

Expectation Resonance in Affirmative Irony: A Multimodal Analysis of Verbal Humor in *Cecilia*

Bin Dang^{1,2*}

¹China Shaanxi Translators Association, Xi'an, 710068, China

²Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de Las Villas, Santa Clara, Cuba

*Corresponding author: Bin Dang, bd26198@foxmail.com

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Humberto Solás's 1982 film *Cecilia* does something unusual with verbal irony. Characters who occupy subordinate social positions use it not just to criticize or tear down, but to build up solidarity and sketch alternative possibilities. The study calls this *affirmative irony*. The study examines five key scenes with a multimodal lens, drawing on the evaluative synergy framework and expectation linguistics. From that synthesis emerges a proposal, which is the *expectation resonance hypothesis*, to explain how ironic evaluation and expectation modulation feed into each other as voice, body, and camera converge. Five ironic types and four recurring multimodal configurations surface in the analysis. The paper also lays out a replicable, annotation-based method and argues that taking ironic discourse as merely negative misses half the picture.

Keywords: Verbal irony; Multimodality; Discourse study; Affirmative irony; Study of expectation *Cecilia*; Study of expectation

Online publication: May 25, 2026

1. Introduction

For a long time, linguists and literary scholars talked about irony as if it lived exclusively in words. That has changed. Over the past few decades, researchers have come to see irony, especially the humorous, evaluative variety, as something that rarely works through language alone. Burczynska captures the point neatly: multimodal irony in film "is not relayed by the film dialogue alone but, rather, in unison with non-verbal semiotic resources" (Page 32) ^[1]. Anyone trying to understand how humor, social commentary, and evaluation lock together on screen has to take that claim seriously.

The material the author works with here is *Cecilia*, a 1982 Cuban-Spanish co-production directed by Humberto Solás. The film calls itself a *versión libre* of Cirilo Villaverde's foundational 1882 novel *Cecilia Valdés*. The story takes place in early nineteenth-century Havana and follows Cecilia, a *mestiza* who claws her way toward white Creole high society by entangling herself with Leonardo Gamboa, a young man

caught between nihilistic impulses and the contradictions that structure his world. Scholars have pored over Villaverde's novel for its anti-slavery and pro-independence politics ^[2-3]. The film's particular ironic tactics and the full multimodal ensemble that delivers them have received far less scrutiny. Three questions drive the investigation:

1. What varieties of verbal irony surface in the dialogue of *Cecilia*, and in what sense do those ironic expressions carry out humorous-affirmative work?
2. How do non-verbal modes, such as gesture, facial expression, prosody, and camera framing, pull together with language to build and sharpen the evaluative punch of the irony?
3. What methodological takeaways can a systematic, multimodal annotation scheme supply for the study of cinematic irony?

The author's central claim is straightforward. Verbal irony in this film works as *affirmative irony*. It does not just negate, mock, or topple existing hierarchies. It exposes absurdities and, while doing so, opens breathing room for agency, solidarity, and critique. Unlike irony that only destroys, affirmative irony cuts across linguistic, bodily, and cinematic planes; it builds something even as it exposes.

The theoretical spine of the paper draws on two lines of work. Dang has proposed "multimodal evaluative synergy", arguing that evaluation in film emerges from a dynamic interplay among verbal, prosodic, kinesic, and visual resources ^[4]. The author applies that model directly to humorous verbal irony and traces how affirmative evaluation gets spread across semiotic modes. The other line comes from expectation linguistics. It should be noted that the expectation-based linguistics is a research domain proposed by Chinese experts, professors, and scholars, who have carried out relatively in-depth research on this subject, such as Zhenyu Chen, Bin Zhu, Fangzhe Lu, and others. ^[5-6]. In that framework, expectations are probabilistic beliefs about states of affairs: convergence happens when reality meets expectation, counter-expectation when it does not. From this vantage point, ironic utterances do something quite strategic. They activate a generic expectation, then break it, producing cognitive dissonance and, alongside it, an affirmative evaluative shift.

Methodologically, the study uses a multimodal discourse approach backed by systematic annotation of five chosen scenes; this design lets recurrent patterns emerge. The paper stretches beyond linguistic pragmatics into multimodal film analysis, proposes a new typology for Spanish-language cinema, and sets out a methodological roadmap that others can replicate. By staying close to a Cuban film that grapples with race, class, and colonial power, the article also illustrates how linguistic humor can operate as a vehicle for social critique and affirmative world-building. After this introduction, theoretical ground is covered in Section 2, methodology in Section 3, findings in Section 4, discussion in Section 5, and conclusions in Section 6.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Verbal humor and the general theory of verbal humor

Two accounts have shaped how people think about verbal humor. Raskin gave us the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH), which says that humor ignites when two opposed semantic scripts collide inside a single text ^[7]. Attardo and Raskin later broadened the picture with the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), introducing six knowledge resources: language, narrative strategy, target, situation, logical mechanism, and script opposition ^[8]. For the ironic humor in *Cecilia*, script opposition captures the gap between what

is literally said and what is evaluatively implied; the logical mechanism captures how that incongruity gets resolved—usually because the audience recognizes the speaker’s dissociative stance. Yet Brône, Feyaerts, and Veale have pointed out a real limitation: the GTVH does not systematically absorb multimodal resources^[9]. In film, that omission bites hard, because prosodic contours, facial expressions, and camera framing are not decorations; they are central to the humorous meaning.

2.2. Relevance theory and echoic irony

A different tradition, grounded in Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory, gives us a pragmatically richer story^[10]. In the echoic model, ironic utterances implicitly ascribe a thought or utterance to someone else while broadcasting a dissociative attitude toward it (Page 17)^[1]. The speaker echoes a proposition and marks its rejection, rather than flatly asserting the opposite. The model stretches beyond words without strain: cinematic irony routinely echoes verbal propositions alongside visual clichés, gestures, and film conventions. In *Cecilia*, characters frequently pair ironic lines with exaggerated gestural echoes of aristocratic mannerisms. Smith, drawing on the pragmeme of insolence, has shown how ironic face-threatening acts are realized through layered prosody, gesture, and facial expression, a perspective that fits a film that regularly trains its sights on the colonial elite^[11].

2.3. Multimodal discourse analysis and cinematic evaluation

The multimodal turn rests on a straightforward recognition: meaning always pulls on several semiotic modes at the same time. Kress and van Leeuwen elaborated a grammar of visual design; Baldry and Thibault worked out procedures for multimodal transcription^[12–13]. When it comes to film evaluation, Dang introduced the “multimodal evaluative synergy”^[1]. Building on the appraisal framework, the argument is that evaluation in film arises from a synergistic interplay among verbal, prosodic, kinesic, and visual resources^[14]. Language contributes propositional content and attitudinal vocabulary. Prosody adds intensity and affective shading. Kinesic resources carry embodied attitudes. Cinematic resources situate the viewer. For ironic humor, the engagement system becomes especially important because irony always juggles at least two voices: the echoed voice of the target and the dissociative voice of the ironist.

2.4. Multimodal markers of irony

A growing body of empirical work has pinned down multimodal irony markers. Attardo, Eisterhold, Hay, and Poggi found that pitch operates as a contrastive marker rather than furnishing a single “ironical intonation”, and they identified the “blank face” as a visual cue for ironic intent^[15]. *Cecilia*’s deadpan delivery in Scene 4 fits that configuration neatly. Tabacaru, working with corpus data, demonstrated that co-speech gestures are indispensable for getting at intended humorous meanings^[16]. Koochacki and Sharafzadeh looked at how prosodic and gestural cues interact in sarcastic utterances; they noted that the cues sometimes align, sometimes go their own way, and often function as gestural codas^[17]. Their combined acoustic-and-visual method offers a template worth borrowing.

2.5. Toward a theory of affirmative irony

Most standard accounts have stressed the negative, critical, or subversive edge of irony, often filing it under face-threatening acts^[18]. The material from *Cecilia* tells a different story. The film’s ironic lines do not just negate or mock; they uphold alternative values, relationships, and possibilities. Affirmative irony, as the

author is proposing it, exposes social absurdities while generating positive evaluative stances toward other ways of being. The author sees three defining features. The first is evaluative contrast: a rejected stance gets placed right next to an affirmed one. The second is a humorous resolution, achieved through multimodal signals of a dissociative attitude that pull the viewer into the humorous exposure. The third is social bonding: an in-group forms around the shared ironic stance, whether among viewers or characters. This way of framing things makes it feasible to specify how ironic evaluation distributes across modes and how it can do affirmative rather than purely critical work.

2.6. Expectation linguistics and ironic evaluation

Expectation linguistics adds another dimension ^[2-3]. Expectations are probabilistic beliefs; convergent expectation holds when reality matches the belief, counter-expectation when it does not. Zhu and Lu set out three tiers: an underlying cognitive layer, an intermediate information-structure layer (topic-comment, presupposition-focus), and a surface discourse layer (connectives, modal particles, syntactic patterns) ^[2]. Chen sharpens the picture by pulling apart individual and generic expectations and by introducing a seven-interval model of subjective probability for calibrating expectation strength ^[3]. If we pick up this lens, ironic utterances come into view as strategic manipulations. A character fires up a generic expectation and then smashes it with a counter-expectational utterance. The cognitive dissonance that results drives the humorous effect, while an alternative evaluative stance gets affirmed in the process. Imperative sentences are especially revealing here. An imperative embodies the speaker's wish that the hearer carry out an action, supported by beliefs about the hearer's capacity and willingness. Ironic imperatives twist that armature. Cecilia's "Que sufra, mi amiga, que sufra" works exactly this way. On the surface, it is an imperative. Deeper down, it subverts the generic expectation that a pursued woman should soothe her suitor. The counter-expectational charge generates humor and an affirmative stance: Cecilia expects her friend to join her in rejecting the normative expectation, and that joint rejection cements solidarity.

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus description

The corpus comprises the complete Spanish-language dialogue of *Cecilia* (1982), directed by Humberto Solás and produced by ICAIC in partnership with Impala S.A. of Madrid. The film runs about 147 minutes. Daisy Granados is Cecilia, Imanol Arias is Leonardo Gamboa, Raquel Revuelta plays Doña Rosa, and Miguel Benavides is Pimienta. The setting is early-to-mid nineteenth-century Havana, when Cuba was still a Spanish colony propped up by enslaved African labor. The film's self-labeling as a *versión libre* signals a deliberate reworking for revolutionary ends ^[19-21]. The author concentrates on five scenes chosen because ironic clusters are especially dense in them: Scene 1, Cecilia's dismissal of Don Cosme at the dance; Scene 2, Leonardo's ironic sparring with Cecilia; Scene 3, a family confrontation threaded with ironic remarks about an execution; Scene 4, Cecilia's refusal of Don Cosme's gift; and Scene 5, Leonardo's conversation about a repeating watch, which spirals into a face-off over the family's slave-trade wealth.

3.2. Transcription and translation

Dialogue was transcribed directly from the audio track and checked against available script sources. Spanish passages keep their original orthography, with only minimal punctuation adjustments. English translations

aim to preserve pragmatic force and ironic flavor rather than chasing word-for-word equivalence.

3.3. Annotation scheme

The annotation grid had five tiers. Tier 1 (Verbal) tagged echoic mention, negative polarity, falsehood/understatement, and metaphorical irony. Tier 2 (Prosodic) captured exaggerated falling intonation, high rising terminals, and lengthened syllables. Tier 3 (Kinesic-Facial) logged eyebrow raises, eye-rolling, smirks, direct eye contact, and blank face. Tier 4 (Kinesic-Gestural) recorded dismissive hand waves, exaggerated polite gestures, and pointing. Tier 5 (Cinematic) noted shot type, camera angle, and editing pattern.

3.4. Analytical procedure

The work unfolded in three steps. The five scenes were first annotated with time-aligned multimodal coding. Instances of verbal irony were then identified and classified with the help of GTVH's script opposition and logical mechanism, supplemented by echoic and expectation-linguistic analysis. Finally, co-occurring non-verbal resources were scrutinized to map synergy patterns. Following Tabacaru, and Koochacki and Sharafzadeh, the author paid particular attention to prosodic-gestural co-occurrence, especially the post-verbal window where gestural codas tend to appear^[16-17]. For every ironic utterance, the author asked which expectation was activated, whether the utterance confirmed or violated it, which alternative evaluative stance was affirmed, and which multimodal resources contributed to modulating that expectation.

4. Findings

4.1. Scene 1: "Que sufra, mi amiga, que sufra"

Script excerpt:

Cecilia: Bienas.

Pimienta: ¿Qué te paso, mujer? Pensábamos que no venías. Al viejo Don Cosme no le quedan unas en los dedos. Está que arde.

Cecilia: Que sufra, mi amiga, que sufra.

4.1.1. Vocabulary-level analysis: *sufra*

The form *sufra*, third-person present subjunctive of *sufrir* ("to suffer"), repays close attention. In Spanish, a *que*-clause with the subjunctive works as an optative or jussive expression; it conveys the speaker's wish that some state of affairs obtain. *Sufrir* carries the core meaning of an undesirable experience. In unmarked usage, it would surface in commiserative utterances that wish for relief. The generic expectation that *sufrir* triggers in interpersonal settings is that the speaker deplores suffering and wants it stopped. Cecilia's deployment systematically flips that expectation. Lexically, she reroutes a sympathy-oriented verb toward a counter-expectational function: she wishes for the continuation, not the cessation, of suffering. Morphosyntactically, the subjunctive, generally used to express a wish, here articulates a wish that runs directly counter to the norm that a pursued woman should placate her suitor. Expectation modulation gets encoded at both lexical-semantic and grammatical levels.

4.1.2. Sentence-level analysis

"Que sufra, mi amiga, que sufra" does the work of an ironic optative imperative. Within the expectation linguistics framework, an imperative reflects a speaker's intention that the hearer perform an action, backed

by beliefs about the hearer's capacity and willingness^[6]. On the surface, Cecilia expects Don Cosme to suffer and wants that outcome. But the surface collides with a deeper generic expectation: a mixed-race woman who depends on wealthy patrons should be managing a suitor's emotions through appeasement. Cecilia's counter-expectational imperative violates several things at once, the generic expectation of female deference, the assumption that suffering is deplorable, and the notion that third-person optatives express benevolence. The repetition of *que supra*, with the vocative *mi amiga* inserted between the two occurrences, intensifies the impact. The first *que supra* sets up the counter-expectational stance; *mi amiga* draws the interlocutor into the speaker's evaluative position; the final *que supra* nails the stance down as definitive. The tripartite structure has an incantatory, rhythmic feel, and that turns the utterance into an affirmative, humorous declaration of resistance.

4.1.3. Multimodal analysis

At the verbal level, the irony turns on a script opposition. The anticipated reaction, such as apology, soothing, or flattery, sits opposite Cecilia's callous indifference. The logical mechanism hinges on an inversion of power relations: the pursued woman actively wills the suitor's discomfort. The echoic dimension is vital here. Cecilia echoes, and flatly rejects, the unspoken rule that women must cater to male desire. Several co-occurring resources reinforce the effect. Prosody gives us a falling pitch on both *supra* tokens, with a stretched final syllable that signals dismissive finality. Facial expressions register a slight smirk and locked eye contact, which flag a shared in-group stance. Gesture chips in a small, dismissive hand flick that physically enacts the brushing aside of Don Cosme. Cecilia affirms her own agency and her bond with Pimienta. The synergy among dismissive prosody, the smirk, and the gestural dismissal creates a stance that is at the same time critical and affirmative. Seen through the expectation linguistics lens, these multimodal resources operate as expectation-modulation signals: falling intonation stamps the stance as resolved; the smirk communicates knowingness; the hand gesture physically performs the rejection of a normative expectation; locked eye contact invites the interlocutor to share the counter-expectational evaluation, consolidating in-group solidarity.

4.2. Scene 2: "Eso sí que es una hembra"

Script excerpt:

Leonardo: Eso sí que es una hembra, Meneses!

Nemesia: Sí, lo que se dice una estética. Para cobertura, Leonardo.

Leonardo: Me imagino cuán tonta y ictua debe ser. Como lo linda que es.

Nemesia: ¿Y a mí qué rayos me importa lo que piensa? Yo me conformo con lo sabrosa que está. No pido más.

4.2.1. Vocabulary-level analysis: *estética*

The noun *estética* warrants a close look. Standardly, it names the philosophical study of beauty or the principles of artistic taste. It carries a whiff of intellectual detachment, miles away from Leonardo's crude, visceral vocabulary. Nemesia's lexical choice works as a counter-expectation. Given Leonardo's sexually charged remark, the generic expectation would be a response pitched in a congruent register, namely, colloquial, embodied, maybe just as crude. Instead, Nemesia reaches for a term from philosophical aesthetics.

The register clash that results generates ironic dissonance. The word superficially echoes admiration, yet reframes beauty in terms that expose the crudity of the original formulation. Expectation modulation operates on two planes at once: at the register level, *estética* violates the expectation of register congruence; at the evaluative level, it turns Cecilia from an object of sexual appraisal into an object of aesthetic contemplation—a reframing that mocks Leonardo’s objectification even as it subjects Cecilia to a different kind of it.

4.2.2. Multimodal analysis

Leonardo’s line sets the table, and Nemesis’s ironic rejoinder flips it. Her “Sí, lo que se dice una estética” wields understatement like an ironic tool: apparent endorsement gets twisted into irony through exaggerated, clinical language. The humor feeds on the incongruity between the rough, sexualized “hembra” and the cool, quasi-academic “estética.” Leonardo’s follow-up “Me imagino cuán tonta y ictua debe ser.” Como lo linda que es”—is a specimen of ironic misogyny. The script opposition pits the stereotype that links female beauty to intellectual deficiency against the audience’s knowledge that Cecilia is intelligent and self-possessed. Nemesis’s final salvo, “¿Y a mí qué rayos me importa lo que piensa? Yo me conformo con lo sabrosa que está. No pido más”, does something more cunning: it ironically appropriates Leonardo’s objectifying vocabulary and redirects it. She is content with Cecilia’s tastiness, so his opinion becomes irrelevant. The humor cuts both ways: it criticizes objectification while affirming Nemesis’s agency and loyalty. Annotations pick up an exaggeratedly polite, singsong tone on *estética*, raised eyebrows, and a steady gaze that broadcasts ironic detachment, a shot-reverse-shot pattern that positions the viewer to register discomfort, and emphatic stress on *mí* and *yo* that marks the pivot to an active stance. The scene is practically a textbook case of multimodal evaluative synergy ^[4].

4.3. Scene 3: “¡Vaya porquería!”

Script excerpt:

Doña Rosa: ¿Qué es lo que pasa? Llevan a esa mujer al garrote.

Leonardo: ¿Al garrote? ¿Y qué hizo la infeliz?

Doña Rosa: Mató al marido con un hacha, cortándolo en mil pedazos.

Leonardo: ¡Vaya porquería!

Doña Rosa: ¡Madre! Pero has estado llorando, Leonardo! Eso sí que no lo puedo creer.

Cantalapiedra: Ante mis ojos veo la reedición del pasaje de Cristo y la Magdalena. ¡Quién me lo iba a decir! El duro, calculador y viril corazoncito de Leonardo Gamboa estremeció y conmisero ante la suerte de una infeliz mujerzuela.

4.3.1. Vocabulary-level analysis: *corazoncito* and *mujerzuela*

Cantalapiedra’s commentary leans on two marked diminutives. *Corazoncito* fuses *corazón* (“heart”) with the suffix *-cito*. Spanish diminutives can convey smallness, endearment, or ironic belittlement. The unmarked expectation for *corazón* in metaphorical settings is sincerity, depth, and passion. The diminutive adds a counter-expectational twist: it miniaturizes the emotional organ, suggesting that Leonardo’s sentimental capacity is tiny and laughable. Placing *viril* next to *corazoncito* pumps up the counter-expectational force: virility connotes hardness, while *corazoncito* drips with sentimentality. *Mujerzuela* uses the derogatory suffix *-zuela* and carries open contempt. In commiseration discourse, the generic expectation would be a

neutral term for the condemned woman. Cantalapiedra's choice slashes through surface pathos, laying bare the ironic distance between pretended sympathy and actual evaluative stance.

4.3.2. Multimodal analysis

The scene kicks off with Doña Rosa announcing that a woman is being taken to the garrote. Leonardo's intentionally ambiguous "¡Vaya porquería!" reflects his morally unreliable character. The ironic peak arrives with Cantalapiedra's hyperbole, as he claims to see the "re-edition of the passage of Christ and Mary Magdalene" in Leonardo's tearful reaction. The script opposition sets a sacred redemptive narrative against a sordid reality. Cantalapiedra's closing observation ricochets on several planes: "virile corazoncito" welds contradictory terms together; *mujerzuela* undercuts pathos; and the whole utterance is delivered in a pompously formal cadence. The humor skewers hypocrisy while affirming Cantalapiedra's truth-teller role. Multimodal annotation picks up Leonardo's reddened eyes, creating sharp incongruity with his self-image, exaggeratedly solemn prosody that brands the commentary as an ironic sermon, a close-up that positions the viewer as co-conspirator, and a faint smile with a hand-on-chest gesture that physically enacts the ironic sermon. The scene also displays *meta-irony*: Cantalapiedra explicitly labels Leonardo's display as ironic, giving the viewer a nudge toward an ironic meta-stance.

4.4. Scene 4: "Como que será devuelta"

Script excerpt:

Calesero: Buenos días, mi santa, ésto es para la niña Cecilia, de parte de Don Cosme.

Nemesia: Dale, niña, que te trajeron un regalo.

Cecilia: Abrelo tú, tonta.

Nemesia: Dice que te espera el jueves a las diez de la mañana, en su garsonier.

Madre: ¿No te la vas a probar?

Cecilia: Como que será devuelta.

Abuela: La señorita no acepta regalos. A buen paso vamos. De este tugurio no salimos más nunca, aquí nos entierran.

4.4.1. Multimodal Analysis

The scene revolves around a gift from Don Cosme, probably a dress. Cecilia's comeback, "Como que será devuelta", is an understatement wielded as an ironic device at its sharpest. The script opposition contrasts the expectation of eager acceptance with her actual refusal. The logical mechanism frames the future passive inside *como que* ("as if"), making the proposition hypothetical and ironic. And the refusal is not a bare negation. It reads as a powerful affirmation of dignity, an echo of her earlier line, "Yo no soy plato de segunda mesa." The grandmother's lament, "De este tugurio no salimos más nunca, aquí nos entierran", comes off as ironic because the audience already understands that her rigid moralism has helped dig the family into poverty. Multimodal details reinforce the reading: Cecilia's deadpan expression: the "blank face" that Attardo et al. describe as giving the refusal gravity; she pushes the gift box aside without a glance, performing rejection physically; the grandmother's rising intonation stamps the complaint as exaggerated and theatrical; and a medium shot that holds all three women frames an intergenerational clash ^[15]. Affirmative irony, the scene suggests, can cut across generations. Cecilia's irony faces forward; the grandmother's looks

backward.

4.5. Scene 5: “Sí, trabajando. Robando hombres para venderlos”

Script excerpt:

Leonardo: ¿A qué no sabes una cosa, mamá?

Doña Rosa: Si no me lo dices.

Leonardo: No creas que te voy a pedir. Yo no quiero nada.

Doña Rosa: Ya.

Leonardo: ¿Te ríes? Entonces me callo.

[Later]

Doña Rosa: Eres injusto con tu padre, Leonardo. ¿De quién es el dinero que tú derrochas? ¿Quién trabaja para que tú goces y te diviertas?

Leonardo: Sí, trabajando. Robando hombres para venderlos.

Doña Rosa: Tu padre les hace un beneficio, una cosa digna de celebrar. A esos hombres salvajes les da bautizo, les da una religión que abiertamente no tienen en sus tierras.

Leonardo: Sí, y también los marcan al hierro vivo, les dan latigazos y los...

4.5.1. Vocabulary-Level Analysis: *trabajando* and *robando*

The pairing of *trabajando* and *robando* delivers a potent dose of lexical counter-expectation. *Trabajar* hums with positive overtones: honorable work, legitimate economic activity. Doña Rosa reaches for *trabaja* precisely to activate those overtones, giving the slave trade a coat of respectability. Leonardo's reply takes that lexical framing apart piece by piece. *Sí* signals superficial agreement and builds conversational alignment. *Trabajando* echoes Doña Rosa's word choice, as if endorsing it, and then *Robando hombres para venderlos* replaces the whole lexical field. What Doña Rosa euphemizes as *trabajar*, Leonardo re-lexicalizes as *robar*. The counter-expectational charge comes from swapping a negatively valenced verb for a positively valenced one, and in doing so, it exposes the ideological labor the euphemism performs. In expectation-linguistic terms, Doña Rosa's *trabaja* flickers on a generic expectation of legitimate wealth; Leonardo's *robando* snuffs it out, forcing a confrontation with the violence the euphemism conceals. The affirmative function lives inside this act of naming: an insistence on speaking truthfully.

4.5.2. Multimodal analysis

The exchange starts playfully. Leonardo's “¿A qué no sabes una cosa, mamá?” and “No creas que te voy a pedir” are transparently ironic. Doña Rosa's dry “Ya” and her smile show she knows the game is on. The ironic climax lands when Leonardo counters her defense: “Sí, trabajando. Robando hombres para venderlos.” The line pretends to agree while eviscerating the claim, setting honorable labor against complicity in the slave trade. The echoic dimension is crucial: Leonardo echoes his mother's euphemism and rejects it by naming what it hides. Doña Rosa's counterargument is that her husband does these people a “benefit” through baptism; this functions as dramatic irony. Leonardo's cut-off final reply follows the same template: surface agreement, then devastating enumeration. The humor is critical-affirmative; it exposes brutality and insists that brutality must be named. Multimodal details: emphatic stress on *robando* and *venderlos* provide the ironic hammer blow; Doña Rosa's smile freezes as the impact sinks in; alternating close-ups underscore the face-threatening charge of the exchange; Leonardo ticks off abuses on his fingers, physically piling up

evidence. The scene showcases the evaluative engagement system that Dang describes: Leonardo's "Si" engages with his mother's worldview while shattering it ^[4].

5. Discussion

5.1. A typology of humorous verbal irony in *Cecilia*

The analysis yields five types. Type 1, *Dismissive Affirmative Irony* (Scene 1), pushes away unwanted social expectations while affirming autonomy and solidarity; it works through a counter-expectational imperative. Type 2, *Echoic Deflationary Irony* (Scene 2), ironically echoes and deflates someone else's evaluative stance by appropriating that person's own language; here, register clash does the expectation-modulating work. Type 3, *Meta-Ironic Commentary* (Scene 3), explicitly names and comments on another's ironic or hypocritical posture, producing layered irony about irony. Type 4, *Understatement as Affirmation* (Scene 4), harnesses understatement to assert dignity; the blank face serves as a minimal facial marker that scales up to a maximal evaluative stance. Type 5, *Critical-Affirmative Naming* (Scene 5), pairs ironic agreement with devastating specification, exposing the truths that euphemism conceals; lexical substitution drives the expectation modulation.

5.2. Multimodal patterns in ironic evaluation

A handful of patterns reappear across the scenes. The *Ironic Smirk*, namely a slight asymmetrical smile, stands as the most reliable facial marker of irony, radiating knowing detachment and evaluative superiority. The *Dismissive Hand Wave* physically enacts the evaluation that words deliver, generating multimodal redundancy that reinforces the ironic message. *Exaggerated Prosodic Marking*, such as stretched syllables, over-the-top politeness, and flat delivery, signals non-literal interpretation, extending Attardo et al.'s finding that pitch works contrastively ^[15]. *Cinematic Positioning as Ironic Co-Conspirator* places the viewer inside the ironist's evaluative position via shot-reverse-shot sequences that favor the ironist's vantage point. And the *Blank Face*, unmistakable in Scene 4, pulls together with verbal understatement to build the ironic effect.

5.3. The expectation resonance hypothesis

Affirmative irony extends the multimodal evaluative synergy framework in three important directions ^[4]. First, it clarifies how ironic evaluation, which necessarily requires a dissociative attitude, gets distributed across modes. The smirk, the dismissive wave, exaggerated prosody, and the blank face are precisely the resources that mark this dissociation. Second, the data show that ironic evaluation in *Cecilia* is not simply critical. It is affirmative: Cecilia's irony affirms agency and solidarity, Nemesia's affirms loyalty and desire, Cantalapedra's affirms truth-telling, and Leonardo's affirms the urgency of naming brutality. Third, and most centrally, bringing expectation linguistics into the picture produces the *expectation resonance hypothesis*. When an ironic utterance lands and its multimodal markers register, the audience undergoes expectation modulation. A generic or individual expectation is activated, violated, and then reconfigured. The violated expectation, say, "women should defer to male desire", gets swapped for an affirmed counter-expectation: "women can assert autonomy and solidarity." The word "resonance" tries to capture the collaborative nature of the process. The verbal utterance fires up the expectation. Prosodic marking signals that it has been violated. Facial expressions convey a dissociative stance. Gestural enactment physically performs the counter-expectational evaluation. Cinematic framing positions the viewer to share the reconfigured stance.

When those resources line up and resonate with one another, the affirmative force of the irony gets amplified. When they clash, the ironic effect weakens. The hypothesis delivers a unified account covering all five types, and it explains how the appraisal system's engagement dimension is multimodally realized, the ironic smirk telegraphs a dissociative stance, the raised eyebrow flags echoic mention, and the blank face signals withheld emotional display^[14].

5.4. Theoretical implications

Several implications follow. The findings strengthen the echoic, relevance-theoretic account of irony over strictly semantic alternatives^[10]; the ironic lines in *Cecilia* are persistently echoic, and multimodal resources systematically mark that echoic mention. They also suggest that the GTVH's six knowledge resources could fruitfully be expanded to take in prosodic marking, kinesic enactment, blank face markers, and cinematic positioning: an extension along the path that Tsakona cleared for visual elements^[8, 22]. The study adds a fresh dimension to scholarship on humor and social critique in postcolonial and Caribbean cinema, showing that linguistic humor is a domain of social critique that has too often been skipped over^[23–24]. The data also supply empirical backing for Tabacaru's claim that co-speech gestures are essential for apprehending intended humorous meanings^[16]. Most distinctively, the expectation resonance hypothesis pulls together two theoretical traditions that have so far stayed apart. It offers a single framework that can handle both the cognitive processing of ironic utterances and their multimodal realization.

5.5. Methodological contributions

On the methodological front, the five-tier annotation scheme provides a template that can be taken up and adapted by other researchers. A few practical lessons stand out. Time-alignment across modes is not optional; without it, simultaneity slips through the cracks. Annotating prosodic features benefits considerably from acoustic analysis. And tracking the temporal choreography of gestural codas—the slight delay of *Cecilia*'s hand wave in Scene 1, the sustained hand-on-chest gesture in Scene 3—turns out to be critical for catching the full ironic configuration. Folding expectation-linguistic analysis into the workflow is a methodological move that opens up new angles of inquiry.

6. Conclusion

This paper has worked through the linguistic and multimodal architecture of humorous verbal irony in Solás's *Cecilia* (1982). The analysis identified five varieties of verbal irony and five recurring multimodal patterns that jointly construct evaluative force. The concept of *affirmative irony* serves as a counterweight to accounts that foreground irony's negative or purely subversive character. By weaving expectation linguistics together with multimodal analysis, the author has put forward the expectation resonance hypothesis. Affirmative irony works through the collaborative resonance of multimodal resources as they activate, violate, and reconfigure audience expectations. When verbal, prosodic, kinesic, and cinematic resources align in the service of expectation modulation, the affirmative force of irony intensifies. The implications do not stop at this single film. If irony deployed from subordinate positions can accomplish affirmative as well as critical tasks, then theories of humor and social critique need to pay closer attention to the evaluative stances that irony assembles. The study has clear limits: it focuses on one film and leans on the researcher's interpretation. Future work could bring in viewer response data to corroborate the identification

of multimodal irony and could pursue cross-linguistic comparisons to see how multimodal irony translates. In a society propped up by hierarchies of race, class, and gender, the capacity to laugh ironically is also the capacity to see clearly, to name truthfully, and to insist that other realities stay possible.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Burczynska P, 2018, Investigating the Multimodal Construal and Reception of Irony in Film Translation: An Experimental Approach, thesis, University of Manchester.
- [2] Genova T, 2016, Foundational Frustrations: Incest and Incompletion in Cirilo Villaverde's Cecilia Valdés. *Decimonónica*, 13(1): 66–86.
- [3] Novau J, 2019, “La isla que se repite” and Ways of “bregar”: Slavery and Dynamics of Transgression in Cecilia Valdés (1882) by Cirilo Villaverde. *CELEHIS*, 2019(37): 1–5.
- [4] Dang B, 2026, Constructing Evaluative Meaning Across Modes: A Case Study of Pon tu pensamiento en mí. *Advances in Humanities Research*, 13(4): 45–63.
- [5] Zhu B, Lu F, 2025, The Expectation Principle Underlying the Operation of the Language System. *Studies in Language and Linguistics*, 2025(2): 1–18.
- [6] Chen, Z., Wang, M., & Jiang, Y. (2022). Revisiting guoran: Issues concerning (positive) expectation markers. *Contemporary Rhetoric*, (2), 39–57.
- [7] Raskin V, 1985, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Reidel, Dordrecht.
- [8] Attardo S, Raskin V, 1991, Script Theory Revis(it)ed: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 4(3–4): 293–347.
- [9] Brône G, Feyaerts K, Veale T, 2006, Introduction: Cognitive Linguistic Approaches to Humor. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 19(3): 203–228.
- [10] Sperber D, Wilson D, 1995, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (2nd ed.). Blackwell, New Jersey.
- [11] Smith CA, 2022, The Multimodal Realisations of the Trope of Verbal Irony through the Lens of the Pragmeme of Insolence: A Study of Four Scenes from Buffy the Vampire Slayer S05. Paper presented at Multimodal Tropes in Contemporary Discourse, Université Lyon 3.
- [12] Kress G, van Leeuwen T, 2006, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2nd ed.). Routledge, London.
- [13] Baldry A, Thibault PJ, 2006, *Multimodal Transcription and Text Analysis*. Equinox, Sheffield.
- [14] Martin JR, White PRR, 2005, *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- [15] Attardo S, Eisterhold J, Hay J, et al., 2003, Multimodal Markers of Irony and Sarcasm. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 16(2): 243–260.
- [16] Tabacaru S, 2019, *A Multimodal Study of Sarcasm in Interactional Humor*. De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin.
- [17] Koochacki R, Sharafzadeh MH, 2025, Audiovisual Representation of Multimodal Cues during the Production of Irony and Sarcasm in Persian Sitcom. *Iranian Journal of Educational Research*, 4(2): 1–15.
- [18] Culpeper J, 2011, *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- [19] EcuRed, 2026, Cecilia (película). [https://www.ecured.cu/Cecilia_\(pel%C3%ADcula\)](https://www.ecured.cu/Cecilia_(pel%C3%ADcula))
- [20] Cubacine, 2026, Cecilia. ICAIC. <https://www.cubacine.icaic.cu/es/filme/cecilia>

- [21] IMDb, 2026, Cecilia (1982). <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080508/>
- [22] Tsakona V, 2009, Language and Image Interaction in Cartoons: Towards a Multimodal Theory of Humor. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 41(7): 1426–1444.
- [23] Lourenco CID, 1998, Negotiating Africanness in National Identity: Studies in Brazilian and Cuban Cinema, thesis, Ohio State University.
- [24] Austin EL, Lahr-Vivaz E, 2023, On Incest and Adaptation: The Foundational Scandal of Cecilia Valdés, in *Palgrave Studies in Adaptation and Visual Culture* (pp. 81–98). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.