Contextual sources, mutually manifest assumptions and epistemic vigilance in ironic communication

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ECHO

The notion of “echo” has broadened conveniently from the initial use-mention distinction to cover all cases in which irony is conveyed.

“The thought being echoed may not have been expressed in an utterance; it may not be attributable to any specific person, but merely to a type of person, or people in general; it may be merely a cultural aspiration or norm” (Wilson & Sperber, 1992: 60).

(Handout, p. 1, note 1)

DISSOCIATIVE ATTITUDE

“The attitude expressed by an ironical utterance is invariably of the rejecting or disapproving kind. The speaker dissociates herself from the opinion echoed and indicates that she does not hold it herself” (Sperber & Wilson 1986/95: 239).

(Handout, p. 1, note 2)
METAREPRESENTATIONS AND THE INTERPRETATION OF IRONY

Three types of metarepresentation (Wilson, 2009):

1. **Mindreading ability** (or **metapsychological ability**) to represent and think about one’s own thoughts and those of others.

2. **Pragmatic ability** (or **metacommunicative ability**) to represent and think about utterances and other overt communicative acts.

3. **Argumentative ability** (or **metalogical ability**) contributing to a more general capacity for epistemic vigilance: the capacity to defend oneself against mistakes or deliberate deception by communicators.

(Handout, p. 1)
Proposal (a)

These abilities are also activated as parallel adjustment of 2 (pragmatic) and 3 (argumentative) within the general framework of 1 (mindreading) while interpreting utterances.

(Handout, p. 1)
Stage 1
(stages are rather an activity of mutual parallel adjustment)

IRONY COMPREHENSION

The speaker produces a verbal stimulus with an ostensive quality

Ostensive stimulus triggers activation of mindreading (*metapsychological ability*)

(Handout, p. 1)
(general irony comprehension chart on p. 8)
Stage 2

Pragmatic (or metacommunicative) ability engages in mutual parallel adjustment

Stretch-by-stretch mutual parallel adjustment of:

(1) identification of a grammatical sequence (semantic representation, \textit{logical form}).
(2) pragmatic enrichment into an explicit interpretation (\textit{explicature}).
(3) construction and derivation of implicated premises and implicated conclusions (\textit{implicature}).
(4) accessibility to as much \textit{contextual information} as necessary to obtain (2) and (3).

(Handout, p. 1-2)
Stage 2

["expl." = explicit / "impl." = implicated / "con." = context]
Stage 3 (while engaged in Stage 2)

During mutual parallel adjustment some information from context is found incompatible with the proposition being enriched.

Information from context is mainly obtained from a number of "contextual sources" (Yus, 2000, 2009, 2012b):

[A] General **encyclopaedic information** + commonsense assumptions
[B] Specific **knowledge of the speaker**
[C] **Recent events or actions** triggering ironical remark
[D] **Previous utterances** re-used later
[E] Speaker’s **nonverbal communication** (vocal / visual)
[F] **Lexical or grammatical** choices
[G] Information from **physical surrounding**

(Handout, p. 2)
Stage 3 (while engaged in Stage 2)

Access to these sources can take place either in isolation (one single source, called *leading contextual source*) or with the aid of other contextual sources (*leading contextual source* plus *supportive contextual sources*)

(Handout, p. 2-3)
successive access

(simultaneous access

(Handout, p. 2 and 8)
Stage 3 (while engaged in Stage 2)

Multiple access to these sources does not necessarily entail higher processing cost (handout, p. 3)
PROPOSALS

Proposal (b)

The argumentative ability (hard-wired for epistemic vigilance) will be activated by contextual inappropriateness, which leads to a specific attitude-tracking inferential activity in the hearer while the utterance is being inferred.

(Handout, p. 4)
mindreading ability

Irony-triggering contextual source

argumentative ability

Initial stretch of utterance

logical form of initial stretch

expl., con., impl.

Next stretch of utterance

logical form of next stretch

expl., con., impl.

Next stretch of utterance

logical form of next stretch

expl., con., impl.

(...)

pragmatic ability
Stage 4 (triggered by Stage 3)

- The speaker’s dissociative attitude is spotted
- The source of the echo is identified
- The ironic interpretation is obtained

(Handout, p. 4)
Question: Are these all that is needed for an appropriate account of how ironies are identified and their interpretations obtained?

If utterances end up with different interpretations even with the same attitude and source of echo (as utterly critical, mildly critical, praising, humorous...), there has to be another inferential procedure involved in the processing of ironies.

(Handout, p. 4)
My proposal

To incorporate the identification of a second-order, feeling- or emotion-related metarepresentation (with the broad label of \textit{affective attitude}) that is added to the main metarepresentation that locates the (propositional) \textit{dissociative attitude}. This affect-related metarepresentation is held towards the source of the echo, thus generating different outcomes of the irony depending on the feelings and emotions held by the speaker while producing the ironical utterance.

(Handout, p. 4)
CONTEXTUAL INAPPROPRIATENESS DURING IRONY COMPREHENSION TRIGGERS

ACTIVATION OF ARGUMENTATIVE ABILITY (EPISTEMIC VIGILANCE)

DISSOCIATIVE ATTITUDE IDENTIFIED SOURCE OF ECHO SPOTTED

AFFECTIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS SOURCE OF ECHO INFERRRED (this is facilitated…)

BY PROVIDING NECESSARY CONTEXTUAL SUPPORT (VOCAL AND VISUAL NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION)

BY CHOOSING AN APPROPRIATE UTTERANCE THAT AIDS IN INFERRING ONE’S AFFECTIVE ATTITUDE CORRECTLY
different ironical utterances

[One day while parking at work your car splashes mud on Mary. You look at Mary and ask why her clothes are such a mess]

You splashed mud on me with your car
[not much about her attitude and emotions]

[laughing] I’m getting ready for a “wet T-shirt” competition
[irony, negative attitude, amusement]

Thanks a lot for giving me a bath
[irony, negative attitude and anger]

I loooove your driving ability!!! Can you do it again?
[irony, negative attitude and much more anger]

(adapted from Gibbs et al., 2002)
same ironical utterance

SAME DISSOCIATIVE ATTITUDE (normative bias)

SAME SOURCE OF ECHO

UTTERLY CRITICAL INTERPR.
MILDLY CRITICAL INTERPR.
PRAISING INTERPR.
HUMOROUS INTERPR.
[John calls Mary on the phone].

Mary: Hi John! How’re things?
John: I am fine! I’ve just thought... Since Mary is always calling me, today for a change I’ll make the call.

Mary: Hahaha. Poor thing... You are right, I should call you more often, but you seem soooo happy to call your friend, don’t you? hahaha.

John: Hehehe... Of course, Mary... A pleasure.
[John calls Mary on the phone].

Mary: Hi John! How’re things?

John: I am fine! I’ve just thought... Since Mary is always calling me, today for a change I’ll make the call.

Mary: I am sorry... I do call you every now and then... Don’t be so angry.

John: Yeah, once a year more or less. I just think I deserve better.
[John calls Mary on the phone].

**Mary:** Hi John! How’re things?

**John:** I am fine! I’ve just thought... Since Mary is always calling me, today for a change I’ll make the call.

**Mary:** Hahaha. Poor thing... You are right, I should call you more often, but you seem sooo happy to call your friend, don’t you? hahaha.

**John:** Actually, I am pissed off with having to call you all the time. You could make the effort to call me, couldn’t you?

**Mary:** I am sorry... Don’t be so angry. I never thought you’d be so upset.
Juan has always complained of those politicians who do not care about their appearance or dress inelegantly since, for him, personal appearance and clothing in politics are crucial to achieving the desired election results.

Juan: Have you seen the candidate from the conservative party? I can’t believe it.

Luis: Yes, I have...They could have chosen a better candidate...

Juan: [Smiling ostensively] At least he dresses very elegantly and looks really tidy.

Luis: Yes, he is not the best dressed politician, and having a pigtail and that three-day beard does not do him any good either. But you shouldn’t be so critical of his appearance. Perhaps it’s not so important nowadays, and it’s his performance as a politician that counts.

(Handout, p. 5-6)
Juan hopes that a political change will take place in the forthcoming elections. He has become fond of the ideas of the left-wing party candidate, who does not look too tidy, has a three-day beard and a pigtail.

Juan: Have you read the left-wing party’s manifesto? I really think these guys could change this country. I like their revolutionary ideas.

Luis: I still haven’t had a chance to look at it, but I do think we need a change in this country. The leader says some sensible things about how to tackle the crisis.

Juan: [Smiling ostensively] Nice pigtail and beard, though [laughs].

Luis: Hahaha... Swallow your principles! You’ll have to accept this guy’s look if you like the ideas of his party.
Research questions

[1] Despite being non-propositional information, do the speaker’s emotions count as part of what is communicated and what is relevant?

Feelings and emotions can indeed affect the outcome of ironical interpretations, so they are worth the hearer’s attention in his/her search for a relevant interpretation of the speaker’s utterance.

(Handout, p. 6-7)
Research questions

[2] Is affective attitude intentional?

Normally, the speaker will want the interlocutor to work out the feelings and emotions associated with a specific ironical utterance. Speakers will be surprised if their utterances are understood as humorous when they are meant to be offensive, or if their interlocutors interpret anger when they only held humorous intentions. However, there is a lot of discussion concerning whether speakers actively mean to communicate their feelings and emotions.
Research questions

[3] At which point during irony comprehension is affective attitude identified?

My proposal is that when contextual inappropriateness activates epistemic vigilance, which triggers the identification of the dissociative attitude and the source of the echo, the hearer also engages in a parallel identification of the speaker’s affective attitude towards the source of the echo.
Research questions

[4] Which contextual sources are at work in the identification of the speaker’s affective attitude attached to the production of an irony?

Mainly knowledge of the speaker and speaker’s nonverbal communication, but also general norms and expectations.

(see my proposal of *narrowed mutual cognitive environment* on p. 3-4 of handout)
[5] How much information about the speaker’s feelings and emotions is worth the hearer’s attention?

Emotion ascription is constrained by relevance. We cannot pay attention to all the emotional information that a speaker can hold and display (especially because we are rather bad at identifying fine-grained emotions and intensities), but hearers do infer broad feelings and emotions inasmuch as they play a part in the quality of the interpretation.
Thanks!