

LITERAL/NONLITERAL AND THE PROCESSING OF VERBAL IRONY¹

Yus Ramos, Francisco

Dpto. de Filología Inglesa, Universidad de Alicante. Apdo. 99, E-03080 Alicante,
Tel: (96)5903400 Ext: 3027 Fax: +34 965903800. e-mail: francisco.yus@alc.es

(Recibido, mayo 2000; aceptado, junio 2000)

BIBLID [1133-682X (2000-2001) 8-9; 349-374]

Resumen

En el presente artículo se propone una distinción terminológica entre '*proposición expresada*' evitada y '*proposición expresada*' contemplada, desde una perspectiva cognitiva (sobre todo desde la *teoría de la relevancia*). En esta propuesta terminológica subyace la afirmación de que la identificación rápida, lenta o inexistente de la ironía depende del número de incompatibilidades detectado por el destinatario en múltiples activaciones mentales de las fuentes contextuales disponibles. Esta visión de la comprensión de la ironía intenta arrojar luz sobre debates, aún por dilucidar, como por ejemplo el que se centra en el papel del significado literal en el procesamiento de la ironía verbal, o sobre si el procesamiento de la ironía necesariamente exige más esfuerzo de procesamiento que el procesamiento de enunciados explícitos.

Palabras clave: ironía, teoría de la relevancia, lo indirecto, pragmática, proposición expresada

Abstract

In the present article a terminological distinction between *bypassed 'proposition expressed'* and *entertained 'proposition expressed'* is suggested from a cognitive perspective (mainly *relevance-theoretic*). Underlying this terminological proposal is the claim that the faster, slower, or nonexistent identification of irony depends on the number of incompatibilities detected by the addressee in multiple mental activations of the available contextual sources. This picture of irony comprehension aims at shedding light on current unresolved scholarly debates such as the one on the role of literal meaning in the processing of verbal irony, or on whether the processing of irony necessarily demands more mental effort than the processing of explicit utterances.

Key Words: irony, relevance theory, indirectness, pragmatics, proposition expressed.

Résumé

Cet article essaie de proposer une distinction terminologique entre *proposition exprimée évitée* et *proposition exprimée envisagée* en suivant une perspective cognitive (surtout selon la théorie de la pertinence). Cet approche terminologique est basé sur l'idée que l'identification rapide, lente ou inexistante de l'ironie dépend du nombre d'incomptabilités détectées par le récepteur dans de nombreuses activations des sources contextuelles disponibles. Cette façon de

1 I would like to thank Rachel Giora and Billy Clark for their fruitful comments on a previous version of this paper, and also Bryn Moody and Antonio Lillo for stylistic suggestions. Needless to say, I take full personal responsibility for any shortcomings in this resulting article.

comprendre l'ironie prétend offrir des solutions pour des débats intellectuels qui n'ont pas encore été résolus au présent, par exemple, le rôle du signifié littéral à l'heure de traiter l'ironie verbale, ou si traiter l'ironie exige toujours plus d'effort mental que traiter des énoncés explicites.

Mots Clés: ironie, théorie de la pertinence, pragmatique, proposition exprimée, l'indirect

Sumario

1. Introduction. 2. Relevance theory and irony: echo and dissociation. 3. The role of context in the processing of irony. 4. Bypassed "proposition expressed" versus "proposition expressed". 5. Criterion, bypassed/entertained "proposition expressed", and current theories of irony. 5.1. Standard pragmatic theory. 5.2. Direct transfer theory. 5.3. Echoic mention theory. 5.4. Graded salience hypothesis. 5.5. Pretense theory. 5.6. Allusional pretense theory. 6. Concluding remarks

1. Introduction

What is the role of literal meaning in the interpretation of ironic utterances? Is it invariably retained? Is it dismissed during the processing of (nonliteral) ironic interpretations? Questions like these have originated a still unresolved debate between followers of different theoretical orientations. The present article aims at shedding light onto this debate by suggesting a new terminology which fits the claims of these orientations and at the same time overcomes their occasionally restrictive scope of analysis.

The structure of the article is as follows: In section two Sperber and Wilson's relevance-theory approach to irony is sketched out, together with its *ad hoc* terminology. Section three deals with the role of context in the processing of irony, taking former studies of irony as a theoretical framework (Yus (1998a, 2000)). In section four the new terminology (*bypassed 'proposition expressed'*; *entertained 'proposition expressed'*) is introduced, and its theoretical implications are contrasted with current theories of irony in section five.

2. Relevance theory and irony: echo and dissociation

Sperber and Wilson's (1986, 1995, henceforth S&W) *relevance theory* (henceforth RT; see Blakemore (1992); S&W (1997); and Yus (1997a, 1998b, 1998c) for comments and bibliography on the theory) is a cognitive approach to human communication which focuses on the hearer's ascription of relevance in the (verbal/nonverbal) stimuli that speakers intend to make manifest (or, rather, *mutually manifest*). In order to reach a potential candidate to match the speaker's intended interpretation, the hearer weighs the information provided by the utterance against contextual information and tests interpretive hypotheses according to a balance of cost (processing effort) and benefit (cognitive effects), so that the interpretation which has the best balance is the one which the speaker supposedly intended to communicate. If a *first* relevant interpretation is reached, all the other potential interpretations will be dismissed.

Within RT, interpretation is pictured roughly as a three-stage process:

1. *Logical form*. Comprehension starts off with the hearer's identification of the semantic representation of the speaker's utterance (S&W (1986: 9)), which yields a preliminary incomplete logical form. Logical forms can be either stored in conceptual memory as *assumption schemas* (which can be later completed into

fully-fledged assumptions), or completed into the speakers' (intended) propositional forms. This phase is *decoding*, the only context-free phase of interpretation according to RT. Subsequent enrichments to yield propositions are *inferential*.

2. *Propositional form*. The hearer then completes and enriches this logical form inferentially, with such cognitive operations as reference assignment, disambiguation, enrichment and loosening: "a semantic representation must be selected, completed and enriched in various ways to yield the propositional form expressed by the utterance" (S&W (1986: 179)).
3. *Explicature/implicature*. The hearer is now in a position to be able to grasp the speaker's intended interpretation of the utterance, which can be explicitly or implicitly communicated. In either case, the proposition expressed has to be embedded in a higher-level proposition expressing the speaker's attitude upon communicating the utterance. This attitude may be related to the fact that the speaker believes and intends to communicate the proposition expressed by the utterance, in which case the proposition will be communicated as an *explicature*, or to the fact that the speaker expects the hearer to construct an implicit interpretation arising from the combination of the proposition and contextual information, in which case the proposition expressed will not be communicated, but will be used as one of the necessary elements in order to reach an *implicature*.²

For example, the speaker of (1a) can communicate the proposition expressed as an explicature (1b), or communicate the implicit information (1c) as an implicature (S&W (1986: 179ff)).

- (1)
 - a. Mary: "It will get cold".
 - b. [*Mary believes and intends to communicate that*] the dinner will get cold very soon.
 - c. Mary wants Peter to come and eat dinner at once.

The difference between (1b) and (1c) is the difference between explicit and implicit communication. In S&W's (1986: 181) words,

[1b] includes as sub-part one of the logical forms encoded by the utterance. It is constructed inferentially, by using contextual information to complete and enrich this logical form into a propositional form, which is then optionally embedded into an assumption schema typically expressing an attitude to it... [1c], by contrast, is not a development of one of the logical forms encoded by the utterance; it is constructed on the basis of contextual information, and in particular by developing assumption schemas retrieved from encyclopaedic memory.

2 "The proposition expressed may or may not be actually (ostensively) communicated; that is, it may or may not be an instance of *P* in the schema 'the speaker makes mutually manifest her intention to make manifest to the addressee that *P*'. The proposition expressed by a metaphorical, ironical or some other kind of non-literal utterance is not communicated in this sense, but rather serves as an effective and efficient means of giving the hearer access to those assumptions which are communicated. In other words, the proposition expressed may or may not be an 'explicature'" (Carston (1998: 471)).

Irony is a variety of implicitly communicated information. S&W have proposed an *echoic mention theory of irony* (S&W (1986, 1995, 1998); W&S (1992)) as part of a general relevance-theoretic distinction between *interpretive use* and *descriptive use*, and also as a development of their former *theory of use/mention distinction* (S&W (1981); Jorgensen et al. (1984)). This theory aims at overcoming the problems which cannot be dealt with in the traditional view of irony as conveying the opposite of what is literally (i.e., explicitly) said with the utterance, for example cases in which people endorse the proposition expressed by the utterance but are at the same time ironic.

Ironic utterances are typically used *interpretively*. An ironic utterance is an interpretation of another thought, utterance or assumption which it resembles and which the speaker attributes to a different speaker or to himself/herself at another time. Besides, they are necessarily *echoic* (they simultaneously refer to an attributed thought —or utterance, or assumption— and express an attitude to it; see Seto (1998) for discussion). Specifically, the speaker's attitude towards what is echoed has to be *dissociative*. This dissociation may refer to either the proposition expressed by the utterance, or to some effect that is generated by that proposition.

An example can be found in Curcó (1997: ch. 9):

- (2) a. [It is late and the children are not in bed].
 b. **Mother: "I love children who go to bed early".**

In situation (2a), the mother utters (2b) as a means to echo and dissociate herself from a thought, specifically a potential utterance which she would have liked to utter in a different situation such as (3), a situation in which (2b) would no longer be used interpretively, but *descriptively* (the mother would not only endorse the proposition expressed by (2b) but also communicate it as an explicature fitting situation (3)):

- (3) [It is early and the children are in bed].

In order to reach the correct ironic interpretation of (2b), the hearer needs to identify — as a contextual assumption— the existence of this situation (3) which did not occur as the mother would have expected, which triggers the mismatch between (2a) and (2b), and hence the ironic interpretation of (2b), even though the mother actually endorses the proposition expressed by (2b) (she *does* love children who go to be early). In Curcó's (ibid.) words,

in [3], the speaker would be in a position to utter [2b] descriptively, *and*, crucially, to endorse all its potential implicatures. In [3], her utterance would logically imply that she loves her own children and that one of the reasons she loves them is because they have gone to bed early. When this situation fails to materialise, she ironically echoes the utterance she had earlier hoped to be able to produce. In the actual circumstances, [2a], her utterance does not have the implication that she loves her children, at least, not because they go to bed early.

So, the mother is implicitly expressing her attitude of dissociation from the potential implicature in [4]:

- (4) I love my own children because they go to bed early.

The identification of the discrepancy between situations (2a) and (3) is essential to discover the irony in (2b):

The speaker of [2b] is echoing a potential utterance that she could have produced in a situation S_1 , different from S_0 , when the utterance is in fact produced. She dissociates from some of the potential implicatures that the utterance would have if uttered in S_1 . To recognise these facts, a hearer has to notice that while S_0 , the actual context, contains [2a], the non-actual but stereotypically desirable S_1 , contains [3]. Part of the relevance of [2b] when uttered in S_0 is to make strongly mutually manifest [2a] (Curcó, *ibid.*).

S&W (1998: 289) comment upon a similar example: In (2b) “the speaker agrees with the literal meaning of her utterance, and would not want to dissociate herself from it. So where does the irony come from? (...) [2b], literally understood, is inappropriate not because it is false, but because of the circumstances of utterance. What is being ironically echoed is the higher-order explicature... that [2b], literally understood, is relevant in the circumstances. The circumstances *should* be such that the mother could relevantly say [2b] without irony: that is, [an alternative situation such as (3)]”.

3. The role of context in the processing of irony

In Yus (1998a; further developed in Yus (2000)), it was claimed that a multiple-source simultaneous activation of contextual information is essential for a fast processing of the ironic interpretation of utterances. It was hypothesized that the proposition expressed by the utterance has to be incompatible with the information provided by one, several, or all of these sources, so that the more incompatibilities detected, the easier it should be to reach the ironic interpretation.³ In Yus (1998a) a so-called *principle of optimal accessibility to irony* was proposed taking this hypothesis as a premise. It was turned into a *criterion* in Yus (2000) and slightly modified:

3 Needless to say, I am not claiming that one invariably needs multiple contextual activations in order to reach an ironic interpretation. Indeed, one hears *nice weather!* in the middle of a downpour, and cannot help noticing an incompatibility between the proposition expressed by the utterance and the information provided by the physical environment, one single source triggering an attitude of dissociation. However, it is not the *ability to access* irony that is being discussed (although hearers do differ in their ability to integrate information from different contextual sources), but the idea of *accessibility making this ability more effort-saving*. The same utterance (*nice weather!*) when said in a typically ironic tone of voice (Kreuz et al. (1999: 1686)) and maybe with a smile on the speaker's face, is bound to have so much contextual information supporting an attitude of dissociation that the effort required to process the ironic interpretation of the utterance will necessarily decrease.

Furthermore, in Yus (2000) a new terminology is proposed to cover this fact: it is assumed that in every conversational situation in which the speaker intends to convey an ironic interpretation there is one contextual source whose information is surely very accessible (i.e., it is highly manifest to the hearer in the course of the conversation), at least more accessible than other contextual sources. The incompatibility detected between the proposition expressed by the utterance and the information provided by this single contextual source is enough to detect the speaker's attitude of dissociation and reach an ironic reading of the utterance. Consequently, it is labelled *leading contextual source*. There may also be one or several additional contextual sources reaffirming the hypothesis of an ironic interpretation, providing a high degree of informative support capable of leading to the ironic interpretation much faster. These are called *supportive contextual sources*. Which of the contextual sources is a candidate to become a *leading contextual source* depends on the attributes of the speech situation, the utterance itself, and the hearer's inferential capabilities and cognitive resources.

CRITERION OF OPTIMAL ACCESSIBILITY TO IRONY

The processing effort required for the interpretation of the intended ironic meaning of an utterance decreases in proportion to the increase in the number (and quality) of incompatibilities (detected by the addressee) between the information supplied by the inferential integration of simultaneously activated *contextual sources* (*leading* or *leading plus supportive* [see note 3]) and the information provided by the proposition expressed by the utterance.

When the incompatibility detected between the proposition expressed by the utterance and the information provided by one or several contextual sources reaches a certain level of redundancy, the hearer effort-savingsly infers that the speaker is being dissociative towards this proposition, and that an ironic reading is intended. The (highly salient) incompatibility provided by a *leading* contextual source may be enough to set off this search for irony, but its access may be accelerated by the simultaneous identification of incompatibilities found in the information supplied by other *supportive* sources. These sources and their incompatibilities are listed below:

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| A. Factual information | Incompatibility with factual, encyclopaedic, and commonsense assumptions about the world we live in. |
| B. Physical setting | Incompatibility with a salient phenomenon from the speech setting surrounding the interlocutors in the course of a conversation. |
| C. Nonverbal communication | Incompatibility with normal nonverbal behaviour which typically accompanies verbal speech. |
| D. Biographical data | Incompatibility with the speaker's opinions, character, habits and attitudes about life and the world we live in. |
| E. Mutual knowledge | Incompatibility with information which is supposedly shared between the interlocutors. |
| F. Previous utterances | Incompatibility (in the current conversational context) of the repeated utterance with the information provided explicitly by the same utterance in previous stages of the conversation or even farther away in time. Alternatively, incompatibility between the assumptions arising from the interpretation of previous utterances and the information provided by the current utterance. |
| G. Linguistic cues | Incompatibility with linguistic choices and sentential structures which are typically used for ordinary communication. |

The picture outlined here is that of multiple *contextual sources* providing parallel reasons for the hearer to reach the conclusion that the speaker's intended interpretation of his/her utterance might be ironic (and the parallel conclusion that there is a discrepancy between the proposition expressed by the utterance and the interpretation really meant by

the speaker: see Torres Sánchez (1999: 99-102) for discussion). If the level of *informative support* provided by these *contextual sources* is high enough (depending on the hearer's processing ability and his/her accessibility to contextual information), then the ironic interpretation of the utterance will be easily identified: the hearer will have overwhelming contextual support to conclude that the speaker's attitude towards his/her utterance is dissociative. Similarly, if the number of *contextual sources* accessed and subsequent incompatibilities detected is not high enough or even nonexistent, a misunderstanding of the ironic interpretation might take place.

An example of rich contextual support is quoted in (5) below (Yus (2000), slightly adapted from Yus (1998a)):

- (5)
- a. [*Cold, wet, windy English spring in London*].
 - b. [*Smiling, with a distinctive tone of voice*] "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life".
 - c. I am tired of living in London.
 - d. [*Sunny day in London, lively atmosphere in the streets, little or no traffic*].
 - e. Some of the reasons why everybody likes London are its weather, lively atmosphere and little traffic.

S&W claim that in order to reach the ironic sense of (5b), the hearer is expected to label it as a quotation (echo) towards which the speaker has an attitude of dissociation (in this particular example, (5b) may actually be a literal quotation of Dr. Johnson). Indeed, there is nothing to prevent the effective interpretation of the ironic sense of (5b), since the contextual information invalidates any chance that the speaker intended to communicate—as an explicature—the proposition expressed by (5b). Clearly, the speaker is ironically echoing a more pleasurable situation such as (5d) (in which s/he could have endorsed the proposition expressed by (5b) and its strong implicatures, for instance (5e)), instead of the disappointing—and mutually manifest—situation (5a). Therefore, reaching (5c) is minimally effort-demanding and provides the only relevant information available. No doubt, identifying (5b) as a quote (and as a change of register contradicting normal communicative means) is just one of multiple incompatibilities that the hearer can detect simultaneously in several contextual sources, and whose contextual support triggers the ironic interpretation in the course of the conversation. As shown in (5f), several contextual sources provide multiple incompatibilities with the proposition expressed by (5b):

(5)	f.	SOURCE	INCOMPATIBILITY
		Factual information	-
		Physical setting	-
		Nonverbal communication	-
		Biographical data	-
		Mutual knowledge	-
		Previous utterances	X
		Linguistic cues	

In this example, there are incompatibilities with the hearer's knowledge of typical characteristics of London (FACTUAL INFORMATION), with the terrible weather causing the hearer to be tired (PHYSICAL SETTING), with the stereotypical nonverbal behaviour that is normally used for assertions (NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION), with the hearer's prior knowledge of the speaker's opinion about London (BIOGRAPHICAL DATA), with speaker/hearer shared opinions about London (MUTUAL KNOWLEDGE), and with normal, discursive structures used in casual conversations, since there is a distinctive change of register in (5b) (S&W (1981: 559)) (LINGUISTIC CUES). However, previous utterances (in the conversation) do not seem to play any role in indicating the speaker's dissociative attitude.

An example of poor contextual support is quoted in (6) below (Yus (1998a)), in which Bill's utterance in (6b) is meant to communicate the interpretation (6c):

- (6) a. [*Passengers Tom and Bill sitting together on a train. After a while they strike up a conversation. Tom is reading a paper and makes a comment on one of the headlines*].
- b. Tom: "Listen, it says here that sixty per cent of women are still unemployed in this country!"
 Bill: "Yeah! Keep them in the kitchen where they belong!"
 Tom: "Do you think all women should be housewives?"
 Bill: "Of course not! I was only joking, for God's sake!"
- c. Yeah! It is sad to think that so many women are unemployed.

Clearly, the proposition expressed provided by Bill's utterance is not incompatible with any information from contextual sources, as we can see in (6d):

(6)	d. SOURCE	INCOMPATIBILITY
	Factual information	X
	Physical setting	X
	Nonverbal communication	X
	Biographical data	X
	Mutual knowledge	X
	Previous utterances	X
	Linguistic cues	X

No source of incompatibility in Tom's accessible contextual information can be found for Bill's proposition. Not even Tom's factual knowledge about women not deserving to be kept in the kitchen is activated, because it is also a factual assumption that not everybody agrees on the role of women in society. Tom does not find incompatibilities in the other *contextual sources*, not even in Bill's nonverbal behaviour, since Bill utters his statement in a default, neutral tone of voice, without any special facial gesture and with no striking sentential structure or vocabulary choice. Tom's misunderstanding of Bill's ironic utterance was indeed predictable. Although Bill echoes a cultural norm and dissociates himself from the proposition expressed by his utterance, lack of contextual support on Tom's side (rather than Bill's defective communicative efforts) explains why Bill's communicative intention proves unsuccessful. Besides, Bill and Tom are strangers. As such, Bill should have

concentrated on very salient aspects of the physical setting for the construction of ironic interpretations. *Physical co-presence* (Clark and Marshall (1981)) usually helps to reach “communicative success between listeners and speakers whose degree of shared common ground is unknown. If someone makes an ironic remark to a stranger at a bus stop, the reference will probably be to some perceptually salient phenomenon, such as the weather, or the fact that the bus is late. Since the listener can directly perceive the mismatch between the situation and the utterance, he or she can conclude that the speaker is employing irony” (Kreuz et al. (1999: 1686)). The same can be said about Bill and Tom’s conversation.

4. Bypassed ‘proposition expressed’ versus entertained ‘proposition expressed’

One of the main points under discussion with respect to the subject of irony is the one concerning the role of literal meaning in the processing of ironic utterances. Is the literal meaning processed, and then dismissed in favour of an alternative ironic meaning (*Standard Pragmatic Theory*), or are both literal and ironic meanings computed (*Graded Salience Hypothesis*), or is the ironic interpretation perhaps accessed without a prior processing of the literal meaning (*Direct Transfer Theory*)? As will be discussed in heading five below, the distinction between *bypassed ‘proposition expressed’* and *entertained ‘proposition expressed’* covers most of these possibilities.

As I have sketched out above, after reaching the proposition expressed by the speaker’s utterance, the hearer—with the aid of contextual information—has to make interpretive hypotheses on whether the speaker intends to communicate this ‘proposition expressed’ as explicit information (i.e., as an *explicature*), or expects the hearer to access one or several contextual assumptions which, when combined with the proposition expressed, will yield implicitly communicated information (i.e., as an *implicature*) not directly derivable from that proposition. Interpreting both explicatures and implicatures is effort-demanding⁴, and reaching the proposition expressed by the utterance *also* demands cognitive effort, which hearers are willing to make in exchange for the eventual relevance which the utterance will (supposedly) yield. However, some authors have dismissed the effort to reach the proposition expressed almost as straightforward decoding. On the contrary, it should be

4 Furthermore, I have come to the conclusion that processing ironic utterances (except in cases of highly conventionalized ironic phrases; see Alba Juez (1998); on Spanish conventionalized phrases, see Penadés Martínez (1999)) tends to be more effort-demanding than processing explicitly communicated information (which is a direct embedding of the proposition expressed in a higher-level assumption incorporating the speaker’s attitude to it). Some authors, for instance Giora (1995, 1998a), think that RT does not consider the possibility of (nonliteral) ironic interpretation being more costly in terms of processing effort than explicitly communicated information. However, as Curcó (1997: ch. 9) correctly points out, “nothing in the relevance-theoretic approach to irony denies that the proposition expressed by the utterance is computed during the processing of an ironic utterance. Not only that, but... a number of related propositions that are part of the context of interpretation, notably, contradictory ones, need to be entertained roughly simultaneously during processing in order to derive an ironic interpretation. Moreover, the relevance-theoretic approach to irony certainly does not predict that processing irony will be a ‘simpler task’ than that of understanding non-ironic language. Quite the opposite”. A similar conclusion was reached by Dews and Winner (1999). An essential claim in this article is that rich contextual support (i.e., contextual information which can become manifest in the course of interpreting an ironic utterance) may reduce the supplementary effort until a similar processing demand is reached for explicit and ironic communication.

underlined that hearers have to devote a certain processing effort to this task, which often involves mentally tiring operations such as disambiguation, enrichment, loosening, and reference assignment. For example, the hearer often has to enrich the logical form so that it becomes a truth-evaluable proposition, as in (7a), which the hearer will surely process until a much more relevant proposition such as (7b) is recovered (see Blakemore (1989); Vicente (1998); Carston (1996)):

- (7) a. Ann: “It will take us some time to get there”.
 b. It will take longer to get there than you think.

Secondly, the fact that the proposition expressed is context-bound has often been underestimated. Unlike Grice’s (1975) proposal of *saying/implicating*, in which only the latter has truly contextual connotations (contextual features in the former are restricted to reference assignment and disambiguation), all of the relevance-theoretic terms *proposition expressed*, *explicature* and *implicature* are generated through the mediation of context. Indeed, since Grice (1975) proposed his popular distinction, up to now little attention had been paid to the proposition expressed by utterances, taking for granted that “any meaning not derived by linguistic encoding must be implicated [...] The explanation for cutting things this way lies with the further assumption that the explicature must be truth-evaluable; so Grice and the Griceans are prepared to let in just whatever is necessary in addition to linguistically determined content to bring the representation up to a complete propositional form” (Carston (1988: 160-163); for analysts endorsing this perspective see references therein). Of course, this is far from satisfactory: reaching the proposition expressed by the speaker’s utterance involves several “processes which are just as dependent on context and pragmatic principles as is the derivation of implicatures” (Carston (ibid.: 160)).⁵

5 In Gibbs and Moise (1997) we find the following example:

(1) (a) Robert broke a finger last night.

[*contextual assumptions*: The speaker is a football player in the same team as Robert. The speaker is responding to a question about Robert’s whereabouts, asked by the team coach on the day of a big game].

(b) Robert broke a finger, either his own or someone else’s, on the night prior to uttering (8a).

(c) Robert broke his own finger on the night prior to uttering (8a).

(d) Robert can’t play the game today.

According to the standard Gricean picture, (1b) would be ‘what is literally said’; (1c) would be a ‘generalized conversational implicature’; and (1d) would be a ‘particularized conversational implicature’. For Récanati (1989), (1b) would be a ‘minimal proposition’ not consciously available to people; (1c) would be ‘what is said’ (an *enriched explicature* consciously available to people); and (1d) would be an implicature. Within RT, (1b) would be considered (à la Grice) the proposition strictly and literally expressed by (1a), “the minimal proposition that can be constructed from the semantic representation of the utterance, something which departs as little as possible from encoded content and yet which has a determinate truth-condition” (Carston (1996: 85)). RT is more interested in (1c), the proposition expressed by (1a), a proposition pragmatically constructed out of the concepts encoded in the logical form of the utterance and communicated explicitly as an explicature, or serving as one of the elements needed to derive a context-bound implicature (1d).

In this paper, I underline the idea that the hearer's processing may well reach the "context-bound proposition expressed", make a hypothesis about the possibility of a "propositional form-as-intended" interpretation, and not access the eventually intended ironic interpretation (in other words, not identify the echoic quality of the utterance plus the speaker's dissociative attitude towards the proposition), unless context guarantees a cognitive reward in exchange for the supplementary mental effort required to access further interpretive assumptions. Consequently, if "utterance comprehension consists in the recovery of an enumerable set of assumptions, some explicitly expressed, others implicitly conveyed, but all individually intended by the speaker" (S&W (1986: 195)), then it is perfectly plausible that the speaker intends to communicate only the explicit information provided by the proposition expressed by the utterance, especially if the utterance is an ordinary assertion which communicates its own propositional form.⁶

The possibility that utterances convey only the propositional form as an explicature is particularly important for the study of irony, since hearers may well stop their processing of the utterance at that propositional level, find it consistent with the principle of relevance, and therefore not test other hypotheses such as a potential intended (implicit) irony.⁷ We should not forget that "the deductive device simply uses the most accessible context *first* and only extends it if the effects aren't adequate [...] The mind then can't be said to search for a context which maximizes relevance. Rather it simply churns through a 'given' hierarchy of contexts in order of accessibility until it is satisfied" (Downes (1998: 343-344)). It will be assumed, then, that the hearer will not look for an ironic interpretation unless that implicit interpretation is made accessible (i.e., highly manifest) or the information provided by the proposition expressed makes little or no sense (it is not relevant) in the course of the conversation. It will be assumed, in short, that it is the strength of context, specifically the *contextual support* provided by the incompatibility detected in the information provided by one or several contextual sources, that *triggers* the identification of the speaker's attitude of dissociation towards the utterance and also short-circuits a hypothetically plausible explicit interpretation (see Attardo (forthcoming) and Utsumi (forthcoming) for similar views of the role of context in the interpretation of irony).

The strength of context is, then, responsible for how much attention the hearer pays to the proposition expressed by the utterance before reaching the intended ironic interpretation. In this article it will be assumed that there are two *degrees of attention* that the hearer may hold after accessing the logical form of the utterance. The first degree, involving such preliminary cognitive operations as reference assignment, enrichment, loosening, and disambiguation of the logical form, always takes place in the cognitive

6 Many misunderstandings in communication are a consequence of the hearer's inability to estimate to what extent the speaker wants to communicate the explicit or the implicit information that can be inferred from his/her utterance. In this sense, a number of categories of misunderstandings have been isolated: (i) explicature unidentified; (ii) intended explicature turned implicature; (iii) implicature unidentified; and (iv) intended implicature turned unintended explicature (see Yus (1997b, 1998d, 1998e, 1998f, 1999a, 1999b) for discussion).

7 In Yus (1998f), the speaker's intention to communicate the proposition expressed as an explicature is labelled *direct intention*, whereas the speaker's intention to communicate an implicature is called *indirect intention*. The Spanish counterparts (in Yus (1997b)) are *intención explicativa* and *intención implicativa* respectively.

process of comprehension, regardless of the explicit/implicit quality of the intended interpretation. The second degree, cognitively deeper, refers to the hearer's making a hypothesis that the proposition expressed by the utterance may well be the intended interpretation, and this hypothesis will be formulated unless the implicit interpretation of the utterance has become conventionalized by repeated social use, the proposition expressed makes no sense in the current conversational interaction (typically in metaphors such as 'you are an ace up my sleeve', whose explicit information cannot possibly be communicated), or unless the information supplied by manifest contextual assumptions (rendering the 'proposition-expressed-as-intended' hypothesis irrelevant) invalidates it (for example, leading the hearer to test a much more relevant implicit, i.e. ironic, interpretation).

An example will illustrate this proposal of dual-degree processing. Let us imagine, first, that the utterance (8b) is said in the contextual situation (8a) with the intended implicit interpretation (8c):

- (8)
- a. [*Ann and Tom have owned a cat for four days. Ann has already noticed that whenever the cat is hungry, it goes to the kitchen and sits on its mat as a signal to ask for food. Ann (wrongly) thinks that Tom has also noticed this habit (i.e., that this information is mutually manifest)*].
 - b. Ann: "Tom! the cat is sitting on the mat!"
 - c. Ann wants Tom to feed the cat.

In this example, Tom will decode Mary's logical form and enrich it by providing reference assignment to *cat* and *mat*, identify the declarative mood of the utterance, and infer that Mary believes in (8b), and intends to communicate (8b), thereby reaching the inferential explicature (9):

- (9)
- Mary [intends to make manifest that she] believes that the cat *which we own* is sitting on the mat *which is in the kitchen at time t*.

Not only does Tom make these inferential steps in order to reach the explicature of Mary's utterance. Faced with very weak contextual information, he cannot help hypothesizing that the proposition expressed by (8b) is Mary's intended interpretation (explicature), that is, that Mary wants to inform Tom about the cat's exact location in the house, no matter how implausible this mere 'informing' of the cat's situation may seem to Tom, the context does not provide any alternative (i.e., more accessible) interpretation to test for relevance.

Consider now the utterance (10b), when said in the contextual situation (10a) with the intended implicit interpretation (10c):

- (10)
- a. [*Ann and Tom have owned a cat for eight years and both Ann and Tom noticed long ago that whenever the cat is hungry, it goes to the kitchen and sits on its mat as a signal to ask for food (i.e., this information is highly mutually manifest)*].
 - b. Ann: "Tom! the cat is sitting on the mat!"
 - c. Ann wants Tom to feed the cat.

Again, Tom will have to assign a referent to *cat* and *mat* and identify the mood and attitude that Mary has when uttering (10b). However, (10b) differs from (8b) in that now there is a highly salient contextual assumption (10) which Tom can easily extract from background information and combine with the proposition expressed by (10b) to yield the implicature in (10c):

(11) The cat always sits on the mat whenever it is hungry.

This contextual assumption (11) is highly accessible in situation (10a), since “as a result of some kind of habituation, the more a representation is processed, the more accessible it becomes. Hence, the greater the amount of processing involved in the formation of an assumption, and the more often it is accessed thereafter, the greater its accessibility” (S&W (1986: 77)). It can be predicted, then, that Tom will have no difficulty in accessing the implicit interpretation (10c). But does this mean that he does not process the proposition expressed by (10b) at all and instead goes straight into (10c) with the aid of contextual information (11)? Undoubtedly, some minimal contextualization (reference assignment, disambiguation, enrichment...) of the logical form is always necessary, even for easy-to-access implicatures such as (10c). What Tom does not do in situation (10a), unlike situation (8a), is to devote extra cognitive effort to hypothesize on whether the proposition expressed by (10b) equals Mary’s intended interpretation (in other words, whether (10b) is an explicature). The salience of (11) *triggers* the relevance of the implicit interpretation (10c).

From now on, two types of ‘proposition expressed by the utterance’ will be suggested, which play an important role in how implicit meanings (irony included) are accessed and processed:

a) **BYPASSED ‘PROPOSITION EXPRESSED’**

The proposition expressed by the speaker’s utterance which the hearer, due to the strength of contextual information making an alternative implicit meaning more relevant, does not process as the speaker’s intended interpretation.

b) **ENTERTAINED ‘PROPOSITION EXPRESSED’**

The proposition expressed by the speaker’s utterance which the hearer, faced with an absence of adequate manifest contextual information making an alternative implicit meaning more relevant, processes as the speaker’s intended interpretation.

This dichotomy is important in understanding how the ironic interpretation of an utterance is processed and, despite being new terminology, it is compatible with relevance-theoretic claims on how processing takes place: by communicating messages explicitly (the proposition expressed communicated as an explicature), speakers spare hearers a lot of processing effort. So, when “giving [an indirect utterance, the speaker] must have expected to achieve some additional contextual effects not obtainable from [an explicit message], which would offset the additional effort needed to process [the intended implicit meaning] (...) [T]he surplus of information given in an indirect [utterance] must achieve some relevance in its own right” (S&W (1986: 196-197)).

Consequently, when faced with a typically explicit ordinary assertion (whose main proposition is also its explicature), for example, and given poor or nonexistent invalidating contextual sources triggering the identification of the speaker’s attitude of dissociation toward

the utterance (and its echoic quality) leading to an ironic reading of the utterance, the hearer may think that the message provided by the proposition expressed matches the speaker's intended interpretation (i.e., the speaker intends to communicate it as an explicature). Why would the hearer make effort-demanding interpretive extensions when there is nothing in the context to make him/her think that testing alternative or potential implicit meanings of the utterance will be informationally rewarding? Hence, given poor/nonexistent invalidation from context, the hearer may be led to both reaching the proposition expressed by the utterance (reference assignment, etc.) and also to making the hypothesis that this proposition is the intended interpretation (*entertained 'proposition expressed'*). On the other hand, when the invalidation from context is strong, the hearer will *skip*, as it were, this 'propositional form-as-intended' hypothesis and find it easier to identify the speaker's attitude of dissociation and the echoic quality of the utterance, essential aspects of ironic interpretation (*bypassed 'proposition expressed'*). One of the claims in this article (and also in Yus (1998a, 2000)) is that the supplementary cognitive effort to reach this implicit (ironic) meaning can be reduced by accessing manifest contextual assumptions from multiple sources simultaneously (so that on some occasions the informative support may even result in similar processing effort for literal and ironic interpretations of utterances).

A parallel hypothesis is that the contextualization needed to reach the proposition expressed is always required, while the deeper cognitive effort required to formulate a hypothesis on whether or not the speaker's intended interpretation is an explicature or an implicature will depend on the strength of contextual information (which may be accessible to the hearer from different —sometimes simultaneously activated— contextual sources). This claim is consistent with several psychological experiments which showed that in the interpretation of irony some aspects of the literal meaning must always be processed (Dews and Winner (1995: 16; 1999: 1596)). For example, Winner and Gardner (1993: 426) claim that the interpretation of implicit messages entails not only grasping the speaker's meaning, but also *metalinguistic awareness*: "keeping in mind the literal sentence meaning and hearing the contrast between what is *said* and what is *meant*". In Dews and Winner (1999) it is suggested that "some aspects of the literal meaning must be processed, and these aspects color the hearer's interpretation. While a strictly compositional analysis of words in an utterance may not lead a hearer directly to an interpretation, a literal interpretation of those words, combined with the hearer's knowledge of the world (including knowledge of the speaker), is what leads to an interpretation. In other words, the compositional meaning *must* play a part in determining conveyed meaning". However, in cases of *bypassed 'proposition expressed'* the role of the proposition expressed as a hypothetical intended interpretation is minimized under the pressure of context. As Myers Roy (1978, in Barbe (1995: 43)) suggests, "irony, a form of indirectness [...] [appears] in those contexts where direct communication is to some degree inhibited, either socially or psychologically".

Although contextual attributes and the hearer's particular cognitive resources in specific conversational situations cannot be calculated beforehand, in general three *prototypical cases* of irony comprehension may be predicted:

1. A high level of manifest information provided by single or multiple, simultaneously activated (*leading and supportive*) contextual sources, leads to a fast identification of a mismatch between contextual information and the proposition expressed by the

utterance, which foregrounds the speaker's dissociative attitude underlying the ironic interpretation of the utterance without much mental effort. This case typically leads to a *bypassed 'proposition expressed'*. Example (5) above would fit this case.

2. A low level of manifest information provided by single or multiple, simultaneously activated (*leading and supportive*) contextual sources, leads to a slow identification of a mismatch between contextual information and the proposition expressed by the utterance, which in this case does not foreground the speaker's dissociative attitude underlying the ironic interpretation of the utterance in a straightforward way. This case leads to a *bypassed 'proposition expressed'* if eventually the hearer relies on this contextual support, however weak, in order to reach the intended ironic interpretation, or leads to an *entertained 'proposition expressed'* if contextual support does not guarantee a cognitive reward in exchange for the supplementary mental effort required to test an alternative (implicit) interpretation. In either case, the hearer is cognitively aware of an explicit/implicit duality, since the effort required for the hypothesis that the speaker might intend to communicate the proposition expressed as an explicature is not straightforwardly short-circuited by contextual strength.
3. An insufficient level of manifest information provided by single or multiple, simultaneously activated (*leading and supportive*) contextual sources, leads to a nonexistent identification of a mismatch between contextual information and the proposition expressed by the utterance, which should have foregrounded the speaker's dissociative attitude underlying the ironic interpretation of the utterance. This case typically leads to an *entertained 'proposition expressed'* (the proposition expressed by the utterance is the *first and only* information found consistent with the *principle of relevance*). Instead of an optimal interpretation, in this case a misunderstanding of the utterance (intended implicature turned unintended explicature) will take place. The hearer is not aware of the ironic interpretation underlying the speaker's utterance. Example (6) above would fit this case.

In the next section, current theories of irony will be compared to the new terminological proposal in this and previous research (Yus (1998a, 2000)).

5. Criterion, bypassed/entertained 'proposition expressed', and current theories of irony

The model of irony comprehension presented in this article is compatible with most of the claims made by analysts of irony in the last few years. However, it also sheds light on the restrictive scope of some of these theories.⁸ We will analyse them briefly in the next headings.

5.1. Standard pragmatic theory

According to this theory, processing an ironic utterance also involves the prior processing of the literal meaning of the utterance, which is later rejected for a more plausible nonliteral —ironic— interpretation. This idea underlies Grice's (1975) view of irony (see Glucksberg, Gildea and Bookin (1982), and Glucksberg (1995: 55)).

8 For a review of theories of irony, see Barbe (1995) and Torres Sánchez (1999).

The view presented in this article does not predict that such “literal-then-nonliteral-processing” situations may occur, since Grice’s view is too restrictive. It should be stressed that within RT the literal meaning (i.e., the propositional form) of the utterance is not rejected and replaced by a nonliteral interpretation, but remains, either as an intermediate stage between the logical form and the (highly accessible) ironic interpretation (*bypassed ‘proposition expressed’*) or actually as a hypothesis for the intended interpretation, that is, for the proposition communicated as an explicature (*entertained ‘proposition expressed’*). The view presented here is, perhaps, closer to Bredin’s (1997: 13-14), when he states that “irony [is] produced by a process in which they [explicit/implicit meanings] *interact* with one another. It is in grasping this interaction that the listener comes to understand the speaker’s intended meaning in its totality”. The situation which would at least resemble Grice’s view is case 2 above, in which lack of contextual support raises doubts about the speaker’s intended interpretation. However, in this case, even if the hearer may be aware of an explicit/implicit duality, the proposition expressed by the utterance will not be rejected and replaced with an implicit interpretation, but retained as an essential means to reach that interpretation.

5.2. Direct transfer theory

Followers of this theory⁹ (among others, Gibbs (1979, 1983, 1986a, 1986b, 1994); Inhoff, Lima and Carroll (1984); Gibbs and O’Brien (1991); Gibbs and Gerrig (1989); Gildea and Glucksberg (1983)) claim that processing the literal meaning of an utterance is no precondition to reaching the intended irony. Rather, irony is processed directly so that there is no substantial difference in how people process (and how long they take to process) explicit and implicit interpretations (Gibbs and O’Brien (1991: 524-525); Gibbs (1986a: 4); Barbe (1995: 52)).

The *criterion of optimal accessibility* (Yus (1998a, 2000)) predicts conversations in which, due to the richness and variety of incompatibilities between the proposition expressed by the utterance and the information provided by contextual sources, a *bypassed ‘proposition expressed’* will occur and irony will be accessed very easily (case 1 above). Therefore, the hearer will not be forced into devoting any extra cognitive effort to a two-stage processing of a literal/nonliteral interpretation. In these situations, the interpretation of irony need not take longer¹⁰ to process than an ordinary assertion communicating information explicitly. However, the criterion also predicts that, under certain circumstances, an awareness of a literal/ironic duality (case 2) or even an incomplete interpretation of irony (case 3) may in

9 Also called *processing equivalence hypothesis* (Giora, Fein and Schwartz (1998: 84)) and *direct access view* (Giora and Fein (1999a)).

10 One of the experiments by Gibbs is to provide a text with two alternative comments: Harry was building an addition to his house. He was working real hard... His younger brother was supposed to help, but he never showed up. At the end of the day Harry’s brother did turn up, and Harry said to him: “You are a big help” (sarcastic) / “You are not helping me” (non-sarcastic). The processing results indicate that readers did not take longer to process the sarcastic remark than the literal one. However, as Giora (1995: 250) comments, the sarcastic remark is highly appropriate in the specific situation, whereas the nonliteral is simply redundant. Giora concludes that even if Gibbs proves that processing irony may indeed require the same effort as processing literal utterances, he cannot account for the fact that irony is *sometimes even easier to understand*.

fact occur due to little or no contextual support, a possibility which the adherents of this theory do not seem to account for. The *criterion* plus the newly introduced terminology for the proposition expressed (*bypassed/entertained*) accounts for more interpretive degrees in the explicit/implicit interface than these analysts contemplate.

5.3. Echoic mention theory

This is the theory proposed by S&W (1986, 1995); W&S (1992)), in which they claim that irony necessarily “involves the expression of an attitude of disapproval [...] The speaker echoes a thought she attributes to someone else, while dissociating herself from it” (W&S (1992: 60)). Besides the speaker’s attitude, the notion of *echo* has acquired an increasing importance in this theory while, at the same time, becoming increasingly broad. It now “goes beyond what would generally be understood by the ordinary-language word ‘echo’. It covers not only cases of direct and immediate echoes [...] but also echoes of (real or imaginary) attributed thoughts [...] and echoes of norms or standard expectations” (S&W, 1998: 284).¹¹

The theory—which this and previous studies (Yus (1998a, 2000)) complement—has been criticised or commented upon by a number of analysts (see, among others, Martin (1992); Barbe (1995: 45-48); Giora (1995); Seto (1998)), not so much for the requirement of the speaker’s attitude of disapproval, as for the loose concept of *echo*. Actually, the *criterion* plus the newly introduced terminology—*bypassed/entertained proposition*—predicts the hearer’s identification of incompatibilities in the activation of different domain-specific contextual sources. These incompatibilities foreground the existence of an attitude of dissociation and are also related to S&W’s *echo*:

1. Actual utterances may be repeated (S&W’s *mention*) for the sake of irony. The utterance, which fitted in the previous context, is now repeated in a new incompatible context, which activates the contextual source of “previous utterances” (source F).¹² An example is quoted in (12c), echoing (12a) in a (now incompatible) situation (12b) (Hamamoto (1998: 258), slightly modified):

- (12) a. Ann: “It’s a lovely day for a picnic!”.
 b. [They go for a picnic and it rains].
 c. Ann: “It’s a lovely day for a picnic, indeed!”.

2. Echoes of the speaker’s attitude can be traced using the activation of such contextual sources as “the hearer’s background knowledge of the speaker’s biographical data” (source D) (including his/her opinions, tastes, and interests) and “mutual knowledge” (source E). For instance, in situation (13a) the attitude of dissociation is made manifest only if the hearer knows that Ann dislikes overcrowded bars and prefers a quiet atmosphere:

11 Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989) also have an *echoic reminder theory* of irony which “highlights the role of expectations and how people remind each other of such expectations” (Kreuz and Roberts (1995: 23)).

12 This may imply that the activation of irony based on the actual repetition of an utterance cannot occur on its own, but needs a contextual readjustment (i.e., the aid of the activation of other *contextual sources*), so that the utterance no longer fits in and the speaker’s attitude of dissociation is foregrounded.

- (13) a. [Ann and Tom enter a bar. It is crowded with people dancing, shouting and queuing to order drinks].
b. Ann: "There's nothing like a lively bar!".

3. Echoes of norms and standard expectations can be identified by finding an incompatibility in the activation of the contextual source of "encyclopaedic, factual information" (source A), especially the sub-group of commonsense assumptions. For example, the utterance (14c) in situation (14a) (from Barbe (1995: 25)) is ironic because it violates default expectations about what a person is supposed to say about a blind date (his personality, his appearance...). Also, by focusing on an irrelevant aspect of the date's look, Ann stresses how unsatisfactory the date was:

- (14) a. [Tom has arranged a date for his friend Ann. After the meeting, Ann phones Tom to tell him how the date was].
b. Tom: "How was your blind date?"
c. Ann: "He had nice shoes".

5.4. Graded salience hypothesis

This hypothesis was proposed by Giora et al. (Giora (1995, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1999); Giora and Fein (1999a, 1999b); Giora, Fein and Schwartz (1998)). As summarized in Giora (1998b: 85) the theory assumes that

salient (i.e., coded) meanings of words or expressions (whose degree of salience¹³ is affected by e.g., frequency, familiarity, conventionality) and salient (e.g., frequent) structures should always be accessed and always first, regardless of contextual bias or speaker's intent. According to the graded salience hypothesis, direct process should apply when salient information is intended, i.e., when salient information is compatible with contextual information. A sequential process should be induced when less salient meanings are intended (e.g., the literal meaning of conventional idioms). On such occasions, salient meanings would not be bypassed. Rather, they would be activated first, rejected as the intended meaning and reinterpreted in consistency with the principle of relevance.¹⁴

This quote shows how close the terminology in this paper and the *graded salience hypothesis* are. According to the new terminology (*bypassed/entertained*) there are also aspects of literal meaning (rewritten now as the proposition expressed by the utterance)

13 "A word's salient meanings are those coded in the mental lexicon. Their degree of salience may be affected by e.g., conventionality, familiarity, frequency, or prototypicality. According to the graded salience hypothesis (Giora (1997)), salient meanings should always be accessed and always first, regardless of contextual information. The graded salience hypothesis, thus, predicts that less salient ironies (which depend on context for their interpretation) would be processed literally initially" (Giora (1998a)).

14 This theory adds, in fact, to Giora's previous theory of "irony as negation". In Giora (1995: 240-241) she claims that "irony does not cancel the indirectly negated message [...] Nor does it necessarily implicate its opposite [...] Rather, it entertains both the explicit and implicated messages so that the dissimilarity between them may be computed". Her claim is close to Bredin's (1997) and is certainly close to the hypothesis posited by the criterion.

which are always processed, no matter what literal/nonliteral interpretation is intended. It also predicts duality of literal/nonliteral awareness when the contextual support (in terms of incompatibility with the information from one or multiple activated sources) is very poor (“not biasing”, to use Giora’s own term). The *graded salience hypothesis* also contemplates the possibility of direct access to irony: “[it] predicts that less familiar, non-salient ironies should be processed literally initially. However, salient, familiar ironies such as *wise guy*, *big deal* (whose ironic meaning is coded) should be accessed directly” (ibid., 89). In other words, “when salience and context mismatch (salience and contextual information don’t fit) this triggers inferencing (ironic interpretation). This means that when the literal meaning of nonconventional ironies does not match contextual information, this triggers ironic interpretation. Or when the salient (conventional i.e., ironic) meaning of conventional ironies does not match a literally biasing context, this would involve sequentiality (whereupon the ironic meaning should be rejected as the intended meaning and the literal meaning would be derived)” (Giora, personal communication).

In my opinion, it is clear, given Giora’s picture of irony processing, how the *criterion* (Yus (1998a, 2000)) and *bypassed/entertained propositions* may be used to predict when salient/non-salient meanings of utterances are processed or rejected, by resorting to one single formula based on the determining influence of one or several irony-relevant contextual sources. Besides, the criterion provides a fine-grained analysis of the extent to which the proposition expressed is found relevant and fitting to the speaker’s intended interpretation, beyond the general assumption that this proposition always has to be processed.

5.5. Pretense theory

This theory was proposed by Clark and Gerrig (1984). As its name indicates, in this case it is suggested that irony involves the speaker’s pretense rather than echoic mention, and the theory also exploits Clark’s (1996) analysis of communicative layers. Irony necessarily involves two of these layers: one real and one implied. For instance, in situation (15a), Peter’s statement (15b) is ironic because there is a contrast between *layer 1*, where real life is taking place, and *layer 2*, a fictional world implied by Peter’s words:

- (15) a. [Someone pushes Peter aside when entering a room].
 b. Peter: “I love people who push me aside and don’t apologize!”.
 Layer 1: Peter pretends that the event in layer 2 is taking place.
 Layer 2: Implied Peter says that he loves people who push him aside and don’t apologize.

From this perspective, a person uttering an ironic utterance such as *what lovely weather!* in the pouring rain would be pretending to be someone else, an unseeing person, perhaps, and even pretending to be talking to some person other than the listener. According to Gibbs (1994: 386), “when listeners recognize this pretense, they should understand that the speaker is expressing a derogatory attitude toward the idea expressed, the imaginary speaker, and the imaginary listener”.

Mariscal Chicano (1994: 339) finds limitations in this theory. For instance, it posits even more restrictive criteria of identification than S&W’s *echoic mention theory*, since

the hearer has to recognize who or what kind of person the ironic speaker is pretending to be and who he or she is pretending to address.

Intuitively, the *criterion* would also account for the assumed activation of pretense which underlies this theory. Basically, some incompatibility with the information provided by the contextual sources D (background knowledge of speaker's biographical data) and occasionally A (factual and commonsense assumptions) should be detected. Contextual source E (mutual knowledge) is also essential for this theory: "a listener's understanding of an ironic utterance depends crucially on the common ground he or she believes is shared by the ironist and the audience—their mutual beliefs, mutual knowledge, and mutual assumptions" (Clark and Gerrig (1984: 124)). The quantity and quality of these contextual activations will determine the *bypassed* or *entertained* attribute of the proposition expressed. In any case, it is doubtful that the notion of pretense can cover all the multiplicity of ironic situations that can be found in ordinary conversations (see Barbe (1995: 48)).

5.6. Allusional pretense theory

This theory, proposed by Kumon-Nakamura (1993) and Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995), seems to be a combination of S&W's *echoic mention theory* and Clark and Gerrig's *pretense theory*. According to Glucksberg (1995: 53), pragmatic insincerity is necessary for irony, but not sufficient: an allusion to some norm, expectation or convention also has to be made, since "a necessary property of discourse irony is an allusion to some prediction, expectation, preference, or norm that has been violated. Thus, the allusional function of irony is not simply a type of topical reference or cohesion, but refers specifically to a discrepancy between what is expected (what should be) and what actually is".

In short, two major claims underlie this theory (Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995: 5)): (a) "Ironic utterances are allusive since they call the listener's attention to some expectation that has been violated"; and (b) "pragmatic insincerity is a criterial feature of ironic utterances". For example, in situation (16a), Ann's utterance (16b) is ironic because it alludes to a social norm: drivers should always signal when turning (in Glucksberg (ibid.: 54)). Besides, there is a touch of insincerity, easy to work out, in Ann's fake praise to the driver:

- (16) a. [Ann is driving. Suddenly the driver in front turns left abruptly without signalling].
 b. Ann: "I just love people who signal when turning!"

The two conditions (allusion and insincerity) are necessary to perceive irony. By definition, the broad mechanism of allusion replaces S&W's narrower proposal of echoic interpretation: "The act of echoing, be it via mention or interpretation, is necessarily an act of allusion. By alluding to someone else's explicit or implicit thoughts, beliefs, or actions, a speaker can call a listener's attention to those thoughts, beliefs or actions" (Kumon-Nakamura et al. (ibid.: 18)).

The *criterion* would explain (16) as an example of incompatibility between the information provided by the proposition expressed by (16b), which may in fact be a true opinion of Ann's, and the information provided by the *leading* contextual source B (physical

environment), that is, a driver not signalling. The incompatibility with other *supportive* contextual sources such as Ann's possible ironic tone of voice (source C), and maybe also the hearer's knowledge of Ann's opinion about what it takes to be a good driver (source D) would surely make the intended irony much easier to access and process, and would lead to the so-called *bypassed 'proposition expressed'*.

6. Concluding remarks

In this article the *criterion of optimal accessibility to irony* (Yus (1998a; 2000)) has been complemented with new *ad hoc* terminology to account for the different possibilities in the processing of ironic interpretations that can arise in ordinary conversations. The article relies on the hypothesis that the identification of irony (and the cognitive effort required for its processing) depends on the hearer's detection of incompatibilities between the proposition expressed by the speaker's utterance and the information provided by one or several *contextual sources* (one of them highly salient, called *leading contextual source*, enough by itself to trigger a search for the irony-related attitude of dissociation and echoic quality of the utterance, plus one or several *supportive contextual sources*) which may be activated simultaneously during the interpretation of the utterance. Different degrees of contextual activation lead to different degrees in the processing of the proposition expressed (which were labelled *bypassed* and *entertained*), as part of the general, relevance-seeking mental process involved in the interpretation of ironic utterances.

References

- ALBA JUEZ, L. (1998), "On the conventionalization of verbal irony in English: A corpus-based study", in Vázquez Orta, L. and I. Guillén Galve (eds.), *Perspectivas pragmáticas en lingüística aplicada*, Zaragoza, Anúbar, 11-18.
- ATTARDO, S. (forthcoming), "Irony as relevant inappropriateness", *Journal of Pragmatics*.
- BARBE, K. (1995), *Irony in context*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins.
- BLAKEMORE, D. (1989), "Linguistic form and pragmatic interpretation: The explicit and the implicit", in Hickey, L. (ed.), *The pragmatics of style*, London, Routledge, 29-51.
- BLAKEMORE, D. (1992), *Understanding utterances*, Oxford, Blackwell.
- BREDIN, H. (1997), "The semantic structure of verbal irony", *Journal of Literary Semantics* XXVI(1), 1-20.
- CARSTON, R. (1988), "Implicature, explicature, and truth-theoretic semantics". in Kempson, R.M. (ed.), *Mental representations. The interface between language and reality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 155-181.
- CARSTON, R. (1996), "Enrichment and loosening: Complementary processes in deriving the proposition expressed", *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics* 8, 61-88.
- CARSTON, R. (1998), "Postscript", in Kasher, A. (ed.), *Pragmatics. Critical Concepts*, vol. 4, London, Routledge, 464-477.
- CLARK, H. (1996), *Using language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- CLARK, H. and R. GERRIG (1984), "On the pretense theory of irony", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 113, 121-126.
- CLARK, H. and C.R. MARSHALL (1981), "Definite reference and mutual knowledge", in Joshi, A.K., B. Webber, and I.A. Sag (eds.), *Elements of discourse understanding*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 10-63.
- CURCÓ, C. (1997), *The pragmatics of humorous interpretations: A relevance theoretic approach*, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University College, London.
- DEWS, S. and E. WINNER (1995), "Muting the meaning: A social function of irony", *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 10(1), 3-19.
- DEWS, S. and E. WINNER (1999), "Obligatory processing of literal and nonliteral meanings in verbal irony", *Journal of Pragmatics* 31, 1579-1599.
- DOWNES, W. (1998), *Language and society* (2nd edition), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- GIBBS, R.W. (1979), "Contextual effects in understanding indirect requests", *Discourse Processes* 2, 1-10.
- GIBBS, R.W. (1983), "Do people always process the literal meanings of indirect requests?", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 9, 524-533.
- GIBBS, R.W. (1986a), "Comprehension and memory for nonliteral utterances: The problem of sarcastic indirect requests", *Acta Psychologica* 62, 41-57.
- GIBBS, R.W. (1986b), "On the psycholinguistics of sarcasm", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 115, 3-15.

- GIBBS, R.W. (1994), *The poetics of mind*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- GIBBS, R.W. and R.J. GERRIG (1989), "How context makes metaphor comprehension seem 'special'", *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 4, 145-158.
- GIBBS, R.W. and J.F. MOISE (1997), "Pragmatics in understanding what is said", *Cognition* 62, 51-74.
- GIBBS, R.W. and J. O'BRIEN (1991), "Psychological aspects of irony understanding", *Journal of Pragmatics* 16(6), 523-530.
- GILDEA, P. and S. GLUCKSBERG (1983), "On understanding metaphor: The role of context", *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 22, 577-590.
- GIORA, R. (1995), "On irony and negation", *Discourse Processes* 19, 239-264.
- GIORA, R. (1997), "Understanding figurative and literal language: The graded salience hypothesis", *Cognitive Linguistics* 8(3), 183-206.
- GIORA, R. (1998a), "Irony", in Verschueren, J. et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Pragmatics 1998*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins.
- GIORA, R. (1998b), "When is relevance? On the role of salience in utterance interpretation", *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 11, 85-94.
- GIORA, R. (1999), "On the priority of salient meanings: Studies of literal and figurative language", *Journal of Pragmatics* 31, 919-929.
- GIORA, R. and O. FEIN (1999a), "Irony: context and salience", *Metaphor & Symbol*, 14(4), 241-257.
- GIORA, R. and O. FEIN (1999b), "On understanding familiar and less familiar figurative language", *Journal of Pragmatics* 31, 1601-1618.
- GIORA, R., O. FEIN and T. SCHWARTZ (1998), "Irony: Graded salience and indirect negation", *Metaphor and Symbol* 13(2), 83-100.
- GLUCKSBERG, S. (1995), "Commentary on nonliteral language: Processing and use", *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 10(1), 47-57.
- GLUCKSBERG, S., P. GILDEA and H.B. BOOKIN (1982), "On understanding nonliteral speech: Can people ignore metaphors?", *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 21, 85-98.
- GRICE, H.P. (1975), "Logic and conversation", in Cole, P. and J. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and semantics, Vol. 3*, London, Academic Press, 41-58.
- HAMAMOTO, H. (1998), "Irony from a cognitive perspective", in Carston, R. and S. Uchida (eds.), *Relevance theory. Applications and implications*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 257-270.
- INHOFF, A.W., S.D. LIMA and P.J. CARROLL (1984), "Contextual effects on metaphor comprehension in reading", *Memory and Cognition* 12, 558-567.
- JORGENSEN, J., G.A. MILLER and D. SPERBER (1984), "Test of the mention theory of irony", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 113(1), 112-120.
- KREUZ, R.J. and S. GLUCKSBERG (1989), "How to be sarcastic: The echoic reminder theory of verbal irony", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 118, 374-386.
- KREUZ, R.J. and R.M. ROBERTS (1995), "Two cues for verbal irony: Hyperbole and the ironic tone of voice", *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 10(1), 21-31.

- KREUZ, R.J., M.A. KASSLER, L. COPPENRATH, and B. McLAIN ALLEN (1999), "Tag questions and common ground effects in the perception of verbal irony", *Journal of Pragmatics* 31, 1685-1700.
- KUMON-NAKAMURA, S. (1993), *What makes an utterance ironic: The allusional pretense theory of verbal irony* (Ph.D. Thesis), Princeton University.
- KUMON-NAKAMURA, S. (1995), "How about another piece of pie: The allusional pretense theory of discourse irony", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 124(1), 3-21.
- MARISCAL CHICANO, J.M. (1994), "¿Quién finge la ironía pertinente?" *Pragmalingüística* 2, 319-356.
- MARTIN, J. (1992), "Irony and universe of belief", *Lingua* 87, 77-90.
- PENADÉS MARTÍNEZ, I. (1999), "Para un tratamiento lexicográfico de las expresiones fijas irónicas desde la pragmática", *Pragmalingüística* 7, 183-210.
- RÉCANATI, F. (1989), "The pragmatics of what is said", *Mind and Language* 4, 295-329.
- SETO, K.-I. (1998), "On non-echoic irony", in Carston, R. and S. Uchida (eds.), *Relevance theory. Applications and implications*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 239-256
- SPERBER, D. and D. WILSON (1981), "Irony and the use-mention distinction", in Davis, S. (ed.), *Pragmatics: A reader*, 1991, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 550-563.
- SPERBER, D. and D. WILSON (1986), *Relevance. Communication and cognition*, Oxford, Blackwell.
- SPERBER, D. and D. WILSON (1987) "Précis of *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*", *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 10, 697-754.
- SPERBER, D. and D. WILSON (1995), *Relevance. Communication and cognition* (2nd edition), Oxford, Blackwell.
- SPERBER, D. and D. WILSON (1998), "Irony and relevance: A reply to Seto, Hamamoto and Yamanashi", in Carston, R. and S. Uchida (eds.), *Relevance theory. Applications and implications*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 283-294.
- TORRES SÁNCHEZ, M.A. (1999), *Aproximación pragmática a la ironía verbal*, Cádiz, University of Cádiz, Servicio de Publicaciones.
- UTSUMI, A. (forthcoming), "Verbal irony as implicit display of ironic environment: Distinguishing ironic utterances from nonirony", *Journal of Pragmatics*.
- VICENTE, B. (1998), "Against blurring the explicit/implicit distinction", *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 11, 241-258.
- WILSON, D. and D. SPERBER (1992), "On verbal irony", *Lingua* 87, 53-76.
- WINNER, E. and H. GARDNER (1993), "Metaphor and irony: Two levels of understanding", in Ortony, A. (ed.), *Metaphor and thought* (2nd edition), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 425-443.
- YUS, F. (1997a), *Cooperación y relevancia. Dos aproximaciones pragmáticas a la interpretación*, Alicante, University of Alicante, Servicio de Publicaciones.
- YUS, F. (1997b), *La interpretación y la imagen de masas*, Alicante, Diputación de Alicante, Instituto de Cultura Juan Gil-Albert.
- YUS, F. (1998a), "Irony, Context accessibility and processing effort", *Pragmalingüística* 5-6, 391-411.

- YUS, F. (1998b), "A decade of relevance theory", *Journal of Pragmatics* 30, 305-345.
- YUS, F. (1998c), "Relevance: A thematic bibliographical list", *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 11, 261-285.
- YUS, F. (1998d), Pragmática del malentendido, in Vázquez Orta, I. and I. Guillén Galve (eds.), *Perspectivas pragmáticas en lingüística aplicada*, Zaragoza, Anúbar, 105-111.
- YUS, F. (1998e), "The *what-do-you-mean syndrome*. A taxonomy of misunderstandings in Harold Pinter's plays", *Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense* 6, 81-100.
- YUS, F. (1998f), "Relevance theory and media discourse: A verbal-visual model of communication", *Poetics* 25, 293-309.
- YUS, F. (1999a), "Towards a pragmatic taxonomy of misunderstandings", *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 38, 217-239.
- YUS, F. (1999b), "Misunderstandings and explicit/implicit communication", *Pragmatics* 9(4), in press.
- YUS, F. (2000), "On reaching the intended ironic interpretation", *International Journal of Communication* 10, in press.