

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## How Sports Fans Forge Intergroup Competition Through Language: The Case of Verbal Irony

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*In situations with rival groups, people strategically use language to strengthen group identity and foster intergroup competition. We distinguished 2 communication mechanisms to accomplish this: (a) linguistic aggression toward out-group members, (b) communicating group expectancies. We contrasted these mechanisms across 2 experiments by studying verbal irony. Experiment 1 targeted speaker behavior and showed that Dutch soccer fans found irony more appropriate to comment on out-group (vs. in-group) members, regardless of behavioral valence. Experiment 2 demonstrated differential inferences from irony by neutral observers: Fans using ironic comments about competent (vs. incompetent) behavior were seen more as out-group and less as in-group members. Our experiments demonstrated a communication asymmetry between speaker behavior and addressee inferences.*

**Keywords:** Intergroup Communication, Social Identity Theory, Verbal Irony, Linguistic Bias, Language, Sports.

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Communication processes play a crucial role in intergroup competition: Through communication, people can strategically strengthen their own group identity, derogate the out-group, and foster intergroup competition. Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) argues that (a) individuals strive for a positive social identity and (b) memberships of social groups are an inherent aspect of one's social identity. The desire to enhance one's social identity is reflected in the types of comments speakers make about behaviors by in- and out-group members. Based on existing literature, we distinguish two contrasting linguistic patterns that are employed to enhance group identity.

A first mechanism through which individuals in intergroup settings enhance their social identity is by being linguistically aggressive toward out-group members. (e.g., Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011a; Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011b). A second, more

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subtle mechanism to enhance one's social identity is by linguistically reinforcing expectancies about behavior by in-group and out-group members, and by mitigating situations in which these expectancies are violated.

Although both communication mechanisms have been validated independently, to the best of our knowledge, they have not yet been compared and contrasted within one study. After all, being linguistically aggressive and subtly communicating expectancies is typically achieved through different linguistic means. However, one specific type of language has been associated with both goals: verbal irony. Irony is defined as "a literal evaluation that is implicitly contrary to its intended evaluation" (Burgers, van Mulken, & Schellens, 2011, p. 190; e.g., saying *What a skillful goalie* when the goalie fumbles). Irony can be used both as a linguistic means to communicate hostility and aggressiveness (e.g., Averbek & Hample, 2008; Boylan & Katz, 2013) and to mitigate expectancy-violation situations (cf. Burgers & Beukeboom, in press; Dews & Winner, 1997).

In this article, we contrast these two perspectives on verbal irony (irony-as-aggression vs. irony-as-expectancy-communication) in intergroup communication. We focus on the roles of both speakers and recipients. First, we study if and how verbal irony is used by speakers as a means to enhance one's social identity as related to one's in-group and a rival out-group. Second, we study inferences drawn by recipients from these comments. That is, if the use of irony indeed serves to enhance one's social identity, recipients should be able to identify speakers' group affiliation and communicative goals based on these speakers' comments.

In the following sections, we review the literature on the links between irony and aggression, and irony and the communication of expectancies. Subsequently, we report on two experiments investigating these competing perspectives in the context of sports rivalries, respectively focusing on language use of strong in-group identifying speakers (Experiment 1), and on inferences drawn from ironic vs. literal comments by neutral recipients (Experiment 2).

### The irony-as-aggression perspective

In a situation with strong intergroup conflict (compared to low conflict), speakers tend to respond differently to suffering of out-group members (Bruneau, Dufour, & Saxe, 2012). Although people usually adjust their communications out of empathy, speakers in strong rivalry contexts typically revel in aggressive derogation of out-group members, especially when intergroup comparisons are primed (e.g., Mummendey, Klink, & Brown, 2001).

Such aggressive derogation can be seen after many sports events. For example, many people commented on social media about the 2014 World Cup, making it the largest social media event to date (Israel, 2014). Many of these comments contained irony: People could ironically comment on both literally negative topics (e.g., a comment such as *What a skillful goalie* after a fumble) and on literally positive topics (e.g., a comment such as *What a poor shot* after a beautiful goal). Many ironic comments

on literally negative topics were jokes expressing *schadenfreude*, pleasure at the pain of others (e.g., at specific game results, cf. Gross, 2014). *Schadenfreude* appears to be a strong motivational factor in such aggressive communication (Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003).

Under the irony-as-aggression perspective, speakers would particularly use such aggressive language when commenting on the behavior of the out-group. Verbal irony is one type of language that can serve such an aggressiveness goal. Irony can be used to deliver hostile criticism (Bowes & Katz, 2011; Colston, 1997; Matthews, Hancock, & Dunham, 2006). The type of irony used to criticize targets in such an aggressive manner is known as sarcasm (Attardo, 2000; Burgers & Beukeboom, in press). Sarcasm is typically defined as a “bitter and derisive statement that employs verbal irony as a device” (Kreuz, Roberts, Johnson, & Bertus, 1996, p. 87).

Because sarcastic irony can be used to aggressively derogate a target, making ironic remarks is regarded as an anger-expression technique (e.g., Forgays, Forgays, & Spielberger, 1997; Kroner & Reddon, 1992). In fact, one study suggests that “being ironic” loads on the same anger-expression factor with aggressive behaviors such as saying nasty things, striking out, or losing one’s temper (Kroner & Reddon, 1992, p. 401). Furthermore, in some cases, ironic statements are assessed as more relationally aggressive than comparable literal statements (Bowes & Katz, 2011). Being ironic has thus been characterized as a form of indirect interpersonal aggression (Fujihara, Kohyama, Andreu, & Ramirez, 1999).

Moreover, various studies demonstrate that being ironic is also associated with speakers’ aggressive personality traits. Persons scoring high on trait aggressiveness are more likely to endorse ironic messages (Averbeck & Hample, 2008), whereas people scoring high on personality traits that are negatively related to aggression, such as shyness, are less likely to endorse ironic messages (Mewhort-Buist & Nilsen, 2012).

Applying this to the context of intergroup competition, a crucial issue is the person targeted by the irony (i.e., out-group vs. in-group member). A study in which participants were presented with ironic statements targeting in-group and out-group members, showed that irony about out-group members was more appreciated than irony about in-group members (van Mulken, Burgers, & van der Plas, 2011). This implies that recipients do not appreciate it if they, or their group members, are being made the target of an ironic comment. Under this perspective, speakers in an intergroup setting should thus avoid irony about in-group members and be ironic about out-group members.

Following the irony-as-aggression perspective entails that, in situations of strong intergroup competition, people will use irony as a tool to aggressively derogate out-group members. Thus, irony is a means in itself to derogate out-group members that can be used to comment on out-group behavior, regardless of whether this behavior is positive or negative. This translates to the following hypothesis:

H1: Speakers find irony about out-group members more appropriate than irony about in-group members, regardless of behavioral valence.

## The irony-as-expectancy-communication perspective

A second strand of research that is relevant with respect to the use of irony in competitive intergroup settings focuses on linguistic biases. A linguistic bias is defined as a “systematic asymmetry in word choice as a function of the social category to which the target belongs” (Beukeboom, 2014, p. 314). In general, linguistic biases show that people systematically vary their language use in messages in which expectancies are violated versus confirmed. These systematic variations linguistically frame expectancy violations as atypical events caused by transient situational factors and frame expectancy confirmations as typical and likely to recur.

Most work in the area of linguistic bias research has focused on stereotype expectancies. The Linguistic Expectancy Bias (LEB; Wigboldus, Semin, & Spears, 2000) for instance shows that speakers vary their language abstraction based on stereotypic expectancies. According to the LEB, stereotype-confirming behavior is typically described abstractly (e.g., *the hooligan is aggressive*), whereas stereotype-violating behavior is described in concrete terms (e.g., *the nurse hits the patient*).

The Stereotype Explanatory Bias (SEB, Sekaquaptewa, Espinoza, Thompson, Vargas, & von Hippel, 2003) states that descriptions of stereotype-violating behavior typically contain more explanations for the supposed inconsistency (e.g., *because the patient was threatening the nurse*), compared to descriptions of stereotype-confirming behavior. The Negation Bias (NB; Beukeboom, Finkenauer, & Wigboldus, 2010) states that speakers use more negations when describing stereotype-violating behaviors (e.g., *the nurse is not friendly*), while affirmations are likelier used to describe stereotype-confirming behaviors (e.g., *the hooligan is aggressive*).

The variations in language use described in the LEB, SEB, and NB have important communicative consequences (Beukeboom, 2014): when speakers use abstract language, no explanations and affirmations, addressees typically attribute the described behavior to internal, dispositional causes (i.e., stable personality traits). In contrast, when speakers use concrete language, explanations, and negations, addressees typically attribute the described behavior to specific situational circumstances and infer that the behavior is unlikely to be repeated in other situations (Beukeboom et al., 2010; Sekaquaptewa et al., 2003; Wigboldus et al., 2000). In this way, linguistic biases function to maintain expectancies, even in the presence of expectancy-violating information.

A recent addition to this work on linguistic biases is the Irony Bias (IB; Burgers & Beukeboom, in press) which argues that irony is another linguistic means appropriate in the context of expectancy violations. The IB is based on various linguistic accounts stating that irony is typically used in situations of failed expectancies (e.g., Kihara, 2005; Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Irony (e.g., *what a skillful goalie*) allows speakers to simultaneously mention the expectancy (*the goalie would be skillful*) and signal its failure (*the goalie fumbled*). This fits with the characterization of irony as relevant inappropriateness (Attardo, 2000), given that the literal meaning of ironic comments

is unfitting to the context, yet still adds to the conversation by (ironically) referring to some relevant information (e.g., implicit expectancies).

Both during and after processing of ironic comments, the literal and the intended meaning are activated and retained in working memory (e.g., Akimoto, Miyazawa, & Muramoto, 2012; Giora, Fein, & Schwartz, 1998). This means that an ironic comment about stereotype-violating behavior can activate the implicit stereotypic expectancy in addressees, and thereby communicate stereotypic expectancies. Research on the IB (Burgers & Beukeboom, in press) showed that speakers judged ironic remarks as more appropriate to comment on stereotype-violating (vs. stereotype-confirming) behaviors and that recipients inferred more external attribution from ironic—compared to literal—comments (see also Averbeck, 2010; Boylan & Katz, 2013).

Although most linguistic bias research has focused on stereotype expectancies, research on the Linguistic Intergroup Bias (LIB) showed comparable communicative patterns and inferences in intergroup situations (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989). The LIB posits that in-group members expect positive behavior from other in-group members, and negative behavior from out-group members, and that in-group members are motivated to communicate these expectancies. When these expectancies are violated (e.g., incompetent in-group behavior/competent out-group behavior), speakers use more concrete language implying external attribution. When expectancies are confirmed, speakers use more abstract language, implying internal attribution (Maass, 1999). Furthermore, group members who communicate following these biased language patterns are perceived as better group members (Assilaméhou & Testé, 2012).

Combining the findings of the IB (Burgers & Beukeboom, in press) and the linguistic patterns in intergroup settings observed in the LIB (Maass, 1999; Maass et al., 1989) suggests that irony could also function to communicate expectancies about in- and out-groups. That is, irony should be typically appropriate in situations in which expectancies regarding in-group and out-group members are violated: Irony allows speakers to introduce a positive evaluation in comments about unexpected and undesired incompetent behavior of in-group members, and a negative evaluation in comments about unexpected and undesired competent behavior of out-group members. Thus, following this perspective, we expect that:

H2a: Speakers find irony about positive behavior by out-group members more appropriate than irony about positive behavior by in-group members.

H2b: Speakers find irony about negative behavior by out-group members less appropriate than irony about negative behavior in-group members.

Note that H2 predicts a different pattern than H1. Where H1 predicts that irony is more appropriate to comment on out-group behaviors regardless of behavioral valence, H2 predicts that irony appropriateness depends on the actor's group membership *and* behavioral valence.

## Experiment 1

### Method

#### *Participants and design*

Experiment 1 was designed to analyze how fans of rival teams considered the appropriateness of literal and ironic comments about in-group and out-group behaviors. We focus on fans of two Dutch rival soccer teams: Ajax Amsterdam and Feyenoord Rotterdam. Theirs is regarded as one of the world's most violent soccer rivalries (Mann, 2009). Because of violent fan-group clashes, fans of the away team have been banned from the stadium during matches between the two teams since 2009 (Nu.nl, 2013). At the time of data collection (April 2013), both teams were strong contenders to win the Dutch League Championship.

Our online experiment had a 2 (fan: Ajax vs. Feyenoord)  $\times$  2 (actor in the stimulus: in-group actor vs. out-group actor)  $\times$  2 (behavioral valence: competent vs. incompetent)  $\times$  2 (type of comment: literal vs. ironic)  $\times$  4 (stimulus set) design. Except for fan allegiance (Ajax or Feyenoord, between-subjects), all factors were repeated measures. Voluntary participants were recruited via fan websites and online forums; we strived to obtain at least 30 participants in each fan group.

A total of 96 participants completed the questionnaire. Five were dropped: One guessed the topic under investigation, two filled in unrealistic answers, and two were neutral with respect to fan allegiance toward the two clubs. Of the remaining 91 participants (55 Ajax fans; 36 Feyenoord fans), 71 were male (78.0%). Their average age was 30.9 years ( $SD = 12.1$ ). About half of participants (45.5% of Ajax fans/47.5% of Feyenoord fans) indicated to have a club card of their club, which is mandatory to visit league games of Dutch soccer teams. A large majority (80% of Ajax fans, 89.9% of Feyenoord fans) indicated that they watched their team's sportscast often to always.

#### *Procedure, materials, and instrumentation*

In the online questionnaire, participants first indicated their preference for Ajax or Feyenoord on a 7-point semantic differential scale ranging from 1 (*completely Ajax fan*) to 7 (*completely Feyenoord fan*). We coded participants scoring below the mid-point (1–3) as Ajax fans and participants scoring above (5–7) as Feyenoord fans.

Participants were asked to imagine that they held good seats in their home stadium during a game between Ajax and Feyenoord. It was explained that they would be presented with specific game situations showing one player and two comments referring to the player's behavior in the situation. Then, they were shown photos with descriptions of soccer players' behaviors, in randomized order. Depending on condition, the actor in the situation was either an in-group or out-group player (Ajax or Feyenoord) showing either competent or incompetent behavior. Each situation was presented with two comments, one literal and one ironic.

Please note that the perceived valence of the same event in such intergroup sports settings may differ depending on the addressee. For instance, if Ajax were to score a

goal against Feyenoord, this event would likely be evaluated positively by Ajax fans and negatively by Feyenoord fans. Thus, in order to keep the experimental factor of behavioral valence independent of fan group, we refer to different behavioral valence by referring to either competent or incompetent player behavior, as competence is one of the universal dimensions of social cognition (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007).

We developed four stimulus sets including ironic and literal comments on competent and incompetent behavior. Each set consisted of two actors (Ajax or Feyenoord player), two contrasting competent and incompetent behaviors, and two relevant comments. For instance, in one stimulus, a player tried to jink past his opponent. In the situation showing competence, the player made a skillful dummy movement and succeeded beautifully. In the situation showing incompetence, the player tripped over his own two feet and failed miserably. We showed participants a cartoon of the behavior (e.g., a soccer player with a ball), the logo of the team of the specific actor (Ajax or Feyenoord) and a verbal description of the behavior.

Each actor-behavior combination was presented with two relevant comments that were formulated equally and varied only in evaluative valence. Type of comment was manipulated only by means of the behavior to which it referred: Negative comments (e.g., *Look, he really has the worst moves of the entire team!*) were literal when referring to incompetent behavior and ironic when referring to competent behavior. Likewise, positive comments (e.g., *Look, he really has the best moves of the entire team!*) were literal referring to competent behavior and ironic referring to incompetent behavior. We included markers such as interjections (e.g., *look*), superlative forms (e.g., *best*, *worst*), and emphatic adverbs (e.g., *really*) in all comments. Such markers are often used in ironic utterances (cf. Burgers, van Mulken, & Schellens, 2012a; Gibbs, 2000), and also fit equivalent literal comments (Burgers, van Mulken, & Schellens, 2012b).

We varied the presentation order such that a random actor-situation combination from set 1 was followed by a random combination from set 2, etc., until all 16 actor-behavior combinations from all sets were presented.<sup>1</sup>

For each behavior, participants were asked to rate the *appropriateness* of both the literal and ironic comments on 7-point semantic differential scales ranging from 1 (*very inappropriate*) to 7 (*very appropriate*). We collapsed the scores on appropriateness over the four stimulus sets, for each of the eight experimental conditions ( $\alpha_{\text{mean}} = .81$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{range}} = .70-.87$ ). For Ajax fans, stimuli about Ajax players were coded as in-group and stimuli about Feyenoord players as out-group. For Feyenoord fans, this was reversed.

After judging the comments for all behaviors, participants were again presented with the 16 actor-behavior combinations, and asked to rate the *perceived behavioral valence* and *perceived expectedness* of each behavior on two 7-point semantic differential scales ranging from 1 (*very negative/unexpected*) to 7 (*very positive/expected*). These scores were averaged over the four stimulus sets, creating variables for in-group versus out-group, and behavioral competent versus incompetent conditions (valence:  $\alpha_{\text{mean}} = .91$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{range}} = .84-.97$ ; expectedness:  $\alpha_{\text{mean}} = .81$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{range}} = .77-.86$ ). Finally, we measured *group identification* with both clubs by means of the 4-item

scale developed by van Zomeren, Leach and Spears (2010;  $\alpha_{\text{identification Ajax}} = .98$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{identification Feyenoord}} = .98$ ).<sup>2</sup>

## Results

### *Group identification*

To check whether participants indeed identified more with their own club, we conducted two *t*-tests on group identification. These showed that Ajax fans ( $M = 5.72$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) identified more strongly with Ajax than Feyenoord fans ( $M = 1.24$ ,  $SD = .49$ ,  $t(77.19) = 24.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .94$ ). In contrast, Feyenoord fans identified more strongly with Feyenoord ( $M = 6.16$ ,  $SD = .67$ ) than Ajax fans ( $M = 1.46$ ,  $SD = .63$ ,  $t(89) = 34.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .96$ ).

### *Behavioral valence and expectedness*

Next, we tested whether perceived behavioral valence and expectedness differed as intended. We expected fans to judge competent behavior of in-group actors as more positive and expected compared to competent behavior of out-group actors. For incompetent behavior, this should be reversed.

We separately subjected both variables to 2 (fan: Ajax Amsterdam vs. Feyenoord Rotterdam)  $\times$  2 (stimulus actor: in-group vs. out-group actor)  $\times$  2 (behavioral valence: competent vs. incompetent) mixed ANOVAs in which fan was a between-subjects factor and the other factors were repeated measures. Table 1 shows descriptive information.

First, we found no main or interaction effects of the fan variable, indicating that Ajax and Feyenoord fans do not differ in their ratings of valence and expectedness of behaviors.<sup>3</sup> We found main effects of behavioral valence on both perceived valence,  $F(1,89) = 81.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .48$ , and perceived expectedness,  $F(1,89) = 147.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .62$ , indicating that competent (vs. incompetent) behavior was perceived as both more positive and expected. A main effect of actor type on perceived valence,  $F(1,89) = 22.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .20$ , indicated that behavior by in-group players was overall considered more positive than behavior by out-group players.

More importantly, and in line with expectations, we found an interaction effect of behavioral valence and actor type on perceived valence,  $F(1,89) = 396.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .82$ . and expectedness,  $F(1,89) = 34.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .28$ . Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons reveal that participants perceive competent behavior by in-group players as more positive and expected (both  $ps < .001$ ) than competent behavior of out-group players. For incompetent behavior, this is reversed (both  $ps < .001$ ). Thus, fans of both clubs expect and desire in-group players to behave competently, and out-group players to behave incompetently. In the next section, we test whether this is reflected in a differential use of ironic and literal comments that may communicate these group identities.

### *Hypothesis testing*

To test and contrast H1 and H2, we subjected the rated appropriateness of the literal and ironic comments to a 2 (fan: Ajax Amsterdam vs. Feyenoord Rotterdam)

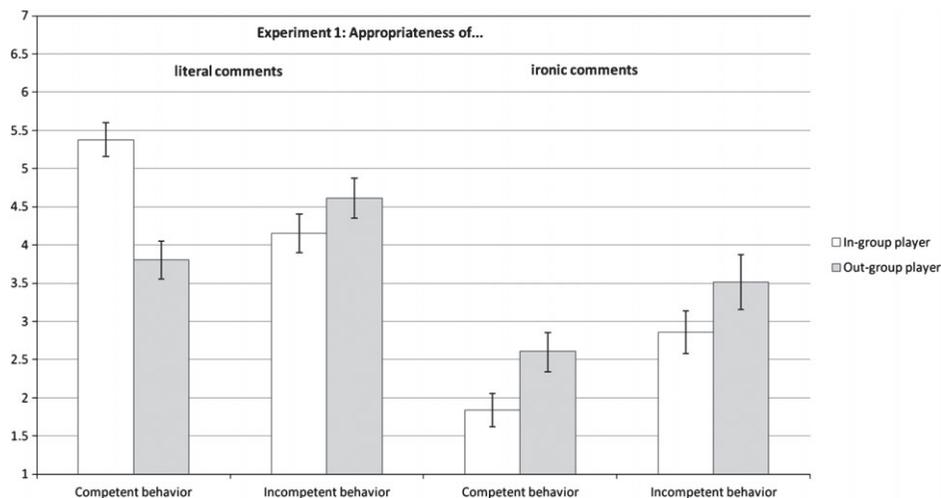
**Table 1** Mean Scores (and Standard Deviations) of Perceived Valence and Appropriateness of Literal and Ironic Comments as a Function of Behavioral Valence (Incompetent vs. Competent), Type of Actor (In-Group vs. Out-Group), and Fan (Ajax vs. Feyenoord, Experiment 1)

	Incompetent Behavior		Competent Behavior	
	In-Group Actor	Out-Group Actor	In-Group Actor	Out-Group Actor
Perceived behavioral valence				
Ajax fans	2.24 (.73) <sup>a</sup>	5.14 (1.22) <sup>b</sup>	6.46 (.67) <sup>x</sup>	2.95 (1.35) <sup>y</sup>
Feyenoord fans	2.35 (.95) <sup>a</sup>	5.26 (.87) <sup>b</sup>	6.42 (.76) <sup>x</sup>	2.83 (1.06) <sup>y</sup>
Perceived expectedness				
Ajax fans	3.02 (.91) <sup>a</sup>	3.78 (1.07) <sup>b</sup>	5.54 (.71) <sup>x</sup>	4.61 (1.05) <sup>y</sup>
Feyenoord fans	3.39 (.99) <sup>a</sup>	3.92 (.88) <sup>b</sup>	5.10 (.92) <sup>x</sup>	4.53 (.96) <sup>y</sup>
Appropriateness literal				
Ajax fans	4.07 (1.19) <sup>a</sup>	4.57 (1.29) <sup>b</sup>	5.33 (1.16) <sup>x</sup>	3.90 (1.96) <sup>y</sup>
Feyenoord fans	4.24 (1.18) <sup>a</sup>	4.65 (1.10) <sup>a</sup>	5.42 (.81) <sup>x</sup>	3.72 (1.12) <sup>y</sup>
Appropriateness irony				
Ajax fans	2.84 (1.29) <sup>a</sup>	3.36 (1.62) <sup>b</sup>	1.85 (1.02) <sup>x</sup>	2.50 (1.18) <sup>y</sup>
Feyenoord fans	2.88 (1.37) <sup>a</sup>	3.67 (1.79) <sup>b</sup>	1.83 (1.02) <sup>x</sup>	2.72 (1.42) <sup>y</sup>

*Note:* Perceived situational valence and appropriateness are measured on 7-point scales with higher numbers indicating a more positive situational valence and higher appropriateness. Means of variables with different subscripts on the same row within incompetent (a, b) and competent (x, y) behavioral valence conditions are significantly different according to Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons with a certainty of at least  $p < .05$ .

$\times 2$  (stimulus actor: in-group vs. out-group)  $\times 2$  (behavioral valence: competent vs. incompetent)  $\times 2$  (comment type: literal vs. ironic) mixed ANOVA, in which only fan varied between participants. The main effect and all interactions involving fan were nonsignificant, indicating that the Ajax and Feyenoord fans did not differ in rated appropriateness of the comments. We did find a main effect of comment type, indicating that literal utterances were found more appropriate than ironic utterances,  $F(1,89) = 195.74, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .69$ ,<sup>4</sup> which corresponds to the view of irony as relevant inappropriateness (Attardo, 2000).

Most importantly, we found a three-way interaction effect between type of comment, behavioral valence, and stimulus actor,  $F(1,89) = 51.98, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .37$  (Figure 1). Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons show that ironic comments are more appropriate to comment on the behavior of out-group (vs. in-group) members, regardless of behavioral valence (both  $ps < .001$ ). In contrast, literal comments are found more appropriate for out-group members' incompetence than in-group members' incompetence ( $p = .001$ ) and for in-group members' competence than out-group members' competence ( $p < .001$ ). These findings show that irony usage in intergroup communication settings is dependent only on group membership (H1) rather than on both group membership and behavioral valence (H2).<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 1** Three-way interaction effect between type of comment (literal vs. ironic), behavioral valence (competent vs. incompetent) and actor in the stimulus (in-group vs. out-group actor) on appropriateness of the comment. Note: Error bars indicate 95% CI.

### Discussion and conclusion

Experiment 1 studied whether and how speakers use irony to enhance their social identity in a rival intergroup context when commenting on in- and out-group behaviors. We distinguished two potential linguistic patterns: (a) irony as a tool for linguistic aggression about out-group members; and (b) irony as a means to reinforce expectancies about in- and out-group members. First, control analyses confirmed that participants held biased group expectancies, in that competent behaviors were more expected for in-group members and incompetent behaviors were more expected for out-group members.

Interestingly, the appropriateness pattern for literal comments corresponds to the second expectancy communication pattern. We found that literal comments about competent behavior were more appropriate when referring to in-group (vs. out-group) players. For incompetent behavior, this was reversed. This suggests that literal comments are used to introduce desired and expected positive evaluations about in-group members and negative evaluations about out-group members.

The observed pattern for irony appropriateness, in contrast, was in line with the irony-as-aggression pattern. That is, fans found irony more appropriate to comment on out-group members rather than in-group members, regardless of behavioral valence. These findings support the irony-as-aggression perspective (H1) over the irony-as-expectancy-violation perspective (H2). In the present strong rival intergroup setting, speakers appear to employ irony as a means to aggressively derogate out-group members, rather than to mitigate expectancy violations. This is in line with previous work showing speakers' preference for irony to talk about "others" (out-group) rather than themselves (in-group; van Mulken et al., 2011).

Thus, although speakers use irony more to comment on out-group members (regardless of behavioral valence), an important question is whether this pattern is also picked up by recipients. Previous research suggests that recipients are able to infer speakers' positions and attitudes from their biased communication pattern, even if they have never met the speaker before (Douglas & Sutton, 2006, 2010). Experiment 2 was designed to study whether neutral recipients draw inferences from ironic comments made by unknown sports fans. If recipient inferences are in accordance with the irony-as-aggression perspective, then, regardless of behavioral valence, recipients should infer from ironic comments that the speaker intends to derogate the target and belongs to the target's out-group. Furthermore, such ironic comments could even negatively affect participants' own attitude about the target club (cf. Burgers et al., 2012b). Our hypothesis for recipient inferences from the irony-as-aggression perspective states that:

H3: Regardless of behavioral valence, from ironic (compared to literal) comments, recipients (a) infer that the speaker is an out-group member to the target of the comment, (b) that the speaker has a negative communicative goal and, (c) develop a more negative attitude towards the target's club themselves.

If recipient inferences correspond to the irony-as-expectancy-communication perspective, however, they should infer that irony reflects the expectancies of the speaker. This means that inferences depend on behavioral valence. That is, if irony is used to comment on competent behavior (i.e., the literal meaning reflects incompetence), recipients should infer that the desired and expected view of the speaker was that the target would be incompetent. This would also suggest that the speaker would belong to the out-group of the target. In contrast, if irony is used to comment on incompetent behavior (i.e., the literal meaning reflects competence), recipients should infer that the desired and expected view of the speaker was that the target would be competent, which would then suggest that the speaker would belong to the in-group of the target. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H4: From ironic (compared to literal) comments about competent behavior, recipients (a) infer that the speaker is an out-group member to the target of the comment, (b) that the speaker has a negative communicative goal, and (c) develop a more negative attitude towards the target's club.

H5: From ironic (compared to literal) comments about incompetent behavior, recipients (a) infer that the speaker is an in-group member to the target of the comment, (b) that the speaker has a positive communicative goal and, (c) develop a more positive attitude towards the target's club.

## Experiment 2

### Method

#### *Participants and design*

Experiment 2 analyzed whether neutral listeners draw inferences from a biased communication pattern as studied in Experiment 1. To ensure participants' neutrality, we

chose to present our Dutch participants with ironic and literal fan comments about players of two rival soccer teams from a foreign country. This study focused on the Manchester Derby between English soccer teams Manchester City and Manchester United. Recently, this derby was followed by fan violence (McCarthy, 2010). At the time of data collection (April 2013), both teams were contenders to win the Premier League.

This online experiment had a 2 (targets' club: Manchester City vs. Manchester United)  $\times$  3 (linguistic pattern of comments: all literal, ironic comments on competent behavior, ironic comments on incompetent behavior) between-subjects design. We strived for at least 180 participants completing the questionnaire (approximately 30 participants per condition), and obtained 185 participants. Two participants were dropped: one showed awareness of the studied topic, another completed the open questions with inappropriate sexual overtures. This left 183 participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 31.2$  years,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 14.5$ ; 44.3% male).

#### *Procedure and materials*

In the online questionnaire, respondents were asked to imagine the scenario that they were on a city trip to Manchester (England). During their stay, they decided to watch the Manchester Derby in a pub in which fans of both teams were present. The person standing next to them in the pub gave comments on various behaviors shown during the game. Participants were asked, based on these comments, to form an impression of this person (the "commenter"; cf. Douglas & Sutton, 2006).

Subsequently, participants were presented with photos and descriptions of eight different match situations about players of either Manchester City or United, depending on target's club condition. We showed participants a cartoon of the behavior (e.g., a soccer player with a ball), the logo of the team of the specific actor (Manchester City or Manchester United), and a verbal description of the behavior. Four of these situations featured a player showing competent behavior and four featured a player showing incompetent behavior. Each competent behavior situation was matched with a situation in which another player of the same team showed comparable incompetent behavior. Note that all participants were presented with the same eight situations about either Manchester City or United: the only difference was the linguistic pattern delivered by a commenter participants had never met before.

Each situation was presented with either a literal or ironic comment about the situation depending on the linguistic-pattern condition to which participants were assigned. In the literal condition, the commenter gave literal comments on both competent and incompetent behaviors. In the ironic-competent condition, the commenter gave ironic comments on competent and literal comments on incompetent behavior. In the ironic-incompetent condition, this was reversed.

Similar to Experiment 1, all comments contained markers. We now used emphatic adverbs, the exclamatory form, and interjections (cf. Burgers et al., 2012a). After all eight situations and comments were presented, participants answered the following

questions to tap their impression of the commenter and their own attitude toward the targets' club.

#### *Instrumentation*

First, we asked participants to assess the *likelihood of commenter position*: On two 7-point scales for each of the two clubs, participants rated the likelihood that the commenter would be a fan, and have a positive attitude toward the respective club ( $\alpha_{\text{city}} = .81$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{united}} = .80$ ). These variables were recoded into the likelihood that the commenter was an in-group member (i.e., commenter is a fan of the target's club upon which they comment) or an out-group member (i.e., commenter is a fan of the other club). An additional item measured the likelihood the commenter was an unbiased observer (all items adapted from Douglas & Sutton, 2006).

Second, we measured three distinct *communicative goals* that could be inferred from the commenter's communicative pattern. Participants rated the likelihood that the commenter wanted to create a (a) positive, (b) negative, or (c) neutral impression of the target's team. Each communicative goal was measured with a single-item 7-point semantic differential scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*) (adapted from Douglas & Sutton, 2006, Experiment 2).

Finally, to test if and how the comments influenced participants' *own attitude toward the target's club*, participants indicated their attitude toward the target's club that was commented on (City or United) on a 7-point semantic differential scale ranging from 1 (*very negative*) to 7 (*very positive*).

As a control variable, we used the same scale as in Experiment 1 to measure *group identification* with both clubs ( $\alpha_{\text{identification City}} = .94$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{identification Utd}} = .93$ ).<sup>6</sup>

## **Results**

### *Control analyses*

A paired-samples *t*-test on group identification with both clubs showed that participants could indeed be considered as neutral observers. Participants identified more with Manchester United ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) than with Manchester City,  $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ,  $t(182) = 4.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .32$ , but in general, participants' identification was low. No differences were observed between experimental conditions in identification with either Manchester City,  $F(5,177) < 1$ , or United,  $F(5,177) = 1.25$ ,  $p = .29$ .

### *Hypothesis testing*

Hypotheses 3–5 were tested with 2 (targets' club: City vs. United)  $\times$  3 (linguistic pattern) between-subjects (M)ANOVAs with likelihood of commenter position, inferred communicative goals and participants' own attitude toward the club as dependent variables, respectively. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics.

First, we found main multivariate effects of linguistic pattern on likelihood of commenter position, Wilks'  $\lambda = .57$ ,  $F(6,350) = 18.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .24$ , and perceived communicative goals, Wilks'  $\lambda = .48$ ,  $F(6,350) = 25.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .30$ . Univariate analyses showed effects of the linguistic pattern on the likelihood that the speaker was an in-group member,  $F(2,177) = 55.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .39$ , an out-group

**Table 2** Mean Scores (and Standard Deviations) of Dependent Variables as a Function of Club (Manchester City vs. Manchester United) and Linguistic Pattern (Always Literal vs. Ironic About Incompetent Behaviors vs. Ironic About Competent Behaviors, Experiment 2)

	Comments on Manchester City Players			Comments on Manchester United Players		
	All Literal	Ironic about Incompetence	Ironic about Competence	All Literal	Ironic about Incompetence	Ironic about Competence
Perceived likelihood of group membership of commenter						
Likelihood in-group	5.67 (1.08) <sup>a</sup>	5.03 (1.82) <sup>a</sup>	2.50 (1.37) <sup>b</sup>	5.29 (1.29) <sup>x</sup>	4.97 (2.02) <sup>x</sup>	2.81 (1.31) <sup>y</sup>
Likelihood out-group	2.73 (1.06) <sup>a</sup>	3.01 (1.53) <sup>a</sup>	4.04 (1.71) <sup>b</sup>	2.54 (1.08) <sup>x</sup>	3.17 (1.59) <sup>x</sup>	4.24 (1.45) <sup>y</sup>
Likelihood unbiased	3.42 (1.86) <sup>a</sup>	3.27 (2.26) <sup>a</sup>	3.43 (1.85) <sup>a</sup>	3.92 (2.47) <sup>x</sup>	3.83 (2.12) <sup>x</sup>	3.32 (2.08) <sup>x</sup>
Perceived communicative goals of commenter						
Creating positive team impression	4.21 (1.34) <sup>a</sup>	4.70 (1.66) <sup>a</sup>	2.00 (1.28) <sup>b</sup>	4.46 (1.56) <sup>x</sup>	4.52 (2.23) <sup>x</sup>	1.89 (1.13) <sup>y</sup>
Creating negative team impression	3.12 (1.29) <sup>a</sup>	2.84 (1.52) <sup>a</sup>	5.70 (.88) <sup>b</sup>	3.25 (1.59) <sup>x</sup>	2.83 (1.93) <sup>x</sup>	5.35 (1.58) <sup>y</sup>
Creating neutral team impression	3.85 (1.54) <sup>a</sup>	3.11 (1.74) <sup>ab</sup>	2.61 (1.31) <sup>b</sup>	3.96 (1.92) <sup>x</sup>	3.07 (1.71) <sup>x</sup>	2.19 (1.22) <sup>y</sup>
Attitude toward club	4.45 (.79) <sup>a</sup>	4.11 (1.17) <sup>a</sup>	3.48 (1.31) <sup>b</sup>	3.96 (.81) <sup>x</sup>	3.97 (1.35) <sup>x</sup>	3.54 (1.30) <sup>x</sup>

*Note:* Means of variables with different subscript within comments on Manchester City players (a, b, c) and Manchester United players (x, y, z) behavioral valence conditions are significantly different according to Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons with a certainty of at least  $p < .05$ .

member,  $F(2,177) = 16.73, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .16$ , as well as the likelihood that the speaker had positive,  $F(2,177) = 51.12, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .37$ , negative,  $F(2,177) = 54.51, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .38$ , and neutral communicative goals,  $F(2,177) = 12.70, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .13$ .

Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons showed that speakers using irony to comment on competent behavior were perceived as likelier to be out-group members, less likely to be in-group members, and have more negative and less positive communicative goals, compared to literal speakers and speakers using irony to comment on incompetent behavior (all  $ps < .001$ ). Furthermore, speakers using only literal comments were perceived as more neutral than any of the ironic speakers ( $p$  at least  $< .05$ ). Speakers using irony to comment on incompetent behavior were in turn perceived as more neutral than speakers using irony to comment on competent behavior ( $p = .053$ ).

These results demonstrate that, in line with H4 and H5, neutral recipients draw different inferences from speakers using irony to comment on either competent or incompetent behavior. Recipients infer that speakers using irony to comment on competent (vs. incompetent) behavior were more likely to be out-group members with relatively negative communicative goals, whereas speakers using irony to comment on incompetent (vs. competent) behavior were more likely to be in-group members with relatively positive communicative goals. This suggests that, for neutral recipients, the use of irony by speakers in an intergroup situation has differential meaning depending on whether the ironic comments refer to competent or incompetent behavior.

Second, we observed a main effect of linguistic pattern on participants' own attitude toward the club,  $F(2,177) = 5.66, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons demonstrated that participants reported a more negative attitude toward the described team after receiving ironic comments about competent behavior, compared to only literal comments, or ironic comments about incompetent behavior ( $ps$  at least  $< .05$ ).

Finally, we found neither main effects of club nor interaction effects of club and linguistic pattern on likelihood of commenter position (club: Wilks'  $\lambda = .994, F(3,175) < 1, p = .80$ ; interaction: Wilks'  $\lambda = .97, F(6,350) < 1, p = .60$ ), perceived communicative goals (club: Wilks'  $\lambda = .997, F(3,175) < 1, p = .93$ ; interaction: Wilks'  $\lambda = .98, F(6,350) < 1, p = .74$ ) and attitude towards the club (club:  $F(2,177) = 1.23, p = .27$ ; interaction  $F(2,177) < 1, p = .43$ ).

### Discussion and conclusion

These results exhibited a consistent pattern of inferences drawn by neutral recipients depending on the communicative pattern used by unknown speakers in a rival intergroup setting. The irony-as-aggression perspective (H3) stated that recipients would perceive irony as a form of interpersonal aggression intended to derogate the target. This would have induced recipients to infer from ironic comments, regardless of valence of the behavior they comment upon, that the speaker was an out-group member to the target, entertaining a negative communicative goal. Our findings disconfirmed the hypothesis from the irony-as-aggression perspective.

The irony-as-expectancy-communication perspective (H4–5), in contrast, stated that recipients would infer that ironic comments reflected the speaker's expectancies, which implies that recipient inferences also depend on behavioral valence. Specifically, speakers using irony to comment on competent behavior (i.e., the literal meaning is negative) would be seen as out-group members of the target, entertaining a negative communicative goal. After all, these speakers highlight incompetence (e.g., "Wow, what a poor player"), even though the player in question performed competently. In contrast, speakers using irony to comment on incompetent behavior (i.e., the literal meaning is positive) would be seen as in-group members of the target entertaining a positive communicative goal. These speakers highlight competence (e.g., "Wow, what a great player"), even though the player in question performed incompetently, and thereby imply they desired and/or expected the target to behave competently (cf. Burgers & Beukeboom, in press).

Our findings on recipient inferences confirmed the irony-as-expectancy-communication perspective (H4–5). Inferences from irony differed depending on whether the speaker comments on competent or incompetent behavior. When irony was used to comment on competent behavior, recipients indeed inferred the speaker belonged to out-group and had negative communicative goal (cf. Averbeck & Hample, 2008; Matthews et al., 2006). When irony was used to comment on incompetent behavior, however, recipients inferred the speaker belonged to the in-group and had positive communicative goals (Burgers & Beukeboom, in press; Dews & Winner, 1997).

Moreover, receiving comments also influenced participants own attitude toward the soccer clubs Manchester City or United in line with the implicitly communicated biased view of the speaker. Even though all participants were presented with the same target behaviors, of which four were competent and four were incompetent behaviors, the linguistic pattern of seemingly irrelevant ironic and literal comments by an implicitly biased stranger not only influenced recipients' view of the unknown commenter, but also recipients' cognitions about the general social category.

## General discussion and conclusion

Our research showed that irony plays an important part in intergroup communication. We investigated two potential patterns of irony use that may be employed to enhance group identity, in line with SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986): Irony can either be used as a linguistic tool for aggression toward out-group members or to subtly communicate expectancies about desired in-group and out-group behavior. Verbal irony has previously been linked to both aggression (cf. Averbeck & Hample, 2008; Boylan & Katz, 2013; Matthews et al., 2006) and the communication of expectancies (cf. Burgers & Beukeboom, in press; Kihara, 2005; Wilson & Sperber, 2004).

Experiment 1 focused on irony use by speakers commenting on behavior performed by either members of their in-group or of a rival out-group. Results showed that strong in-group identifying soccer fans found irony most appropriate to

comment on players of the rival club, regardless of behavioral valence. These results support the irony-as-aggression perspective. Experiment 2 focused on recipient inferences from literal and ironic comments on target players' behaviors, made by unknown commenters. Results showed that neutral recipient inferences about the commenter depended on whether irony was used to comment on competent or incompetent behavior. When irony was used to comment on competent behavior, recipients inferred that the speaker was most likely an out-group member with negative communicative goals. In contrast, when irony was used to comment on incompetent behavior, recipients inferred that the speaker was most likely an in-group member with positive communicative goals. These results support the irony-as-expectancy-communication perspective, in line with prior results for other linguistic behavior (Douglas & Sutton, 2006, 2010).

The combined results of Experiments 1 and 2 contribute to intergroup communication by showing a contrast between language used by in-group members (fans) and inferences drawn by neutral observers. Specifically, we found that the actual communication pattern of ironic comments that sports fans found most appropriate was not in line with the inferences that neutral observers draw from ironic sports fans. Although strong identifying sport fans appeared to mainly employ ironic comments to aggressively derogate out-group players (regardless of behavioral valence), inferences drawn by neutral observers varied on whether irony referred to competent or incompetent behavior. This implies that one's position in an intergroup situation (in-group, out-group, neutral) may have differential effects on language use and inferences drawn from that language.

One potential explanation for this asymmetry is that the way in which an (ironic) comment is used and perceived may depend on the positions of speaker and recipient. That is, the salience of group membership, and whether one has a stake in an intergroup situation may influence language use (cf. Palomares, 2008). In Experiment 1, we made the intergroup rivalry highly salient by reminding participants of their actual fan allegiance and by asking them to imagine watching a game against their biggest rival. This strong salience of intergroup rivalry could induce the strong in-group identifying fans to primarily adopt irony usage as a form of aggression toward the out-group.

In Experiment 2, in contrast, we targeted neutral recipients observing unknown others in an intergroup rivalry situation in which they had no significant stake. These participants likely did not perceive themselves as part of the intergroup rivalry between the two foreign clubs. This likely led to different considerations when they tried to deduce the unknown commenter's perspective and communicative goals from his pattern of ironic and literal comments. The question as to whether similar ironic comments can fulfill differential functions and induce different inferences depending on whether they are used in an intergroup setting in which participants take an active part is a question that warrants further investigation.

Furthermore, this study also served to reconcile seemingly conflicting strands of research on verbal irony. Some scholars have suggested that irony can serve as a way

to communicate interpersonal aggression (cf. Averbeck & Hample, 2008; Matthews et al., 2006), whereas others show that irony can mitigate expectancy violations (cf. Burgers & Beukeboom, in press; Dews & Winner, 1997). Our results suggest that irony can achieve both goals depending on the group to which the speaker and the recipient belong (in-group, out-group, neutral observer). This suggests that research on irony should not focus on the general question which effect ironic comments have on recipients, but rather on the functions that ironic comments fulfill for speakers and/or recipients in different contexts.

This study has also opened up other interesting avenues for future research. First, we looked at irony in intergroup communication in the context of sports rivalries. An interesting follow-up question is whether our results generalize to other intergroup contexts and other cultures. Such research may focus on identifying potential moderators of our findings. For instance, in our experiments the groups were in a strong rivalry and were about equally strong, as they were all contenders to win either the Dutch or English league. Future studies may include intergroup contexts with varying perceived rivalry and with varying power differences (e.g., a strong vs. a weak team).

Second, Experiment 2 aimed to contrast the two perspectives (irony-as-aggression vs. irony-as-expectancy-communication) and thus contained experimental situations that would potentially fit both perspectives. Scholars interested in only the irony-as-aggression perspective could conduct a similar study with an added condition in which the commenter is ironic in all situations.

Third, we focused on verbal irony as a linguistic means to achieve various communicative goals such as communicating aggression or expectancies. Future research could also include or combine other linguistic means like metaphors (cf. Srivastva & Barrett, 1988) or negations (cf. Beukeboom et al., 2010) to investigate whether and how they are used to strategically enhance group identity.

Furthermore, all ironic comments in our experimental materials included markers such as superlatives or interjections. Empirical evidence suggests that ironic utterances with such markers are easier to perceive as ironic than ironic utterances without such markers (e.g., Burgers et al., 2012b; Colston & O'Brien, 2000; Kreuz & Roberts, 1995). Furthermore, some of these markers such as superlatives or emphatic adjectives have been associated with increased language intensity (e.g., Hamilton, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1990). Future research could study how differentially formulated ironic utterances (e.g., with or without differential markers) are used and perceived in an intergroup setting (cf. Averbeck, 2010). Finally, our studies were conducted in an experimental laboratory setting. To further bolster external validity of our findings, we believe it would be worthwhile to supplement our experimental approach with observational studies focusing on spontaneous irony usage in real-life intergroup situations.

Many people enthusiastically identify with and support their local sports teams, which can have positive effects on social well-being by increasing social connections (Wann, 2006) and social capital (Palmer & Thompson, 2007). However, fan allegiance can also have negative consequences when promoting out-group derogation and

violence between fans of opposing teams (Braun & Vliegenthart, 2008). Linguistic tools such as irony are important elements to communicate and maintain intergroup differences, depending on the positions of speaker and addressee (e.g., enthused fans vs. neutral observers). This study provides a firm basis for future research that can hopefully further extend our knowledge on the subtleties with which language is used to communicate, accentuate, or mitigate intergroup expectancies and rivalries.

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## Notes

- 1 Complete stimulus materials for both Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 are available as supplementary files at the website of Human Communication Research ([http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1468-2958](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1468-2958)) next to the online version of this article (Appendix S1, Supporting Information).
- 2 As control variables, we also measured participants' *current attitude toward* and *satisfaction with* their team's performance as well as participants' *perceived rivalry* between the two clubs. We also asked participants about whether they found the utterances natural and easy to imagine that they would make the utterances themselves ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Analyses of these variables show that Ajax fans were slightly more satisfied with their team's performance than Feyenoord fans. Further, Ajax and Feyenoord fans held an equally positive attitude toward their own team, experienced a similar degree of rivalry and found the utterances equally natural. No other variables were measured.
- 3 With one exception: The two-way interaction of fan and behavioral competence on perceived expectedness was significant,  $F(1,89) = 4.85, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .05$ . Inspection of Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons, however, showed no significant differences between Ajax and Feyenoord fans in perceived expectedness of competent and incompetent behavior.
- 4 This ANOVA also provided a number of analyses generalizing over literal and ironic comments. We found no main effect of stimulus actor,  $F(1,89) = 1.84, p = .18$ . We did find a main effect of behavioral valence,  $F(1,89) = 28.00, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .24$ , indicating that comments about incompetent (vs. competent) behavior were considered more appropriate. We also found an interaction between stimulus actor and behavioral valence,  $F(1,89) = 45.29, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .34$ . Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons show that comments about competent in-group (vs. out-group) behavior and incompetent out-group (vs. in-group) behavior were deemed most appropriate (both  $ps < .001$ ).
- 5 We also found interaction effects between comment type and actor,  $F(1,89) = 92.37, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .51$ , and comment type and behavioral competence,  $F(1,89) = 38.89, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .30$ . Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons reveal that irony was deemed more appropriate to comment on out-group actors than on in-group actors, and on incompetent behavior than on competent behavior (both  $ps < .001$ ). For literal comments, this is reversed (at least  $p < .05$ ). Our finding that irony in general is more appropriate to comment on negative incompetent (vs. positive competent) behavior reflects the "asymmetry constraint" (Kreuz & Link, 2002; Matthews et al., 2006).

6 As control variables, we also measured participants' perceived competence of players of Manchester City or United and participants' *perceived rivalry* between the two clubs. These did not differ between the two clubs. We also analyzed the situation individually by measuring expectedness and several attribution variables. Results revealed that situations with competent players were more expected and received more internal attribution than situations with incompetent players. Because our main focus is on communicational patterns, these results are not reported on further. No other variables were measured.

## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article:

**Appendix S1:** Overview of experimental materials, Experiments 1 and 2.

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