where conflict is openly expressed by women. In rural Sacapulas most disputes are not settled in a courtroom, rather, they are dealt with by mediated discussions (described below), or preferably, to the parties involved, behind the scenes through gossip, avoidance and even witchcraft. Thus, direct confrontation is difficult to capture on tape or to witness for those not involved in the dispute. The upcoming excerpt from a conversational narrative is an example of the sort of behind-the-scenes gossip that typically follows a face-to-face conflict. This excerpt is informative because it reveals not only displays of emotional distress and moral evaluation, but also contains a representation of the conflict that caused it. Spontaneous (as opposed to researcher-elicited) narrative representations or retellings of events are interesting because, in the case of a verbal conflict, presumably the narrator only recounts the most damning and unfair actions or accusations of her aggressor, implicitly offering an interpretation of what happened and evaluating the aggressor with respect to locally salient moral norms (while positioning the narrator as blameless). When such retellings are questioned or challenged in conversation, there is evidence that the confrontation as represented departs from familiar, presupposed cultural ideals or “stories.”

In cases where conflict is overt and mediated, the aggrieved party contacts the *q'atb'al tziiij*, *ajkaltanh* or (in local Spanish) *alcalde indígena*,<sup>10</sup> a civic official who serves the community and ideally accompanies the aggrieved and any witnesses to the home of the accused. Every large village or cluster of small hamlets has an appointed *q'atb'al tziiij*. *Q'atb'al tziijs* are not chosen based upon any personal or moral characteristics, but rather serve an obligatory *patan* or term that all adult men who reside in the community must perform for one or two years.<sup>11</sup> Typically, when intervening in disputes, the *q'atb'al tziiij* does not overtly take sides and ideally facilitates a resolution between the parties and ensures that conflict does not escalate into threats, violence or witchcraft.

The segment below is excerpted from a recorded conversation about a *q'atb'al tziiij*-mediated confrontation and captures an interaction in which the woman narrating the encounter is clearly morally and emotionally invested, as evidenced by her uncharacteristically public display of affect. This conversation represents one of the most explicit and judgmental Sakapultek “gossip” that my consultants were able to

<sup>10</sup> Offices such as *alcalde indígena* are known as *cargos*, part of a widespread form of civil-religious organization introduced to Latin America by Spanish colonial authorities. On the cargo-system among Mesoamerican communities, see Cancian (1965) and Chance and Taylor (1985).

<sup>11</sup> In Sacapulas the other responsibilities of this post include delivering mail and messages from the town center to the villages and attending regular meetings with other *alcaldes indígenas*. The concerns raised in these meetings are reported to the elected *alcalde* of the municipality of Sacapulas. This institution is apparently much less beholden to municipal center authority than in the past, when, according to my older consultants, mayors used to require that the *alcaldes indígenas* obtain rural Sakapultek men and children as occasional unpaid servants, field hands and porters for the wealthy *ladinos* or non-Indians in the town center.

record or I was able to witness during nearly 18 months of fieldwork. As suggested above, Sakapulteks, when judging others, seldom label them or evaluate them lexically (e.g., 'he's a jerk'). Rather, a conversational focus is on responsibility and the social effects of actions - in this case a neighbor is characterized as "wanting" conflict or acting in a way that demonstrates he seeks to bring about problems. The scene is the home of my hosts, Marta<sup>12</sup> and Tono, in Praxkin, a pseudonym for an ethnic Sakapultek hamlet with a population of approximately 270, early one weekday morning in November, 2001. As we finished breakfast we heard a shrill wailing coming from the road uphill from the house. Tono went to the window and saw Yanaanh, a fifty-something neighbor woman, outside, crying loudly and heading down the path to our house. "She's drunk," he informed us, grimacing at the prospect of having to deal with a nuisance (the inebriated have the annoying habit of begging money to buy more alcohol and of trying to convince others to drink with them). Incidentally, drunkenness is the first explanation for Yanaanh's behavior that most Sakapulteks would offer, as displays of anger or grief are rare and primarily occur when people are intoxicated (in fact, Sakapulteks relish their finely honed abilities to detect intoxication in their neighbors even at 500-700 yards' distance). Note that this bit of evaluative stance-taking (labeling another person as intoxicated and implying, because of gender and the fact that it was during a weekday morning - women are not supposed to drink outside of ritual occasions - a moral lapse) took place in a family home among intimates - the local context most conducive to candid evaluation - and regarding a topic that most Sakapulteks consider to be a clear-cut physical state.

Tono stood in the kitchen doorway and shouted to Yanaanh to take a seat on a bench in the outdoor patio while he finished his breakfast. Martanh went out and brought her a cup of coffee (a Sakapultek token of hospitality) and came back reporting that Yanaanh did not smell drunk or look disheveled. Sensing an exciting recording opportunity, I hurried to my room to ready my recording equipment.<sup>13</sup> Yanaanh, it seemed, had been wronged by another neighbor and had come over to complain and try to enlist Tono and Martanh as allies. A year earlier, Yanaanh's son "robbed" the baby Jesus figurine from the Christmas nativity scene of a neighbor - a local custom known as *robo del niño* 'theft of the child' or *entrega del niño* 'delivery of the child' that creates a bond of fictive kinship between the family of the "thief" and that of the figurine's owner. After the figurine is stolen, the thief's family sends a *k'amal b'eey* or ritual speaker to the owner's home to announce responsibility for the theft and arrange a date for its return. The figurine, decked out in new clothes and adorned with flowers, is usually returned six to twelve months later as part of a ceremony that involves a marriage-like procession of guests from the home of the thief to that of the owner. At the ceremony, two *k'amal b'eey*s act as intermediaries representing both families and

<sup>12</sup> No real names have been used and identifying details have been changed.

<sup>13</sup> A note on recording methods: In order to minimize the effect of participants' awareness of being recorded on conversation, I sometimes began recordings surreptitiously and notified participants (all of whom had given me earlier "blanket consent" to record them) just afterwards that they had been recorded and asked for their permission to keep the recording to help me understand the Sakapultek language and culture. Participants were assured that I would change their names in transcripts and that I would not play the recordings for (or show the transcripts to) other Sakapulteks with the exception of those who were present in the original event or their immediate family members. I also promised to obscure identifiable characteristics of recorded participants in all published work, although people were much more concerned that the recordings be protected from the scrutiny of other Sakapulteks than they were about strange gringos and academics.

perform a formulaic dialogue that creates a kinship bond between them and their guests. The thief pays for the expenses of the festivity, which include food and drink, live marimba music, new clothing and a special basket for the baby Jesus.

Because Yanaanh's son lived and worked in Guatemala City at the time, she and her daughter-in-law were in charge of arrangements for the party that was to leave from her house. All initial negotiations and preparations had gone well, including setting the date for the festive return of the baby Jesus. Then, suddenly, a week before the party (to which Yanaanh had already invited about fifty guests, Marta, Tono and myself included), the owner of the Jesus sent the village's *q'atb'al tzij* over to Yanaanh's house to request the immediate return of the baby, in effect treating this ritual theft as a real one. All plans for new ties of *compadrazgo* or ritual co-parenthood were off, as was the ceremony. Part of Yanaanh's purpose in visiting was to assert that she would still have a party on that day, which happened to be her husband's birthday,<sup>14</sup> and to enlist Tono, the leader of the local Catholic *conjunto* or music group, to perform for the first part of the party.<sup>15</sup> What follows is an excerpt from Yanaanh's (Y) telling of the event to Marta (M) and Tono (who does not speak in this segment).

## (2) Conversational moral irony as third person evaluation [SSAK 68]<sup>16</sup>

01 Y: *para qué tantas problemas kicha' kaan*<sup>17</sup>  
 Para qué tantas problemas ki- 0- cha' kaan  
 L2.For L2.what L2.so.many L2.problems Inc- 3Abs- say remain

“‘why all the problems?’” he says

02 *nikomalanh cha'*  
 ni- komalanh 0- 0- cha'  
 1Erg- co-mother Cmp- 3Abs- say

“my comadre” he said

<sup>14</sup> After the segment excerpted below she indicated that she would get her revenge by having the best party of the year, to which this neighbor would not be invited: “Let him hear the marimba all night as he sits alone in his house.”

<sup>15</sup> Incidentally by hiring the Catholic *conjunto*, who play hymns at religious gatherings in people's homes, Yanaanh positions herself as pious and perhaps not initially interested in the *robo del niño* in order to have an excuse for a party (but rather for the kinship bonds it would have created).

<sup>16</sup> Transcription conventions reflect those proposed by Du Bois et al (1993): Each line represents an intonation unit. Indented lines are part of the intonation unit that precedes them. # represents an unintelligible syllable, while speech bracketed by <##> is a “best guess” of difficult to decipher talk. For clarity, in the gloss, I have bracketed clearly identifiable direct reported speech in quotation marks and have inserted question marks where questions are cued by prosody or morphological marking.

<sup>17</sup> The Sakapultek orthography is based on the standard orthography for Guatemalan Mayan languages documented in Kaufman (1975): I wrote long vowels as double vowels, ch for a voiceless palato-alveolar affricate, tz for a voiceless alveolar affricate, j for a voiceless velar fricative, x for a voiceless palato-alveolar central laminal fricative, nh for a velar nasal, apostrophe for glottal stop and apostrophe following a consonant for glottalized or ejective consonants. I have followed Du Bois (1981) in the designation of word boundaries, particularly in the convention of separating definite articles and nonfactual clitics from the words to which they affix. The abbreviations used in glosses can be found in the Appendix.

- 03 M: → *xa' t ch'o'oj t riij*  
 xa' + t ch'o'oj + t riij  
 just +NF problems NF over.it  
 'as if it's just for problems'
- 04 Y: → *xa' ch'o'oj t riij k'anh Marta- Martanh*  
 xa' ch'o'oj + t riij k'anh Marta- Martanh  
 just problems +NF over.it DM Marta- Martanh<sup>18</sup>  
 'just about problems then Marta—Martanh
- 05 → *ni xa' ch'o'oj riij Marta xaak'aam ol nee' laa'*  
 Ni xa' ch'o'oj riij Marta x- aa- 0- k'aam ol nee' laa'  
 Emph just problems over.it Marta Cmp- Mvt- 3Abs- Psv.bring here baby Dist  
 as if only to cause problems Marta that the baby was brought
- 06 *# porque*  
*# L2.because*  
*# because*
- 07 *pa utziil pa utziil ka'al kaan laa'*  
 Pa utziil pa utziil k- 0- al kaan laa'  
 Loc well Loc well Inc- 3Abs- enter remain Dist  
 in a good manner, in a good manner it stayed there
- 08 *por qué kirk'am ul alkaltanh laa'*  
 Por qué k- 0- r- k'am ul alkaltanh laa'  
 L2.for L2.what Inc- 3Abs- 3Erg- bring hither alcalde Dist  
 why did he bring that official?
- 09 M: *ch'o'oj kikaaj l e'era'*  
 ch'o'oj k- 0- k- aaj l\_e'era'  
 problems Inc- 3Abs- 3pErg- want 3p.PRO  
 they want [to make] problems
- 10 Y: *pues ch'o'oj kikaaj*  
 pues ch'o'oj k- 0- k- aaj  
 L2.well problems Inc- 3Abs- 3pErg- want  
 yeah so they want problems'

((SEVERAL MINUTES LATER))

- 11 Y: *pero ee ra en xinal kaan sin nada*  
 pero ee ra\_en x- in- al kaan sin nada  
 L2.but Foc 1Pro Cmp- 1Abs-stay remain L2.without L2.nothing

<sup>18</sup> *Martanh* is the Sakapultek version of Marta.

‘but then I’m left without anything

- 12 *por qué q’atb’al tziiij kitaaq ul*  
 Por qué q’atb’al\_tziiij k- 0- taaq ul  
 L2.for L2.what municipal.official Inc- 3Abs- Psv.send hither

why was the official sent for?

- 13 *por qué ra’ peetek*  
 Por qué ra’ 0- 0- peet- ek  
 L2.for L2.what 3Pro Cmp- 3Abs- come- IF

why did he [the *q’atb’al tziiij*] come?

- 14 *k’oo t moodo pee l ara’ #*  
 0- k’oo +t moodo 0- 0- pee l\_ara’ #  
 3Abs- exist +Neg way Cmp- 3Abs- come 3Pro #

there is no way he [the neighbor] could come #?

- 15 <# *achenh taj #*>  
     achenh taj  
     man Neg

<# he’s not a man #>

- 16 *k’oo t moodo pee l ara’ ch wichanh*  
 0- k’oo +t moodo 0- 0- pee l\_ara’ ch w- ichanh  
 3Abs- exist +Neg way Cmp- 3Abs- come 3Pro to 1Erg- house

there’s no way he could come to my house himself?

- 17 *o achenh peetek*  
 o achenh 0- 0- peet- ek  
 or man Cmp- 3Abs- come- IF

or did a man come?’

In line 1 Yanaanh quotes what the mediating official supposedly told her. She juxtaposes the conciliatory *por qué tantas problemas* ‘why all the problems,’ with a quotation of how the complaining neighbor had purportedly addressed Yanaanh as *nikomalanh* ‘my comadre’<sup>19</sup>, a respect term referring to a relationship between them that

<sup>19</sup> I went over this recording with both Marta and Tono, who agreed that line 2 is doubly embedded reported speech. They said that in such situations it is usual for the intermediary to use direct reported speech to represent the claimant’s complaints as accurately as possible, lest he appear to be taking sides. Note also that Marta and Tono said that this particular *q’atb’al tziiij* most likely spoke with Yanaanh in Spanish, as he does not prefer to speak Sakapultek publicly. Because Sakapulteks view reported speech to be a veridical accounting of the exact words (and exact code) used in a prior speech event, we can safely infer that the Spanish in line 1 is close to the official’s “own” phrasing, while the

the “robbing” and return of the Christ child would have created. In doing so Yanaanh subtly sets up the neighbor’s hypocrisy, a theme which is emphasized in lines 3-10. Community norms are indexed and mobilized to condemn the neighbor as Marta and Yanaanh collaboratively construct a moral evaluation of his hypocritical actions. In this case, the hypocrisy is due to his involving local authorities in - and thereby escalating or even, as Marta and Yanaanh imply, *creating* - a dispute, while allegedly blaming the resulting discordance on Yanaanh (who, in her account, was only trying to initiate a fictive kin relationship with him). In Yanaanh’s telling the neighbor (through the intermediary) couched this in the very “respect” language associated with the fictive kin relationship that his actions called off.

The linguistic resource for evaluative stance-taking that occurs in lines 3-5 and which sets the interpretive frame for the remaining lines (which involve explicit propositional evaluation in lines 9-10), is what I have termed “moral irony.” Moral irony is a morphologically cued metalinguistic construction that makes strategic use of ambiguity, much like the Tzeltal irony described by Brown (1990, 1995). In addition to occurring in conversation, such as this highly evaluative (by local standards) example of talk about non-present third persons, moral irony occurs in other, addressee-focused Sakapultek moral discourse genres, most notably *yajanek* ‘scolding’/‘judgmental talk’/‘gossip’<sup>20</sup> and *pixab* ‘wedding counsel.’ It should be stressed once more that moral irony, unlike the perceived functions of its English counterpart, is emphatically not a resource for humor or a means for showing off one’s “postmodern hipness” (cf. Haiman 1998).

I will discuss the morphological properties and semiotic functions of tokens of moral irony in more detail below; in this section my aim has been to draw attention to the significance of these forms as an indirect evaluative resource within the Sakapultek communicative ecology. The analysis I will offer differs from Brown’s accounts of Tzeltal irony in that, rather than emphasizing politeness as an explanatory principle, I focus on how the forms are deployed for the moment-by-moment, everyday negotiation of local moral codes and the local moral landscape, not for consideration of “face.” Furthermore, my analysis of the semiotic function of moral irony differs from traditional accounts of irony - and from that offered by Brown (1995) - which have claimed that irony merely means the opposite of what is said.

#### 4. Morphosyntactic properties and types of moral irony constructions

Moral irony is the only type of verbal irony that exists in Sakapultek, and it is morphologically marked by some combination of the non-factual and modal elements *t(aj)*, *ni*, and *xa*. This is significant because unlike English and other languages more familiar to investigators of irony, at the time of my fieldwork Sakapultek did not have purely prosodically or sequentially cued irony. It is widely observed that in English nearly any utterance can be rendered ironic via prosody, facial expression, gesture or by its juxtaposition with other utterances. In Sakapultek, on the other hand, as we saw in the example above, an ironic frame is created by the moral irony morphological

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Sakapultek, framed by a completive verb of speaking, in line 2, represents what the official reported the neighbor as saying.

<sup>20</sup> Readers interested in the complex Sakapultek concept of *yajanek* are referred to Shoaps 2004b.

construction (were this frame not invoked by moral irony, lines 16-17 could only be interpreted as factual, not rhetorical, questions). The obligatory presence of morphological marking indicates that recognition of speakers' intentions is less likely to play a role in interpretation than in English irony. A closer investigation of the morphosyntactic properties of these constructions is instructive, as it suggests that the moral irony construction has a semiotic and evaluative precision apparently not found in prosodically cued ironic expression.

#### 4.1. *Modal particles: Sakapultek metapragmatic resources for cueing moral irony*

Moral irony constructions are composed of a combination of evaluative and/or negatively evaluative counterfactual modal elements and may also contain an irrealis marker, or what I refer to as a nonfactual marker. Because the discourse-pragmatic functions of modal markers have not been well documented in Mayan languages (aside from a treatment of Q'eqchi' in Kockelman 2002), I will devote a bit of attention to each particle<sup>21</sup> that participates in moral irony constructions. I use the term "construction" deliberately, as the meaning of the individual constitutive parts do not predictably indicate the meaning of the whole (Goldberg 1995). Table 1 presents the apparently related Sakapultek evaluative modals xa' and xaq, with examples of their use in non-morally ironic discourse (examples of their role in moral irony are given in Table 3). In other languages similar morphemes have been called "focus" or "focal" particles (König 1991) and in the case of Sakapultek, when the construction flanks a constituent that constituent is "focused" in the sense that it falls under its scope. But their function is much more complex than providing discourse emphasis, as we will see in a later section. Modal particles xa' and xaq appear to be different stages of grammaticization of the same source, the scalar quantifier xaq, which seems to have undergone phonological reduction and semantic bleaching or expansion of possible syntactic and discursive contexts and moved from indicating measure to indicating negative evaluation of stances or actions (an example of subjectification in grammaticization, confirming Traugott's [1995] predictions). The semantic and syntactic properties and discursive functions are illustrated with clauses excerpted from naturally-occurring Sakapultek discourse (when followed by recording number in brackets) or elicited forms based on conversations I witnessed but did not record and were approved by multiple native speakers. Evaluative modal particles are underlined in the examples, for ease of reference. In order to preserve formatting of this and the remaining tables, interlinear glosses of all examples in this and Tables 2 and 3 are given in the Appendix.

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<sup>21</sup> Following recent convention, I use the morphologically imprecise term "particles" here deliberately: The term is a convenient way of referring both to semantically empty, phonologically simple (unstressed, monosyllabic) "function" words or operators, such as xaq, as well as to clitics.

**Table 1: Sakapultek Evaluative Modal Particles**

| <i>Form</i>                  | <i>Gloss</i>                              | <i>Syntactic Characteristics</i>  | <i>Discourse Functions</i>   |
|------------------------------|---|---|--|
| <i>xa' ~xu</i> <sup>22</sup> | Scalar quantifier<br><br>'just'<br>'only' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Precedes the constituent over which it has scope</li> <li>• Occurs with NPs, VPs and adjectives</li> </ul> <p>a). <i>xu' saqa'n</i> 'only a little' (for food or amount of activity, etc.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• interacts with <i>waa</i> 'if' and nonfactive <i>+t</i> to form counterfactual conditional construction:</li> </ul> <p>b).<br/><i>waa t xu' k'oo nipwaaq kinloq'anh</i> 'if only I had money I would buy it'</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• indexes that something has fallen short of expectation</li> <li>• negatively evaluates stance or action</li> </ul> <p>c). <i>ee l ara' xu' yajanla'</i> 'she just goes around scolding'</p> |
| <i>xaq</i>                   | 'just'                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cannot replace <i>xa'</i> in most scalar contexts</li> <li>• more restricted in occurrence than <i>xa'</i></li> <li>• combined with <i>+t(i)</i> in a counterfactual conditional construction:</li> </ul> <p>d).<br/><i>xaq t ya' kirtij carro laa' qatoq'aaj a'n p richaq lix</i> 'if only that car took water [not gas] we would go up there and put the pressure on' [SSAK 02:B16:95]</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• negatively evaluates action:</li> </ul> <p>e).<br/><i>ee k'oo jojoon b'a laa' que xaq tal vez kikimal tzijij</i> 'there are some that maybe just collect gossip' [SSAK32:B6:281]</p>        |

Table 2 contrasts the two pragmatically rich particles that I analyze as marking irrealis or nonfactual mood. The choice of "irrealis" as a descriptive label does not

<sup>22</sup> The occurrence of *xa'* vs. *xu'* seems sensitive both to the vowel in the first syllable of the word immediately following it, as well as to dialectal variation and even individual preference (not all individuals observe vowel harmony in using it).

imply a grammaticized, or obligatorily marked realis/irrealis distinction, and is merely intended as a recognition that both these forms invoke meanings or cast utterances in the notional domain of modality or hypothetically (cf., Bybee 1998a; Mithun 1995). There is some ambiguity in the analysis of how many distinct form-meaning pairings there are. For example, the first particle, an enclitic whose morphophonemic shape depends on its position within the intonation unit or clause, can appear as *taj* or the enclitics *+t*, *+ti* and *+ta*. At first glance this particle may appear to be a negative marker. In fact, the full form *taj* appears to always indicate negation, whereas the contracted forms may either receive negative or nonfactual readings, depending on context. I will not attempt to resolve here whether negative *taj* and its contractions are distinct from, or are polysemous with, the nonfactual clitics. Rather, my focus in Table 2 is on its participation in moral irony constructions.

Lastly, note that many of the elements in Table 1 and Table 2 can have other, non-ironic functions as well. These include negation, as mentioned above, as well as several counterfactual conditional protasis markers, e.g., *xaq t* and *waa t xa* ‘if it were the case that’.

**Table 2: Sakapultek Irrealis Mode Markers**

| <i>Form</i>   | <i>Syntactic Characteristics</i>  | <i>Discourse Functions</i>  |
|---|---|---|
| <i>+t ~ +ti ~ ta ~ taj</i><br><br>Nonfactual marker                                 | Follows the constituent over which it has scope as a negative<br><br>a). <i>xinwil t b'eeek l ara'</i><br>'I didn't see him leave'  | Negative/non-factual marker<br><br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Triggers nonfactual rather than negative reading when combined with other modal particles and conditional marker <i>waa</i>:</li> </ul> b). <i>wee t peetek...</i> 'if he had come...' [SSAK02B17:51] |
| <i>Ni</i><br><br>Emphatic or negative evaluation marker of counterfactual scenarios | Precedes and has scope over questions:<br><br>c). <i>ni k'oo kiitijanh?</i><br>'do you (pl) get anything to eat?'<br><br>Combines with other particles to form <i>ti ni (ra')</i> , an emphatic counterfactual adverbial that follows verbs<br><br>d). <i>kaaxim ti ni ra' aapwaq tza'm l aawuq ee kaaxim jun aawalk'aal</i> 'you can't even tie your money up in your skirt, how are you going to control your child?' [SSAK15.5:3]<br><br>e). <i>l ara' ka'pan ti ni jun Ríos</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphatic question marker/<br/>non-obligatory polar question marker</li> <li>emphasizes nonfactual mood and negative evaluation</li> </ul>  |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
|  | <i>Montt p Congreso cha'</i><br>'It's said Ríos Montt [politician]<br>doesn't even show up at<br>Congress' [SSAK22:97] |  |
|--|--|--|

#### 4.2. Moral irony construction types

Having presented the distinct morphological elements that participate in moral irony, and their use in other construction types, I will now briefly present the variety of morphosyntactic combinations of these particles that I analyze as morally ironic constructions. The following list of construction types presents the variety of recurrent combinations of these particles that I have encountered in my corpus. Each receives an “ironic” reading (setting aside for the moment the precise semiotic functions of moral irony) and is illustrated with an excerpt from naturally-occurring talk; the English gloss is free but gives a sense of the “flavor” of moral irony than a more literal gloss might (see Appendix for full interlinear gloss of all examples). It should be noted that many of the following constructions also function in forming the protases of counterfactual conditionals and thus are not necessarily always “ironic,” whereas all instances of irony that I have encountered in Sakapultek are triggered by a combination of these morphosyntactic frames. Aside from containing the non-factual *+ti/+t* and/either or both of the particles *ni* and *xa'* or *xaq*, these constructions also have in common the fact that they are translated similarly by Sakapulteks into the regional Spanish as *acaso que* which is best captured by ironic uses of ‘as if...’ or ‘like’ in colloquial English. In addition, what unites these constructions morphologically is the fact that they each involve a combination of a negatively evaluative modal marker (from Table 1) with an irrealis mode marker (from Table 2). Each construction type is illustrated with a short example taken from naturally-occurring talk, and not coincidentally, many examples come from recordings of *pixab'*, the ritual counsel brides and grooms are given by their kin the night before a wedding. The frequent occurrence of moral irony in *pixab'* is not surprising because *pixab'* is the prototypical and most ritualized positive moral discourse genre among traditionalist Sakapulteks (Shoaps 2004b.). With the exception of the example in II, all of these tokens were uttered by women, although moral irony is not considered by Sakapulteks to belong to a women’s speech register or to be associated with gender. Nonetheless this marked, gendered distribution of forms (consistent throughout my database of over three hours of recordings of *pixab'*, which unlike my conversational data, features roughly as many male participants as female) confirms Brown (1990, 1995) and Brody’s (1991) findings that in several Mayan language communities, women tend to favor indirect expressions.

The examples illustrate that the particles can occur in several combinations and either form a discontinuous syntactic frame that flanks a constituent (I, II and IV), or combine to form a unit that precedes and has scope over an entire clause (as in III and V).

**Table 3: Moral Irony Construction Types**

I. *(ni) xa' t ADJ taj*

Ex. from wedding advice - uncle to bride [SSAK 04:26]

*ni xa' t junam taj ajk'oo pa qachanh*

'as if it isn't the same as us  
being in our own house'

II. (ni) xa' t VERB taj

Ex. from wedding advice - father to bride [SSAK 06:8]

→ *ni xa' t katnijit taj*  
*mayiij aapensar entonces*

'Is it that I just offered you [in marriage]?  
you thought it through'

III. (ni) xa' t [rimaal chanh]

Ex. from wedding advice - aunt to bride [SSAK 04:50]

→ *xa' t rimaal chanh k'oo t chek aawajaaw*

'as if because you don't have a  
father anymore

*kaaya' rik'ex l aachonh*

you [can] put your mother in shame  
and as if he's over and done with'

→ *ii n xa' t rimaal chanh ya b' antajek ya estuvo*

IV. xa' t [EMPHASIS] taj

Ex. from wedding advice - elderly aunt to groom [SSAK 39 B6:371]

→ *cha'nem kixwa'laj saqa'n*  
*xa' t ee t l aachonh kiwa'ljek*

'get up (2pl.) a little early  
as if your mother's the one going to  
wake up first

*ni ee t chek kiiwilkiij le'era'*

as you're waiting until they [your parents  
get up]'

V. xaq t NP/VP

A. Ex. of nominal modification from wedding advice - great aunt to bride [SSAK 06:18]

*xaq t k'ulb'ek pa q'atb'al tziij*

'as if it were just marrying in the  
courthouse'

B. Ex. of predicate modification from wedding advice - aunt to groom [SSAK 48.1:5]

→ *xaq t sencilla cosa kib'aanek*

'as if it were just a simple thing that  
happens

*pwaq kraaj*

it costs money'

Morphosyntactically, some of the moral irony constructions, particularly V, resemble conditionals. This is due to the fact that, as mentioned above, *xaq t* also marks the protasis of a counterfactual conditional construction. However, the *xaq t* that occurs in counterfactual conditionals differs both syntactically and syntactically from its use in moral irony. Formally, the difference between this counterfactual conditional construction and moral irony is that moral irony lacks an apodosis or consequence conjunct: in moral irony a consequence of the counterfactual condition is never stated.<sup>23</sup> Semantically there is no allusion to or emphasis on actions that would be possible if (counterfactual) conditions were met.

<sup>23</sup> Shoaps 2004a provides an analysis of hypothetical and counterfactual conditionals in Sakapultek and their role in moral reasoning.

Having presented a formal description of Sakapultek moral irony, I will now address its meaning and functions in discourse more carefully.

## **5. An analysis of the semiotic and social functions of Sakapultek moral irony**

In this section I will build upon the grammatical analysis in order to present a semiotic analysis of irony. This analysis will draw from Clift's Goffmanian and participant role analysis of English irony. Then, once the semiotics of Sakapultek moral irony have been laid out, I will return to the question of whether or not "sincerity" or "mental states" of the speaker need to be invoked in order to account for it.

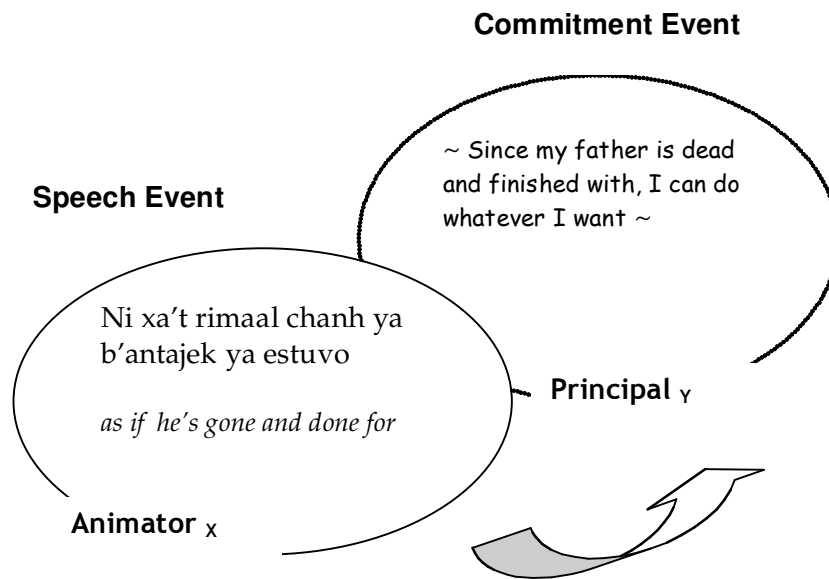
Investigation of the semiotic projections of irony, particularly with respect to the notions of stance and Goffman's participant roles, makes it apparent that moral irony constructions are

at once modal, ironic, and moral, while bringing into relief the similarities and differences between Sakapultek moral irony and morphologically unmarked irony common in many other languages. Sakapultek irony - indeed, as Haiman (1989, 1998) has claimed about all varieties of irony - is "modal." While in Haiman's (1989) analysis, irony is likened to modality because it reflects the speaker's "alienation" toward her utterances, I will argue that irony's modal nature stems from semiotic processes that alter the production format of utterances. In my view, linguistic constructions that fall into the notional domain of modality are indeed metalinguistic (as Sperber, Haiman and others recognize), but in the case of irony the nature of this metalinguistic function is not one of simply meaning the opposite of saying. Sakapultek moral irony constructions are metalinguistic in that they create alternative frames, or in Kockelman's formulation, they differentiate Commitment Events from Signaling or Speaking Events (Kockelman 2005; see also Jakobson 1971). In the analysis I present here I probe the implications of shifts in footing between the Speaking Event and Commitment Event further. Modal utterances create a footing in which the speaker distinguishes whether she is a "committed" animator *and* principal of the Speaking Event, versus merely the animator of a stance belonging to an alter principal in an alternative Commitment Event (the latter semiotic process I view as true of non-declarative modal utterances). The following segment, taken from ritual wedding advice given to a young prospective bride, offers an illustration of how moral irony combines elements of shifts in footing with the entailment of a separation between Speaking and Commitment Event in a particular way. In *pixab'* prospective brides and grooms each receive counsel from their kin the night before the wedding. The kin, depending on age and gender, take turns individually giving their "advice" to the young person. In the idealized case, brides move into the groom's household upon marriage, thus much advice centers on how to adjust to new kin and living arrangements. In this example, the counselor, the bride's aunt, has just spoken about the importance of behaving well in the household of her in-laws and not making her family members ashamed. After saying, in the lines preceding the excerpt, *maaya' k'ix aawajaaw* 'don't make your father ashamed,' she qualifies this, as the girl's father is deceased:

## (3) Excerpt from ritual wedding counsel from aunt to future bride [SSAK 04:T50]

- 1     *xa' t rimaal chanh k'oo t chek aawajaaw*  
       xa' +t rimaal\_chanh 0- k'oo +t chek aaw- ajaaw  
       only +CF because 3Abs- exist +Neg again 2Erg-father  
       'as if because you don't have a father anymore
- 2     *kaaya' rik'ex l aachonh*  
       k- 0- aa- ya' ri- k'ex l aa- chonh  
       Inc- 3Abs- 2Erg- give 3Erg- shame the 2Erg- mother  
       you [can] put your mother in shame
- 3 → *ii n xa' t rumaal chanh ya b'antajek ya estuvo*  
       ii n xa' +t rimaal\_chanh ya 0- b'an- taj- ek ya estuvo  
       and Irr only +CF because L2.already 3Abs-do- CmpPsv- IF already L2.was  
       and as if he's over and done with'

In traditionalist Sakapultek belief, one's actions have repercussions not only on living kin but also on deceased relatives and ancestors. In this example the bride's aunt uses moral irony to index an imagined stance of some other principal who endorses the erroneous idea that because the girl's father is dead he is "over and done with," and that she is not held in the same way to standards of respectability. In doing so the aunt has indexed some other possible scenario or Commitment Event, where there is a principal committed to the stance that responsibilities to one's parents end with their deaths. Furthermore, the moral irony construction goes beyond other related types of Sakapultek modal constructions (such as counterfactual conditionals) by negatively evaluating these stances or actions. In order to do this it presupposes a shared understanding of norms or truths that the projected principal's stance or actions have violated. The central role of presupposed moral norms in Sakapultek moral irony is one dimension which differentiates it from other types of calibrations of footing, such as Bakhtinian voicing and the evaluative uses of reported speech that I have addressed in my previous work (Bakhtin 1981; Shoaps 1999). In those examples, the culturally-specific indexical values of particular linguistic features (such as a lisp as an emblem of effiteness) are presupposed as being shared, however, unlike moral irony constructions there is nothing about reported speech itself that negatively evaluates these features. In fact, without the projection of a purported alter author of the animated speech it is impossible to indexically link the (reported) expressions to social stereotypes or personalities (as the "quoted" speech is meant to reflect on the personality or social identity of the author). In contrast, moral irony offers negative evaluation of projected stances of an alter principal (not words of an alter author) and mobilizes indexicality to presuppose cultural values and moral norms. Thus in our example from wedding advice, above, the information that is presupposed as shared is that family ties extend beyond the grave and an adult child's immoral behavior still has consequences for deceased parents. This semiotic projection is represented in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1. Modal and Moral Work Accomplished by Sakapultek Irony**

Such an analysis suggests one dimension for distinguishing between Sakapultek moral irony and the North American and British examples of irony described by other authors. Put simply, the Anglo-American examples differ from Sakapultek irony in the nature of evaluative work that they do. In many of Haiman's examples, irony is a resource for implicitly (negatively) evaluating clichéd expressions or animating a principal-author responsible for clichés. In contrast, in the Sakapultek data the negative evaluation is of an imagined stance - not the actual (imagined) words of - an indexed imagined principal. Both types of irony rely heavily upon a separation of speaker roles, negation,<sup>24</sup> and shared common ground. However, in the case of Haiman's examples what can be seen as the presupposed-as-shared common ground is the very "routine-ness" of the social encounter or way of being of the alter principal.

This comparison emphasizes the fact that in addition to the semiotic invocation of an alter principal who is responsible for a suspect stance, Sakapultek moral irony, like all irony, hinges upon the assumption of shared common ground. The shared common ground is presupposed, not stated directly. For example in both the English examples Clift (1999) and Haiman (1998) analyze, as well as the Sakapultek examples, in order to "get" the irony one must be familiar with shared presuppositions about the way the world is and the organization of interaction. However, in Haiman's account, these presuppositions include the routinized or clichéd nature of expressions and reflect a cultural propensity to value originality and spontaneity as "sincere" speech. While, in contract, Clift claims that in irony the "evaluations thus make reference to such [shared] norms and standards, which the ironic utterance throws into focus by invoking them - and, often, by apparently contravening them. So it is only by reference to the generally held norm - say that rain is bad and sunshine is good - that *it's a beautiful day* is ironic in a context where it is evident that it is pouring with rain" (Clift 1999: 538). Note that the norms Clift cites, as well as those presupposed by the Sakapultek example are

<sup>24</sup> See giora (1995) for a useful discussion of the relationship between irony and negation.

themselves evaluations or statements about the realm of the “ought” and “should,” which is the very definition of the moral domain. Attesting to the relationship between irony and moral evaluation is the fact that during my fieldwork it was only after I had a picture of local idealized moral norms and conventional evaluations that I was able to “get” or process moral irony, although I felt its sting in rebukes far earlier.

### 5.1. Summary of social and semiotic functions

We can summarize the relationship between the modal and moral work accomplished by Sakapultek moral irony in terms of the distinct linguistic elements that participate in the construction. For example, with reference to (3):

- Irrealis particle *ni* and nonfactual clitic *+t* indicate the proposition is nonfactual
- *xa'* negatively evaluates the proposition - positions it as counter to expectations and norms
- Moral norms that are violated by the proposition are presupposed as shared knowledge e.g., in Figure 1 these may include:

*one has a responsibility to behave well even if parents aren't around (or because one's father isn't around, one cannot stop avoiding behavior that brings shame to the family)*

*one is responsible that one's actions do not bring shame to living and dead relatives*

- Interpretively, the interlocutor is invited to “connect the dots” - by supplying what the presupposed norms are and matching them to how they are violated by the principal’s action or stance.

## 6. Moral irony as a resource in negotiating moral personhood: Contesting tradition

The Sakapultek excerpts discussed thus far illustrate the presupposing side of the coin of indexical meaning.<sup>25</sup> Yanaanh’s statement ‘as if it is just to make trouble that the baby was brought’ presupposes detailed knowledge of the ritual theft of baby Jesus figurines. Specifically, she presupposes-as-shared the knowledge that such “thefts” are performed in order to create fictive kinship between families and bring them together. Likewise, in (3) the bride’s aunt presupposes-as-shared the cultural ideal that a person’s kin ties remain important even after death. Let us now turn to a more complex use of moral irony in order to see another dimension of its semiotic function: Entailment. In the next segment, excerpted from a recording of food preparation and dinner table conversation, moral irony invokes certain values as *presupposed*, which do not in fact

<sup>25</sup> See Silverstein (1976) on indexical forms as simultaneously presupposing and entailing meanings.

match idealized Sakapultek moral norms. This demonstrates that moral irony constructions, with their strongly presupposing bias - or ability to invoke values as *shared* (regardless of whether or not they actually are) - are a powerful resource for indirectly negotiating and challenging moral norms.

The following conversation is between an extended family about the recent suicide of a young man named Mikyel, who is unrelated to the conversationalists. Earlier in the conversation it was established Mikyel had been married to a woman who left him and took their small child to Guatemala City. One conversationalist, 65-year-old Ignacia, the matriach of the assembled household, went to the funeral and says that she heard from Mikyel's mother that Mikyel went to Guatemala City several times to bring his wife back. His mother apparently disapproved and told Ignacia (as a report of what she told Mikyel) that his attempts at reconciliation were just a waste of money on bus fares. Later in the conversation Ignacia reports that his sister blamed her brother's death on his wife and made a scene at the funeral by commenting on how filthy his house was (taken to be a reflection on the wife). The bad wife and Mikyel's suicide, which is interpreted as a reaction to the wife, are themes that are repeated and developed in the conversation.

In the segment that we will look at, the widowed Ignacia (I) repeats the story of how Mikyel's family members reacted at the funeral. Ignacia's 23-year-old nephew, Martin (M) co-constructs the interpretation of the anecdote (as *yajaneek* 'scolding') and was present earlier in the recording when Ignacia recounted a condensed version of this story to a different group of relatives. In the interests of space, full interlinear gloss appears in the Appendix.

#### (4) Moral irony as a means of creatively indexing moral norms [SSAK 47 B12:149-51]

|    |           |   |   |
|----|-----------|---|---|
| 1  | <b>I:</b> | <i>mer riiwaal</i>                          | she was truly angry                         |
| 2  | <b>M:</b> | <i>mer yajnek xaarb'ana'</i>                | she really went to scold                    |
| 3  |           | <i>mer yajnek xaarb'ana'</i>                | she really was there to scold               |
| 4  | <b>I:</b> | <i>te' xaarb'aj chanh</i>                   | then she went and said to him               |
| 5  |           | <i>chee xaab'ananh Mikyel</i>               | "what did you do Mikyel?                    |
| 6  |           | <i>ni k'oo p wa' aasentid</i>               | don't you have any sense?                   |
| 7  |           | <i>ke' wa' xaab'ananh</i>                   | you did this [killed yourself]              |
| 8  |           | <i>xaaya' kaan l aachonh</i>                | you left your mother"                       |
| 9  |           | <i>kicha' chanh</i>                         | she said to him                             |
| 10 |           | <i>xaaya' kaan l aachonh</i>                | "you left your mother"                      |
| 11 |           | <i>ni xa'- xa' jun li ixaq k'oo p muund</i> | "as if there is only one woman in the world |

((several IUs omitted about how there are many women in the world))

|    |           |   |   |
|----|-----------|---|---|
| 12 | <b>I:</b> | <i>waa xa' utztaj l ixaq</i>                    | if the woman just isn't good                      |
| 13 |           | <i>waa utztaj l aawixaqiil</i>                  | if your wife isn't good                           |
| 14 |           | <i>ni k'oo t mood xaajiyij jun chek aaweenh</i> | there isn't any way you could have found another? |
| 15 |           | <i>weeno xaajiyij jun chek</i>                  | fine, you found another one                       |
| 16 |           | <i>waa t ee ra en in achenh</i>                 | if I were a man                                   |
| 17 |           | <i>ki- ki-</i>                                  |   |
| 18 |           | <i>waa utztaj li winaq</i>                      | if the person isn't good                          |
| 19 |           | <i>aj p richanh</i>                             | have her go back home                             |
| 20 |           | <i>kaank'ama' jun chek</i>                      | I'm going off to get another"                     |
| 21 |           | <i>kicha' chanh</i>                             | she told him.                                     |

In line 1 Ignacia says that Patricia, one of Mikyel's relatives (her exact relationship is not made clear in the conversation) who went to the funeral, was 'very angry,' meer riiwaal. Lines 5-20 are direct reported speech of what Ignacia reportedly heard Patricia angrily say to the corpse. Focusing on line 10, we see the action that will be evaluated and which prompts a (reported) indirect commentary challenging local moral norms. In line 11, after accusing the corpse of leaving his mother (sons are expected to care for their parents in their old age and horizontal and vertical kin of parents have the right to remind children of this fact), the transposed Patricia uses moral irony to suggest that a man's wife is not the only woman to whom he has responsibility. In 12-14, Patricia's (alleged) remarks project a distinction between the (Narrated) Speech Event and Commitment Event, the nature of which is specified by conditional constructions in 12 and 13, a world in which it is "true" (i.e., a principal endorses the stance) that Mikyel's wife was a bad wife. In 14, she is presented as using moral irony, in the form of a rhetorical question, to invoke and dismiss the stance that there is only one woman for each man. She continues to elaborate this Commitment Event in 16, using a counterfactual construction to place herself as a principal and to explicitly articulate (as direct reported speech) what she would do, or the stance she would endorse if she had been in Mikyel's position.

In this extended example, moral irony - aided by related modal constructions such as counterfactual and hypothetical conditionals - presupposes-as-shared the notion that a man's duty to his mother comes before that to his wife, and secondly, that wives are expendable by rejecting its converse. This assertion about kin relationships and marriage differs markedly from the "party line" of idealized Sakapultek moral values that are evidenced in *pixab'* for example, where young men are told (by their female and male relatives) that marriage is a lifetime commitment and that a married man can only seek another wife if he becomes a widower. My consultants noted the fact that in this excerpt Patricia utilizes moral irony to challenge "traditional" beliefs about marriage, in which it was held that it is shameful to separate for any reason (causing much suffering to women in the past). In Ignacia's representation of the funeral encounter, Patricia uses the appearance of presupposition offered by the moral irony construction in order to indirectly assert a different value as a shared one.

Moral irony is a powerful linguistic resource for implicitly ordering the social world because it allows for just this type of resistance. The ability to account for change, resistance and challenges to normative behaviors and normative stances can be seen as a prerequisite for any overall theorizing of relating "subjectivity," language and morality (see Kulick and Schieffelin 2004). We can easily imagine explicit evaluative stance-taking that openly challenges moral norms, but for others to take heed of the new "prescriptions," the person doing the challenging usually has to have a great measure of status and power, and do the challenging in a cultural context that allows direct evaluative stance-taking. How can moral norms be challenged and evaluated *without* access to positional privilege or recourse to confrontational, direct evaluation? In the Sakapultek context moral irony is one solution to this dilemma.

Furthermore, moral irony and indirect stance-taking generally, due to the amount of inference and work interlocutor must do, make interlocutors complicit in the speaker's evaluation and thus provide powerful tools for negotiation of moral norms. Some of the power of irony as a resource lies in its being "simultaneously assertion and denial: A way of mentioning the unmentionable" (Clift 1999: 544). The interpretation of

Sakapultek moral irony requires that interlocutors participate in presupposing-as-shared particular norms and stances.

This evaluative potency accounts for why moral irony occurs most commonly in scolding, gossip, and *pixab'* - all of them socially "risky" contexts in which interlocutors morally evaluate other social actors and primary sites of tension in Sacapulas (witness the confrontation Yanaanh describes). One formal difference between the social repercussions of moral irony in two different moral discourse genres - what Sakapulteks call scolding and wedding advice, is that in the latter the principal could be taken to be the addressee. For example, in (3), when the bride's aunt says 'as if your father is over and done with,' she leaves open the possibility that the bride herself is the principal or (Im)moral Other who is responsible for the rejected stance. If someone who is not socially entitled to 'scold' an interlocutor uses moral irony that suggests the identity of the principal could potentially be the addressee (i.e., any use of moral irony outside of what North Americans would call "gossip"), the speaker is subject to being accused of scolding, a culturally circumscribed activity.

In sum, in all discourse environments moral irony involves the interlocutor in evaluation. It is thus a resource for intersubjective evaluation, making it an effective tool for subtly challenging social norms as well as implicitly rebuking the behavior of others. As Clift observes, "even understanding the irony - for which one must share enough of the ironist's assumptions in the first place - effectively makes the addressee complicit in the attack" (Clift 1999: 545).

## **7. Conclusion**

In this paper I have argued that the constructions that I have called 'moral irony' are at once modal, ironic and moral. In my analysis, moral irony is 'modal' not only because the construction makes use of modal particles, but because, semiotically, it projects a realm of possible stances and actions and a possible division between the speaker or animator and principal or agent who takes responsibility for or is committed to the hypothetical stance or action. It is 'ironic' in the sense that it indicates that the Goffmanian principal who is committed to the possible stance is distinct from the animator who, in the moment of speaking, rejects the stance or action (c.f. Clift 1999). Moral irony is 'moral' because it negatively evaluates the possible stance by presupposing as shared a set of norms that are violated by it. Because the norms subscribed to and the intended identity of the principal are implicit or presupposed, the interlocutor is actively engaged in co-constructing the evaluative stance. This is evidence that stance-taking needs to be considered not as the direct transmission of a speaker's private interior states, but rather as a public, interactive process. Furthermore, moral irony allows speakers to indirectly propose (by presupposing-as-shared) moral norms - in effect, to indirectly negotiate moral values and concepts in real time. In sum, in Sakapultek, moral irony is an important evaluative stance-taking strategy that positions speech event participants with respect to imagined principals whose stances and actions are characterized as violating moral norms.

On a larger scale, the example of Sakapultek moral irony suggests a specific relationship between culturally-variable models of personhood or "subjectivity" and particular linguistic resources. In contrast to much of the writing about irony in Anglo-American contexts - in so much as Searle's (1969 and 1983) work on irony can be

viewed as an elaboration of Anglo-American linguistic ideology about intentionality (see Lee 1997) - the interpretation of Sakapultek irony is not considered by Sakapulteks to hinge upon intuiting speaker's intentions any more than other sorts of language use. In introducing the importance of Goffmanian principal to the discussion of stance, differences between a Western folk model of meaning and subjective expression - "personalism" - and Sakapultek stance-taking practices come into sharp focus. "Personalism" or the widespread theory of intentional meaning can be understood semiotically as an assumed alignment of principal and animator (and author, if spontaneity or originality are highly valued).

The Sakapultek findings offer further evidence that this model of personhood as expressed through the prioritization of a particular configuration of participant roles and related ideas about their value is a historically and temporally specific one. As I have demonstrated in prior work, the prayer practices of Pentecostals take the personalist figuration of "self" expression to an extreme, so to speak, and even "ad-lib" in order to re-contextualize repetitions of durable alter-authored texts (such as praise songs) in such a way that animator, author and principal can remain aligned to a greater degree (Shoaps 2002). Stemming from larger ontologies of personhood, "self" expression in such communities can be seen to reside in discourse genres and utterances in which the speaker production format is coherent; situations in which the animator is both principal and author. In Pentecostal worship, as in Haiman's "hip postmodernism," incoherence is uncomfortable (inauthentic, fake, passionless, etc.) and, just as dis-alignment might be interpreted locally as "alienation," the alignment of speaker roles is experienced or equated with sincerity and earnestness. Like Duranti (1985, 1992) and Rosaldo (1982, 1984), I argue that in Sakapultek pragmatics, the discernment of speaker intentions is not of primary importance in interpreting indirect speech. More important is the ability to intuit what are presupposed (therefore indexed) as moral norms: Precisely the "unsaid" portion of moral irony. In other words, accounting for irony, not only in the Sakapultek case, but in general, hinges not on intention but on indexicality. And our analyses must ask what moral values and cultural concepts (including, in the Western case, concepts of "real meanings," "hollow words" and "intentions") are indexed by ironic forms.

Furthermore, in Sakapultek discourse, lack of alignment in speaker roles or disjunction between animator and principal are not associated with "divided" or "alienated" selves, as they seem to be in Pentecostal and "postmodern" ethnopragmatics. In fact, moral irony serves primarily to reinforce what the ironic construction itself indexes as "shared" moral norms (rather than to undermine clichés). It provides a way to negatively evaluate an alter principal (without explicitly naming the principal) whilst invoking sharedness of a moral landscape.

In closing, by illustrating how irony is inescapably moral and suggesting that analyses that focus primarily on defining it as "meaning the opposite of saying" fail to capture its complexity as a social resource, I hope to inspire future research on manifestations of linguistic subjectivity and stance-taking to include a deeper consideration of ethnographically situated talk and how cultural concepts - rather than intentions - are indexed by linguistic resources. In much the same way as "irony means its opposite" misses the moral complexity afforded by irony, recent popular claims that a linguistic resource "indicates speaker subjectivity" is only the beginning of a complete answer to the question of what seemingly expressive linguistic forms do (cf. Scheibman 2002 and references therein). I hope in this essay to have furthered this inquiry by

demonstrating some of the social functions and repercussions for personhood of indirect stance-taking in Sakapultek.

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### **Appendix: Interlinear gloss of Sakapultek examples**

#### Glossing convention

|       |                                 |
|-------|---------------------------------|
| 1     | 1 <sup>st</sup> person singular |
| 2     | 2 <sup>nd</sup> person singular |
| 3     | 3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular |
| 1p    | 1 <sup>st</sup> person plural   |
| 2p    | 2 <sup>nd</sup> person plural   |
| 3p    | 3 <sup>rd</sup> person plural   |
| Abs   | absolutive                      |
| AP    | anti-passive                    |
| Cmp   | completive                      |
| CmPsv | completive passive              |
| Dat   | dative                          |
| Dem   | domonstrative                   |
| Dist  | distal deictic                  |
| DM    | discourse marker                |
| Emph  | emphatic                        |
| Erg   | ergative                        |
| Foc   | focus                           |
| FS    | false start                     |
| HRSY  | hearsay                         |
| IF    | intransitive phrase final       |
| Inc   | incompletive                    |
| Iter  | iterative                       |

|      |                                  |
|------|----------------------------------|
| L2   | Spanish codeswitching            |
| Loc  | locative                         |
| Mvt  | movement                         |
| Neg  | negative                         |
| NF   | non-factual                      |
| Psv  | passive                          |
| Pro  | pronominal form                  |
| Prox | proximal deictic                 |
| TA   | transitive active                |
| TF   | transitive phrase final          |
| TM   | transitive movement suffix       |
| V:   | morphologically lengthened vowel |

Table 1 Examples

- a). *xu' saqa'n*  
Just a.little  
'only a little'
- b). *waa t xa' k'oo nipwaaq kinloq'anh*  
waa +t +xa' 0- k'oo ni- pwaq k- 0- in- loq'- anh  
if +NF +only 3Abs- exist 1Erg- money Inc- 3Abs- 1Erg- buy- TF  
'if only I had money I would buy it'
- c). *ee l ara' xu' yajanla'*  
ee l\_ara' xu' 0- 0- yaj- an- la'  
Foc 3Pro just Inc- 3Abs- scold- AP- Iter  
'she just goes around scolding'
- d). *xaq ti ya' kirtij carro laa'*  
xaq +ti ya' ki- 0- r- tij carro laa'  
just +NF water Inc- 3Abs- 3Erg- eat L2.car Dist  
  
*qaatoq'aaj a'n p richaq lix*  
0- 0- q- aa- toq'a- V:j a'n pi r- achaaq lix  
Inc- 3Abs- Mvt- 1pErg- pressure- TA over Loc 3Erg- butt pants  
  
'if only that car took water [not gas] we would go up there and put the pressure on [chew out his ass]'
- e). *ee'oo jojoon b'a laa' que xaq tal vez kikimal tziiij*  
ee-k'oo jojoon b'a laa' que xaq tal\_vez ki- 0- ki- mal  
3pAbs-exist ones DM Dist L2.that just L2.maybe Inc- 3Abs- 3pErg- gather  
  
tziiij  
words

'there are some that maybe just collect gossip'

Table 2 Examples

- a. *xinwil t b'eeek l ara'*  
 x- 0- inw- il +t 0- 0- b'eeek l\_ara'  
 Cmp- 3Abs- 1Erg- see +Neg Cmp- 3Abs- go 3Pro  
 'I didn't see him leave'
- b. *wee t peetek...*  
 wee +t 0- 0- peet- ek  
 If +NF Cmp- 3Abs- IF  
 'If he had come...'
- c. *ni k'oo kiitijanh?*  
 Ni 0- k'oo k- 0- ii- tij- anh  
 Emph 3Abs- exist Inc- 3Abs- 2pErg- eat- TF  
 'do you (pl) get anything to eat?'
- d. *kaaxim ti ni ra' aapwaq tza'm l aawuq*  
 k- 0- aa- xim +ti +ni +ra' aa- pwaq tza'm l aaw- uq  
 Inc- 3Abs- 1Erg- tie +NF +Emph +DM 2Erg- money nose the 2Erg- skirt
- ee kaaxim jun aawalk'aal*  
 ee k- 0- aa- xim jun aaw- alk'aal  
 Foc Inc- 3Abs- 2Erg- tie a 2Erg- child
- 'you can't even tie your money up in [the edge of] your skirt, how are you going to tie your child up [control your child]?'
- e. *l ara' ka'pan ti nijun Ríos Montt p Congreso cha'*  
 l\_ara' k- 0- a'pan +ti ni jun Ríos\_Montt p Congreso  
 3Pro Inc- 3Abs- appear +NF Emph a Personal.Name Loc L2.Congreso
- cha'  
 HRSY
- 'It's said that Ríos Montt [politician] doesn't even show up at Congress'

Table 3 Examples

- I. *ni xa' t junam taj ajk'oo pa qachanh*  
 ni xa' +t junam taj aj- k'oo pa q- ichanh  
 Emph just +NF similar Neg 1pAbs- exist Loc 1pErg- house  
 'As if it isn't the same as us in our own house'
- II. *ni xa' t katnijit taj*  
 ni xa' +t k- at- ni- jit taj  
 Emph just +NF Inc- 2Abs- 1Erg- offer Neg

'Is it that I just offered you [in marriage]?

*mayiij aapensar entonces*

mayiij aa- pensar entonces  
thoroughly 2Erg- L2.think L2.DM

you thought it through'

III. *xa't rimaal chanh k'oo t chek aawajaaw*

xa' +t rimaal\_chanh 0- k'oo +t chek aaw- ajaaw  
just NF because 3Abs- exist +Neg anymore 2Erg- father

'as if because you don't have a father anymore

*kaaya' rik'ex l aachonh*

k- 0- aa- ya' ri- k'ex l aa- chonh  
Inc- 3Abs- 2Erg- give 3Erg- shame the 2Erg- mother

you [can] put your mother in shame

*ii n xa' t rimaal chanh ya b'antajek ya estuvo*

ii n xa' +t rimaal\_chanh ya 0-b'an- taj- ek  
L2.and Emph just +NF because already 3Abs- do- CmpPsv- IF

ya estuvo  
already L2.he's.gone

And as if he's over and done with'

IV. *cha'nem kixwa'laj saqa'n*

cha'nem k- ix- wa'laj saqa'n  
early Inc- 2pErg- get.up a.little

'get up [2pl—wife and husband] a little early

*xa' t ee t l aachonh kiwa'ljek*

xa' +t ee +t l aa- chonh ki- 0- wa'laj- ek  
just +NF Foc +NF the 2Erg- mother Inc- 3Abs- get.up- IF

as if your mother's the one who is going to wake up [first]

*ni ee t chek kiiwilkiij l e'era'*

ni ee +t chek k- 0- iiw- ilki-V;j l\_e'era'  
Emph Foc +NF again Inc- 3Abs- 2pErg- wait- TA 3p.Pro

as if you're (pl) waiting for them [you're parents get up]'

V.a. *xaq t k'ulb'ek pa q'atb'al tziiij*

xaq +t k'ulb'ek pa q'atb'al\_tzii  
Just +NF wedding Loc courthouse

'as if it were just marrying in the courthouse [as opposed to church]'

V.b. xaq t sencilla cosa kib'aanek  
xaq +t sencilla cosa k- 0- b'a:n- ek  
just +NF L2.simple L2.thing Inc- 3Abs- do.Psv- IF

'as if it [getting married] were just a simple thing that happens

pwaq kraaj  
pwaq k- 0- r- aaj  
money Inc- 3Abs- 3Erg- want

it costs money'

#### Example 4

1 **Ignacia:** mer riiwaal  
mer r- iyiwaal  
really 3Erg -anger

'she was really angry'

2 **Martin:** mer yajnek xaarb'ana'  
mer 0- 0- yaj- an- ek x- 0- aa- r- b'an- a'  
really Inc- 3Abs- scold- AP -IF Cmp- 3Abs- Mvt- 3Erg- do- TM

'she really went to scold

3 mer yajnek xaarb'ana'  
mer 0- 0- yaj- an- ek x- 0- aa- r- b'an- a'  
really Inc- 3Abs- scold -AP -IF Cmp- 3Abs- Mvt- 3Erg- do -TM

she really was there to scold'

4 **Ignacia:** te' xaarb'aj chanh  
te' x- 0- aa- r- b'aj chi- 0- anh  
then Cmp- 3Abs- Mvt- 3Erg- say Loc- 3Erg- Dat

'then she went and said to him

5 chee xaab'ananh Lo'  
chee x- 0- aa- b'an- anh Lo'  
what Cmp- 3Abs- 2Erg- do- TF Personal.name

'what did you do Lo'?

- 6            *ni k'oo p wa' aasentid*  
              ni    0- k'oo        p    wa' aa- sentid  
              Emph 3Abs- exist Loc NF 3Erg- L2.sense

don't you have any sense?

- 7            *ke' wa' xaab'ananh*  
              ke'\_wa'        x- 0- aa- b'an- anh  
              Prox.Dem Cmp- 3Abs- 2Erg- do- TF

you did this [killed yourself]

- 8            *xaaya' kaan l aachonh*  
              x- 0- aa- ya'                    kaan    l    aa- chonh  
              Cmp- 3Abs- 2Erg- give remain the 2Erg- mother

you left your mother"

- 9            *kicha' chanh*  
              ki- 0- cha'            chi- 0- anh  
              Inc- 3Abs- say Loc- 3Erg- Dat

she said to him

- 10           *xaaya' kaan l aachonh*  
              x- 0- aa- ya'                    kaan    l    aa- chonh  
              Cmp- 3Abs- 2Erg- give remain the 2Erg- mother

"you left your mother

- 11           *ni xa'- xa' jun li ixaq k'oo p muund*  
              ni    xa'- xa' jun li ixaq    0- k'oo        p    muund  
              Emph just- just one the woman 3Abs- exist Loc world

as if there is only one woman in the world" '

((several intonation units omitted about how there are many women in the world))

- 12 **Ignacia:**    *waa xa' utztaj l ixaq*  
                      waa xa'    utz- taj        l    ixaq  
                      if    just good- Neg the woman

' "if the woman just isn't good

- 13            *waa utztaj l aawixaqiil*  
              waa    utz- taj        l    aaw- ixaqiil  
              If    good- Neg the 2Erg- wife

if your wife isn't good

- 14 *ni k'oo t mood xaajiyij jun chek aaweenh*  
 ni 0- k'oo +t mood x- 0- aa- jiy- V:j  
 Emph 3Abs- exist +NF way Cmp- 3Abs- 2Erg- pick.out- TA  
 jun chek aaw- eenh  
 an other 2Erg- Dat

there isn't any way you could have found yourself another?

- 15 *weeno xaajiyij jun chek*  
 weeno x- 0- aa- jiyi-V:j jun chek  
 L2.good Cmp- 3Abs- 2Erg- pick.out- TA an other  
 fine, you find another one

- 16 *waa t ee ra en in achenh*  
 waa +t ee ra\_en in achenh  
 If +NF Foc 1Pro 1Abs man

if I were a man

- 17 ki- ki- --  
 FS- FS- --

- 18 *waa utztaj li winaq*  
 waa utz- taj li winaq  
 if good- Neg the person

if the person isn't good

- 19 *aj p richanh*  
 aj p r- ichanh  
 3Abs.Imp.go Loc 3Erg- house

have her go back to her home

- 20 *kaank'ama' jun chek*  
 k- 0- aa- in- k'am- a' jun chek  
 Inc- 3Abs- Mvt- 1Erg- get- TM an other

I'm going off to get another"

- 21 *kicha' chanh*  
 ki- 0- cha' chi- 0- anh  
 Inc- 3Abs- say Loc- 3Erg- Dat

she told him.'

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