1. Introduction: Relevance-theoretic claims on irony

According to relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995), irony has three main attributes: (a) it is a variety of interpretive use in which the proposition expressed by the utterance represents a belief implicitly attributed by the speaker to someone other than herself at the time of utterance, (b) it is echoic (i.e., it implicitly expresses the speaker’s attitude to the beliefs being represented), and (c) the attitude involved in the echo is one of dissociation from the thoughts echoed (Curcó 2000). The task of the hearer is to determine the (implicated) interpretation that the speaker ironically conveys and which differs, to a greater or lesser extent, from the interpretation that is explicitly communicated by the utterance.¹ This ironic interpretation is spotted at some stage during the relevance-centred inferential steps leading to an interpretation, and context plays a vital role by invalidating the expectation that the speaker might intend an explicit interpretation of the utterance. As I will comment on below, my hypothesis is that contextual information (conceptualised in terms of inferential activation of “sources”) can be accessed at different stages during

¹ Very often, authors claim that irony communicates the opposite of what is literally said. For example, Burgers et al. (2011: 190) define irony as “an utterance with a literal evaluation that is implicitly contrary to its intended evaluation.” However, irony can communicate a whole array of meanings besides the opposite, as long as the speaker’s dissociative attitude is detected correctly. The utterance may even be literally true and still be interpreted as ironic. Imagine the situation in which a man says to his wife “Let’s go to the beach. The weather is going to be fine,” even though she has insisted that the forecast was not good. When they are on the beach it starts pouring down and his wife shouts “Look! It’s raining!” while smiling ostensively. This utterance would be literally true but also interpreted as ironic.
interpretation, either in isolation (a single irony-triggering source activated), or in simultaneity and/or sequence (when several contextual sources are activated).

The remainder of the chapter is organised as follows: Firstly, some comments on the relevance-theoretic notions of “echo” and “dissociative attitude” are provided. Next, the different contextual sources are described and their role in irony comprehension explained. Thirdly, I argue against several theories of irony and for an inferential relevance-theoretic perspective. Finally, developments within relevance theory concerning metarepresentations are described and applied to my contextual source-centred view.

2. Source of the echo and dissociative attitude

Wilson and Sperber (2012: 128-129) define “echo” as “a subtype of attributive use in which the speaker’s primary intention is not to provide information about the content of an attributed thought, but to convey her own attitude or reaction to that thought.” Typical instances of echoic use of language are those that convey the speaker’s attitude or reaction to a thought overtly expressed in an immediately preceding utterance. The attitudes which can be conveyed in an echoic utterance cover cases of acceptance and endorsement of the attributed thought, and also cases of doubt or scepticism, together with rejection.

Concerning irony, the notion of “echo” has broadened conveniently from the initial “use-mention distinction” (Sperber and Wilson 1981) to cover all cases in which irony is conveyed. In irony the speaker echoes a belief or some propositional content represented by an utterance and does not convey an attitude of endorsement, but of dissociation. This echo occurs because the speaker’s attitude towards the proposition expressed by the utterance is not that of “endorsement” but of “dissociation.” As Sperber and Wilson (1995: 239) explain, “the speaker dissociates herself from the opinion echoed and indicates that she does not hold it herself.” And this attitude is said to be held by somebody other than the speaker at the current time. However, very often the speaker expresses a dissociative attitude that the speaker attributes to herself in a

2 “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 and Sperber 1992: 60).

3 A “dissociative attitude to a thought with a similar content that she attributes to some source other than herself at the current time. In other words, the speaker in irony is not expressing her own thoughts, but echoing a thought she attributes to someone else” (Wilson 2009: 197).
different context from the current one. This has also been commented upon by Curcó (2000: 261-262). This attribution means that the speaker dissociates herself from the proposition expressed by the utterance but she wishes context was different so that she could endorse it. This is the case especially of the “canonical type” of irony (a positive expectation is violated), since it feels as if the speaker is echoing a parallel context in which her utterance would be communicated as an explicature with a supportive attitude, not as an ironic implicature with a dissociative attitude. Consider examples (1-3):

(1) A man who is completely burnt is escaping from an FBI agent. The agent manages to grab him from behind as he is running away. Both men fall down on the pavement. The burnt man gets up and feels his chin, where he has received a blow. The burnt man says to the FBI agent: “Do you think that will leave a scar on my face?” (The X Files, season 9, quoted in Yus 2009).
(2) [After a very difficult meeting] Mary: That went well (Wilson 2006: 1730).
(3) [Bill is a neurotically cautious driver who keeps his petrol tank full, never fails to indicate when turning and repeatedly scans the horizon for possible dangers].
   Mary: Don’t forget to use your indicator (Wilson 2006: 1732).

In my opinion, these examples illustrate the situation in which the speaker echoes a parallel context in which he/she would be willing to communicate the information explicitly and not ironically. In (1), the speaker wishes he was in the context of a normal person with a normal face in which a blow could leave a visible scar. In (2) the speaker echoes a parallel context in which the meeting did go well, and wishes that the attitude was that of endorsement and the interpretation was explicitly communicated. Finally, in (3) the speaker echoes a more desirable parallel context in which Bill is a normal driver who is not obsessed and has to be reminded of how to drive, that is, a context in which Mary’s utterance would be communicated as an explicature with a supportive attitude.

### 3. Contextual inappropriateness triggers ironic interpretation

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4 “Nothing in the definition of echoic use (and hence of irony) imposes the requirement that an echoic ironic utterance should represent a belief attributed to another speaker. Echoic utterances are those that achieve relevance by informing the hearer that the speaker is entertaining a certain attributable thought and that the speaker simultaneously holds an attitude to it. Echoic utterances, therefore, include those cases where the speaker attributes a thought or an utterance to herself at a time different from the time of utterance” (p. 262).
During interpretation, some information from context is inconsistent with the explicit interpretation of the utterance, which triggers a search for the underlying ironic attitude. Spotting the attitude as dissociative is essential to differentiate irony from other types of incongruity such as the one found in jokes (Yus 1997, 2003, 2008, 2011, 2012).

Irony entails the activation of explicature-invalidating contextual information. I propose to conceptualise this information in terms of seven possible contextual sources whose information, while the hearer is processing the utterance, plays an important part in interpreting irony correctly (Yus 2000; revised and changed in Yus 2009):

**CONTEXTUAL SOURCE A**
General encyclopaedic knowledge (general information on the world we live in, our culture, collective beliefs, social stereotypes, moral standards, etc.).

Very often, the speaker relies on thoughts which are not the speaker’s but belong to the collectivity, to the culture as “widely entertained or expressed by a certain group of people (or people in general), and which are, as it were, endemic in that group” (Wilson 2009: 203). This source also includes commonsense assumptions such as the one exemplified in (4) below:

(4)  [Tom arrives at work soaking wet. His friend John talks to him].
    John: Hi Tom! You look angry...
    Tom: No no, actually I am very happy... I love to forget my umbrella on a rainy day...

**CONTEXTUAL SOURCE B**
Specific encyclopaedic knowledge on the speaker (likes, dislikes, habits, beliefs, opinions...).

Some research has concluded that irony is more common between friends who know each other, and also more easily inferred when information about friends is readily available (Kotthoff 2003; Eisterholdt et al. 2006; Nuolijärvi and Tiittula 2011: 574; Caucci and Kreuz 2012: 3). As Pexman and Zwaigzne (2004: 146) summarise,

solidary relationship between speaker and addressee should facilitate the process of understanding irony. This is because in a solidary relationship the addressee will be much more likely to infer the speaker’s beliefs or thoughts about various ideas and

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5 “This is what happens in ‘As I reached the bank at closing time, the bank clerk helpfully shut the door in my face’, where the bank clerk’s behaviour (which clearly violates a cultural norm) is ironically described as helpful” (Wilson, 2006: 1735).
utterances, in part because the speaker and addressee may have shared their thoughts about a particular idea or utterance (or some similar idea or utterance) in the past, and this experience helps establish what the speaker and addressee mutually believe.

Kreuz (1996) even proposed a principle of inferability, according to which the more common ground shared between interlocutors, the easier it should be to infer irony (specifically sarcasm) correctly. Notice in (5) how Tom’s knowledge of Ann’s likes makes her irony easy to spot by Tom:

(5) [Tom and Ann are in her birthday party. She has just been given a pair of earrings].
   Ann: [smiling] Look! Aren’t these earrings amazingly beautiful?
   Tom: Oh my God! What are you going to do with them?
   Ann: [disgusted] I’ll give them to my sister!

CONTEXTUAL SOURCE C
Knowledge, still stored in the hearer’s short-term memory, of events or actions which have just taken place or have taken place very recently.

In this case, the hearer is able to make a clear connection between the event or action and the ironic remark that it has generated, as in example (6):

(6) [Tom is walking in the street and a car passes by getting him soaking wet].
   Tom [screaming]: This is fantastic!!!

CONTEXTUAL SOURCE D
Previous utterances in the same conversation or coming from previous conversations; utterances which were said before (or some time in the past).

In general, the previous stretch of a conversation is a preliminary context against which subsequent inferencing is contrasted. This often acts as an effort-relieving cognitive strategy. A frequently cited example is (7) below, in which the information from the initial part of the utterance facilitates the disambiguation of “bat”:

(7) a. Your team is disqualified from the baseball game. Peter’s bat is too grey.
   b. We’ve chosen John’s mouse for the experiment. Peter’s bat is too grey.

The same applies to ironic communication, since the intended interpretation

Note how irony can be used for foregrounding the mutuality of information between interlocutors. The successful outcome of the dialogue between Tom an Ann in (5) reveals the information “Ann doesn’t like earrings” as undoubtedly belonging to their mutual cognitive environment. Jorgensen (1996) also suggested this role of enhancing close relationships by emphasizing the shared information between the participants.
is more easily understood if the thought of the speaker has been expressed in a previous utterance (Wilson, 2009: 197).\footnote{\textit{The most easily recognisable cases of echoic use are those that convey the speaker’s attitude or reaction to a thought overtly expressed in an immediately preceding utterance [...] we would expect to find echoic utterances conveying the speaker’s attitude not only to immediately preceding utterances but to more distant utterances” (Wilson 2009: 202).}} An example is provided below:

(8) [Tom told Ann not to take the umbrella to the restaurant because he was sure it was not going to rain. However, when leaving the restaurant it’s pouring down].
Ann: Don’t take the umbrella. I am sure it’s not going to rain.

**CONTEXTUAL SOURCE E**

Speaker’s nonverbal behaviour, either vocal (tone of voice, intonation...) or visual (gestures such as winks or smiles...).

The speaker’s nonverbal behaviour is often essential to grasp the attitude that underlies the intended ironic interpretation and its eventual interpretation. A smile or wink can easily turn an otherwise purely informative utterance into an ironic remark. An example would be (9) below:

(9) Ross: [To Rachel] Anyway, if you don’t feel like being alone tonight, Joey and Chandler are coming over to help me put together my new furniture.
Chandler: [smiling, with a clear ironic tone of voice] Yes, and we’re veeery excited about it! (\textit{Friends}, Season 1, episode 1).

In Yus (2000, 2009) a distinction was made between the leading contextual source, the one which is essential for a successful ironic interpretation, and supportive contextual sources, whose processing may aid the hearer in this interpretation. It was also claimed that nonverbal communication typically plays a supportive role, with an effort-relieving role in irony comprehension.

However, although it is acknowledged that nonverbal behaviour is used ostensively in ironic communication, there is little agreement on whether there are irony-specific visual/vocal behaviours. For example, Woodland and Voyer (2011: 228) review bibliography on whether there is an irony-specific tone of voice, but conclusions are contradictory. Similarly, Bryant (2011: 294) concludes that no clear pattern of vocal behaviour in ironic communication is found and hence “we should not expect consistent prosodic patterning across such a broad category of language use such as verbal irony.” In my opinion these inconclusive outcomes indicate that, since ironic tone of voice is context-bound and the same intonation may be used for different purposes and convey different meanings depending on context, it necessarily has to play a supportive
role by aiding other sources which also reveal an underlying ironic intention.

More coherent conclusions have been obtained when studying visual nonverbal behaviour during ironic communication. For example, Caucci and Kreuz (2012: 17) found some consistency among facial cues used to indicate sarcastic intent. In their experiments, participants used smiles, laughs, looks to partner, lip tightens, and slow nods more often when speaking sarcastically than when making literal statements.

CONTEXTUAL SOURCE F
Lexical or grammatical choices by the speaker which work as linguistic cues about the speaker’s ironic intention.

There are many studies that propose linguistic cues and lexical choices that often (or even automatically) trigger irony. Superlatives, the use of words such as “genius” or grammatical constructions such as “a fine friend” or “a nice favour” are among the proposals of cues. These tend to become conventionalised and end up being used as fixed expressions of ironic communication, although some of them can also be used in explicit communication (Partington 2011). Notice examples (10-11):

(10) A precious lot you care about my wallflowers.
(11) Fat chance there is of Arsenal winning the Cup.

Sperber and Wilson (1998: 286) argue that the ironical interpretations of (10-11) “have become grammaticalised to such an extent that it is hard to imagine these utterances communicating more regular ‘literal’ meanings. [...] What starts out as a genuine irony becomes associated with an automatic interpretive routine which assigns it a standard, though impoverished, interpretation.” Again, although linguistic cues may play a part in how easily irony is identified, they typically play a role of “supportive contextual source,” relieving mental effort while the hearer is activating a leading contextual source during interpretation.

CONTEXTUAL SOURCE G
Information coming from the physical area which surrounds the interlocutors during the conversation.

A typical example is (12) below:

(12) [During a heavy downpour] Tom: I think it’s going to rain...

How are these contextual sources A-G combined in the comprehension of irony? To start with, it should be stressed that relevance theory pictures comprehension as a mutual parallel adjustment of decoded content, inferred
explicit information, derivation of implicated premises and conclusions (implicatures), and access to contextual information. Each chunk of discourse is decoded-inferred through such adjustment process, which often entails the use of anticipatory inferences (to anticipate the interpretation of the next chunk of text according to the information already processed) and backtracking inferencing (to invalidate the interpretation of a previous bit of text due to the evidence of the information provided by the next stretch of discourse). See Figure 1.  

Insert Figure 1 more or less here.

Text under Figure:
Figure 1. Interpretation as a cumulative adjustment of explicit content (expl.), implicatures (impl.) and context (con.).

During this adjustment, irony can be spotted by activating just one of these seven contextual sources (A-G), the so-called leading contextual source. However, as argued in Yus (2000, 2009), human cognition can activate several (supportive) contextual sources, either in sequence or simultaneously while the hearer is interpreting the utterance. This contextual saturation actually aids in accessing irony in a more efficient, effort-relieving way.  

Relevance theory claims that human cognition searches for the interpretation that provides the highest interest (cognitive effects) in exchange for the least mental effort. However, readers of this chapter may argue that the activation of multiple contextual sources should increase mental effort, thus reducing the eventual relevance. However, my opinion is that human cognition has evolved in such a way that it tends to minimize effort, and this applies to all contextual sources. And the way utterances are inferred (Figure 1) allows hearers to “take on board” information from sources that actually speeds up the access to ironic interpretations. Besides, humans have developed ways to minimise the effort when accessing the different contextual sources A-G:

1. General encyclopaedic knowledge (source A). On paper, human cognition cannot access the whole mental encyclopaedia but, rather, foregrounds

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8 In Figure 1, “expl.” stands for “inference of the explicit content of the utterance,” “con.” stands for “access to contextual information” and “impl.” stands for “derivation of implicated premises and conclusions (implicatures).”
9 A criterion of optimal accessibility to irony was proposed in Yus (2009) to account for this fact: “The processing effort that interpreting an ironic utterance demands decreases in proportion to the increase in the number and quality of incompatibilities (detected by the addressee) between information from contextual sources activated (simultaneously or in sequence) and the explicit information provided by the utterance.”
certain information which is more relevant in the current stage of the conversation. Besides, certain general assumptions about culture and society are accessed more often and strengthened by the media, thus acquiring a higher level of accessibility. Strangers often refer to these likely-to-be-mutual cultural assumptions when attempting to be ironic.

2. *Information about the speaker* (source B). When we come across a friend, not all the information about him/her, which belongs to both interlocutors’ *mutual cognitive environment* is equally accessible. Some assumptions have been accessed frequently in previous conversations, and these assumptions have acquired a certain prominence or salience in their accessibility when the interlocutors start a conversation. Bargh et al. (1996: 105) correctly point out that “frequently used or chronically accessible knowledge exerts a greater influence on judgment than does other relevant but less accessible knowledge [...] chronically accessible mental representations become active upon the presence of relevant environmental information.” Therefore, it would make a difference in terms of effort if, instead of activating contextual information about the speaker “on the fly,” the hearer found inconsistencies with information about the speaker which has already acquired certain accessibility because it is salient and accessed almost unconsciously.

In this sense, I would like to propose the notion of *narrowed mutual cognitive environment*, made up of assumptions which are very salient or prominent, and which are almost unconsciously activated due to repeated interactions with the interlocutor in which this information has been commented upon. This narrowed environment would also include information about the interlocutor’s tendency to be ironic, about how a certain interlocutor expresses ironic intent or her recurrent or frequent ironies, together with individual-specific nonverbal behaviour, all of which also save effort when activating these particular contextual sources. Imagine, for example, that when John comes across Tom in the street, the information in (13a-d), which belongs to their narrowed mutual cognitive environment, is almost unconsciously activated and made prominent from the whole array of John’s background information about

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10. *¡Error! Sólo el documento principal.*“New information cannot be assessed relative to the whole of one’s ‘mental encyclopaedia’. To keep processing time and costs within manageable limits, only a very small subset of that encyclopaedia, closely related to the new piece of information, can be brought to bear on its assessment” (Sperber et al. 2010: 374).

11. People construct different concepts and representations of the world, just as their personal experiences are different. This array of information is the individual’s *cognitive environment*, different from person to person. However, some information belonging to the interlocutors’ cognitive environments overlaps, the so-called *mutual cognitive environment*. In ordinary communication interlocutors make predictions of mutuality.
Tom. In this scenario, Tom’s utterances in (13a-d) would be very easy to interpret against the context of this accessible and automatically retrieved background information about Tom, even though the utterances require reference assignment, among other inferential procedures leading to an enriched contextualised proposition:

(13) a. [He has just got divorced].
   Tom: I still haven’t settled it with her.
b. [He has lost his job after 20 years’ work].
   Tom: I’m looking for another one, but most are worse.
c. [No girl ever talks to him in parties].
   Tom: I finally went there and enjoyed it… on my own.
d. [He is looking for a new car… But he’s got no job].
   Tom: I’m still toying with the idea of buying it.

This narrowed mutual cognitive environment is typically exploited for ironic purposes and the effort to identify the dissociative attitude and the source of echo decreases due to the accessibility to this information which is prominent and unconsciously activated, as happens with Tom’s ironic comments quoted in (14a-d).

(14) a. [He has just got divorced].
   Tom: I am ok, happily married for 30 years.
b. [He has lost his job after 20 years’ work].
   Tom: I am taking a short break in my job, you know.
c. [No girl ever talks to him in parties].
   Tom: I went to the party… All the women went wild.
d. [He is looking for a new car… But he’s got no job].
   Tom: I’m toying with the idea of buying a Porsche.

The individual, then, can be pictured as a sort of “cluster of information,” some of which is highly manifest due to repeated interactions with the interlocutor. Upon starting conversations with friends, the information within the narrowed mutual cognitive environment is very salient, to the extent that it is almost unconsciously made accessible. This can be represented as a process:

12 ¡Error! Sólo el documento principal. This is captured in the so-called Automaticity Model of Priming Effects, according to which perceiving people and situational cues is expected to activate thoughts, emotions, and actions linked to particular concepts and situations, points in the same direction. This associative connection between social perception and the activation of internal representations of the outside world is thought of as an automatic response with no involvement of human volition (Bargh and Chartrand 1999, 2000).
a) Reiterative interactions enlarge the area of the interlocutors’ cognitive environments that is mutual.

b) Certain topics are systematically addressed by interlocutors, certain topics and events are reiteratively commented upon, which makes this information highly accessible and even unconsciously expected and retrieved. As Bargh et al. (2006: 105) stress,

The accessibility of knowledge is a function of how recently it has been used and also of how frequently it has been applied in the past… Frequently used or chronically accessible knowledge exerts a greater influence on judgment than does other relevant but less accessible knowledge […] chronically accessible mental representations become active upon the presence of relevant environmental information, even if intentional thought and attention are directed elsewhere.

c) Certain mutually manifest assumptions become more salient, to the extent that every time that these interlocutors meet, they automatically expect them to be addressed during the conversation. In other words, to the extent that an individual repeatedly has the same type of conversation with a specific interlocutor and repeated topics and information are made manifest. Therefore, subsequent conversations with that interlocutor should lead to certain topics and information to be salient on the mere fact that an interaction with him/her is taking place. Thus, if an individual consistently behaves in the same way in response to a conversation with someone, the repeated topics and information exchanged should become automatically associated with that person, thus acquiring certain prominence.

d) Reiterative information mentioned and commented upon in subsequent interactions lead to a narrowed mutual cognitive environment, made up of highly salient information that is constantly and automatically being strengthened and acquiring higher salience.

e) As interlocutors engage in more interactions, the amount and quality of the information belonging to the narrowed cognitive environment becomes more and more fine-grained, and its information is so easy to retrieve that interlocutors are almost unaware that this information has become salient during the interaction. No doubt, the use of irony produces an effect of enhanced mutuality between interlocutors: “Irony serves as a mark of intimacy between

13 In fact, as Peña (2011: 152) comments on the afore-mentioned Automaticity Model of Priming Effects, “perceiving people and situational cues is expected to activate thoughts, emotions, and actions linked to particular concepts and situations… This associative connection between social perception and the activation of internal representations of the outside world is thought of as an automatic response with no involvement of human volition.”
speakers and listeners, and brings them even closer together” (Gibbs and Colston 2001: 190).

f) This narrowed environment becomes a preliminary context for subsequent interactions (Pexman and Zvaigzne 2004: 159 and 144-145).

3. Recent actions (source C). Normally they entail an effort-saving vivid connection between the event and the utterance, since the event or action is still stored in the hearer’s short-memory store.

4. Previous utterances (source D). The information provided by previous utterances is often still active when ironies focussing on this contextual source are intended.

5. Nonverbal communication (source E). It is typically processed in parallel to the interpretation of verbal stimuli with the role of “supportive contextual source.” Since speakers normally intend the irony to be detected and do not want to be misunderstood, it is not surprising that Caucci and Kreuz (2012: 17) concluded that “participants use smiles, laughs, looks to partner, lip tightens, and slow nods more often when speaking sarcastically than when making literal statements. This could be seen as a way to make the nonliteral meaning of the sarcastic utterance more salient.”

Nonverbal behaviours are often stored as part of the information about the speaker, in terms of typical gestures and intonational contours that are systematically used by the speaker in similar situations, hence acquiring higher accessibility, to the extent that they might even end up unnoticed by the hearer. This is typically the case of hearer-specific head nods while listening.

6. Linguistic cues (source F). Due to grammaticalization or conventionalization, certain lexical choices, syntactic arrangements or stylistic features become typical in ironic utterances, and are retrieved almost automatically and “as a chunk”. This entails a loss in the ironic potential of these linguistic cues, since they are used by default on many ironic instances.

7. Physical surroundings (source G). The filtering ability of human cognition, always geared to the maximisation of the relevance of in-coming inputs to their cognitive system (cognitive principle of relevance) selects from the environment only those stimuli that are worth attending to in the processing of ironies.

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14 ¡Error! Sólo el documento principal.“Solidary relationship is a cue to irony and also a product of irony” [...]. “By commenting on the addressee’s attributes and behavior, the speaker can demonstrate and enhance social closeness with the addressee; the speaker and addressee are enough and know each other well enough to be entitled to make such comments.”
4. Dual-stage processing? Direct-access view? Graded salience hypothesis?

There is a great deal of scholarly debate on several aspects of irony comprehension. Two of them have to do with (a) whether irony comprehension is necessarily more difficult and require more processing time than the interpretation of explicitly communicated information; and (b) the role that the literal (explicit) interpretation of the utterance plays in irony comprehension, whether it is computed and rejected or used as part of the preliminary context upon which an ironic interpretation is constructed. In this sense, several theories have been proposed. Among many others, a classical theory is the dual-stage processing (Grice 1975, also called standard pragmatic model), according to which the literal meaning of the utterance necessarily has to be computed (and later rejected as inappropriate) before the ironic interpretation is accessed. On the contrary, for the direct-access view, “listeners need not automatically analyze the complete literal meanings of linguistic expressions before accessing pragmatic knowledge to figure out what speakers mean to communicate” (Gibbs 2002: 460) and, in fact, on certain occasions, irony can be spotted even faster than it would take to process the explicit content of the utterance. Thirdly, for the graded salience hypothesis,

salient meanings should always be accessed and always first, regardless of contextual bias. The salience hypothesis, thus, 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 (Giora 1998: 89).

In my opinion, both the speed of access to the ironic interpretation and how much attention is paid to the literal meaning of the utterance crucially depend on the quality and quantity of contextual information used during the interpretation of the utterance (contextual sources A-G outlined above). Specifically, both aspects of ironic interpretation are dependent on a number of factors:

1. Which contextual source is activated and how obvious the incongruity is (between the information provided by this contextual source and the explicit context of the utterance being processed). For example, the ironic interpretation in (15) should be easier to detect than in (16), because of the greater accessibility to irony-triggering contextual information in the former than in the latter:

(15) [Tom and Ann have just arrived at their hotel at the seaside. In the street there are lots of people singing, dancing and making a lot of noise].
Ann: I love this holiday filled with peace and a quiet atmosphere!
(16) [Tom and Ann have just seen a remake of a Shakespearean play]

Tom: Today’s performance would make Shakespeare jump with joy in his
grave.
Ann: I also liked it. It’s a very innovative remake.
Tom: Actually, I think it’s awful. I thought you’d pick up the irony…

2. Whether only one source is activated (leading contextual source) or other sources aid with contextual saturation (supportive contextual sources), which are activated either in simultaneity or in sequence. In Yus (2000) the following example is provided:

(17) [Cold, wet, windy English spring in London].

[Smiling, with a distinctively ironic tone of voice] Tom: “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.”

In this example, apart from the identification of Tom’s utterance as a quote by Dr. Johnson, there is a great deal of contextual information invalidating any chance that the speaker intended to communicate the explicit interpretation of the utterance. Clearly, Tom is ironically echoing a more pleasurable situation (sunny day, hot temperature) in which he could have endorsed the explicature of (17). Reaching the irony here is minimally effort-demanding since, apart from the leading contextual source (probably the miserable weather, source G: physical surrounding), the hearer can also draw explication-invalidating information from other supportive contextual sources activated in parallel, such as general encyclopaedic information (source A: nobody could ever like to live in a place like this), information on the speaker (source B: perhaps Tom has been reiteratively complaining about how miserable life in London is), and nonverbal communication (source E: ostensively produced ironic tone of voice and smile).

3. The role of the several contextual sources that are activated in sequence or simultaneously. The human brain is capable of integrating simultaneously incoming information from multiple sources such as the ones outlined in this chapter. This integration of information from multiple contextual sources should lead to a more effective and faster processing of the ironic interpretation, especially if these are activated simultaneously.

4. How accessible the information from the contextual source(s) is.

5. The stage of the processing of the utterance at which the speaker’s dissociative attitude is detected and irony is identified (the stage at which contextual sources play a part in the identification of irony).

If these constraints (1-5) are taken into account, certain prototypical cases of irony can be identified:

A. Fast ironic interpretation when the interpretation of the utterance has
just started. Consider example (18):

(18) [Tom sees that his wife is trying to put a vase on a shelf and offers to help her. When he tries to put the vase there he drops it and it breaks into thousands of pieces]
Wife: [smiling, with a noticeable ironic tone of voice] A NICE FAVOUR you’ve done me!!!

As pointed out in Yus (2009), even before his wife speaks, Tom may well expect a negative comment after breaking the vase. If she typically uses ironic remarks when she is angry, then an ironic remark will be expected. To make this expectation more likely, the beginning of the utterance is marked by a typical linguistic cue (source F), “a nice…,” in a negative scenario and aided by ostensive vocal and visual nonverbal behaviour (source E), which immediately triggers the ironic interpretation even before the remainder of the utterance is decoded and inferred.

B. Ironic interpretation half-way through the explicit interpretation of the utterance. Sometimes, when contextual support does not invalidate an explicit interpretation, the hearer interprets the utterance without identifying any signal of an ironic intention, until at some stage during interpretation -half-way in this case- new evidence makes the hearer abandon an explicit interpretation and favour an ironic one. Consider the example in (19):

(19) I left my bag in the restaurant, and someone \textit{kindly} walked off with it (Wilson 2009: 192).

As Wilson (2009: 204) correctly states, in this example only the word ‘kindly’ is echoically used, referring to general norms of behaviour (whoever finds a lost bag will behave kindly and not take the bag). The speaker dissociates herself from this general encyclopaedic information on human behaviour (contextual source A) and communicates ironically that her expectations of kindness were unrealistic. At the same time, the hearer will start processing the utterance as explicit, since there is no contextual support making this interpretation inappropriate, until the word “kindly” alerts him/her to the intended ironic interpretation.

C. Ironic interpretation at the end of the interpretation of the utterance. On other occasions, the irony-triggering information from some contextual source A-G does not turn up until the very end of the utterance and hence, the explicit interpretation of the utterance is taken on board in the absence of such relevant contextual support. An example would be (20) below:

(20) [John has provoked enormous loss of money to the company he works for. The
boss calls him at his office].
Boss: “John... Obviously, what you’ve done to the company is really FANTASTIC.”

In this example, John obviously expects negative comments from the boss after the loss he has provoked. The boss says “X is fantastic” and echoes a parallel context in which what John has done could really be labelled as fantastic and hence John could be congratulated and not reprimanded, but there is no reason for John to expect that ironic remark. The utterance could well have ended with “horrible,” “devastating” or “a disgrace.” Therefore, John starts processing the utterance at the explicit level and it is not until the very end that he finds the word “fantastic” used echoically.

D. Explicit interpretation and ironic interpretation intended and in parallel. Sometimes the speaker intends the interlocutor to process both the explicit and implicated (ironic) interpretation as intended, that is, two interpretations in parallel. This is not the prototypical case, since in most instances of irony the speaker does not mean to communicate what he/she is literally saying. Gibbs ([1986] 2007: 175) acknowledges that in many cases, speakers actually do mean what they literally say but are still speaking ironically. He provides the example of a driver who says to a passenger “I love people who signal,” when another car has just cut in front without signalling and means this sarcastically even though the statement is literally true. The same applies to example (21), in which the mother supports what she is saying explicitly about children who obey but is ironic at the same time:

(21) [Ann is about to take her children to school. She asked them to put on their jackets but they turn up without them on]
Ann: I love children who obey their mothers.

E. Explicit interpretation first, ironic interpretation at a subsequent stage. There is now general agreement that Grice’s (1975) dual-stage processing view of irony is unrealistic. Hearers do not go through a first stage in which they process it literally, then they realise that the literal interpretation is impossible and then move on to a second stage of ironic interpretation. Instead, they go through a mutual parallel adjustment, as pictured in Figure 1 above. However, there are cases in which contextual support by any of sources A-G is so weak that the hearer cannot derive an ironic interpretation even though it was intended, and when the speaker realises that there has been a misunderstanding, then he/she provides additional contextual information that does lead to the intended ironic interpretation. This situation resembles a dual stage, which the speaker could have prevented by providing more contextual support in the first place. Consider the dialogue in (22):
(22) [Mary is in class, taking notes. A new student -John- turns up and sits down beside her].
John [to Mary]: You know, I think this subject is really fascinating.
[Mary looks at him, wondering whether to believe his words or not. Suddenly John starts smiling ostensively].
Mary: Indeed... And I can hardly sleep waiting for this lesson.

In this dialogue, Mary has almost no contextual support from sources A-G, apart from the general commonsense assumption that it is utterly impossible to like that subject (source A) and there is initially no reason why John could not have meant what he has said explicitly. John is a new student and Mary has no choice but to interpret John’s utterance at the explicit level. Then he provides the necessary contextual support (nonverbal communication, source E) and Mary backtracks and reinterprets John’s utterance ironically as intended initially.

F. Ironic interpretation undetected. It is precisely the lack of contextual support that generates this case in which the intended ironic interpretation ends up undetected and the hearer only interprets the utterance at the explicit level, thus misunderstanding the speaker. An example is provided in (23):

(23) [On elections day, two neighbours come across at the polling station]
Tom: I am sure the popular party will win the elections... They’ll do a good job for Spain.
Mike: I hope so... I really trust these guys.
Tom: You do? I thought you voted socialists... I was being ironic... Well, I really doubt they’ll do such a great job, sorry to disagree.

In this dialogue, Mike has no contextual support that stops him from understanding Tom literally and hence he interprets his utterance at the explicit level without identifying the intended irony. There is no general encyclopaedic information being invalidated (source A), Mike does not know about his neighbour’s political ideas (source B), there are no recent actions involved (source C), or previous utterances being reintroduced (source D), nonverbal behaviour is neutral (source E), the utterance is constructed without linguistic cues (source F) and the physical surrounding plays no part in interpretation (source G). Misunderstanding was inevitable.

5. Metarepresentations and the interpretation of irony

In ordinary interactions, interlocutors devote much effort to identifying the
speakers’ attitude towards what they are saying and metarepresent their intentions. These metarepresentational inferences are universal and, like the human search for relevance, they are biologically rooted in human psychology. Indeed, metarepresentations are essential cognitive operations of humans, according to which, when a person is faced with a mental representation, this person is capable of making a representation of this representation. There are several possible metarepresentations: A thought about another thought, as in (24a); an utterance about a thought, as in (24b); a thought about an utterance, as in (24c); and an utterance about another utterance, as in (24d) (see Wilson 1999):

(24) a. John thinks: Tom wants me to leave.
    b. Mary says: Tom thinks that he is intelligent.
    c. John thinks: Mary says that she ate all the chocolates.
    d. Mary says: John says that it rains a lot in England.

In recent research, Wilson (2009) proposes that we should fine-grain metarepresentations by identifying three types: (1) the mindreading ability or metapsychological ability to represent and think about one’s own thoughts and those of others; (2) the pragmatic ability or metacommunicative ability to represent and think about utterances and other overt communicative acts; and (c) the argumentative ability, which contributes to a more general capacity for epistemic vigilance: the capacity to defend oneself against mistakes or deliberate deception by communicators.

Concerning irony comprehension, Wilson (2009: 219) suggests that irony comprehension has both an epistemic and a mindreading component, since “the speaker expresses a proposition she regards as false (or epistemically unsound), intending to share with the audience, via the expression of a mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude, her opinion of its epistemic status.”

My intuitions about these types of metarepresentations in irony comprehension is that they should also be conceptualised as being activated in a mutual parallel adjustment, just in the same way as decoding of the utterance, explicit content, implicated premises and conclusions (implicatures), and access to context are mutually adjusted during interpretation. Specifically, as pictured in Figure 2, this metarepresentational adjustment would be carried out by the pragmatic ability and the argumentative ability within the general cognitive framework of the mindreading ability. In this sense, Sperber et al. (2010: 360) point out that “the abilities for overt intentional communication and epistemic vigilance must have evolved together, and must also develop together and be put to use together.”

Insert Figure 2 more or less here.
This mindreading ability is the one which, in my opinion, covers all cognitive activity ranging from maximising the relevance of general inputs from the outside world (as covered by the cognitive principle of relevance: Human beings are geared to the maximization of relevance) to the utterance-specific search for relevance (covered by the communicative principle of relevance: Every act of ostensive communication conveys the presumption of its own optimal relevance).

Besides, the argumentative ability (hard-wired for epistemic vigilance) is the one that should be in charge of detecting contextual inconsistencies (by activating any of contextual sources A-G either in isolation or with the aid of other sources activated in simultaneity or sequence) and of triggering an attitude-tracking inferential activity in the hearer while the utterance is being inferred. Sperber et al. (2010: 363) propose that “it could be that any piece of communicative behaviour activates two distinct processes in the addressee: one geared to identifying the relevance of what is communicated on the assumption that it is trustworthy, and the other geared to assessing its trustworthiness.” In this scenario, it is logical to assume that the argumentative ability is the one alerting the hearer to a mismatch between context and utterance meaning while he/she is engaged in the interpretation of the utterance by using the pragmatic ability. All of this can be represented in a number of steps:

1. The communicative principle of relevance triggers the hearer’s mindreading activity. What the speaker is saying conveys a presumption that it is going to be relevant enough to be worth processing, and hence mindreading is automatically activated.

2. The metacommunicative ability, devoted to step-by-step extraction of intended interpretation from decoded content, is activated.

3. The hearer engages in a mutual parallel adjustment in which he/she decodes the content of the utterance and for every chunk of text being processed, he/she engages in a mutual parallel adjustment of explicit content, implicated premises and conclusions (implicatures) and context.

4. During this mutual parallel adjustment some incongruity with the information provided by one or several contextual sources (A-G) arises, which makes the explicit interpretation of the utterance inappropriate.

5. The hearer’s metalogical ability takes over and traces the attitude that underlies this incongruity (epistemic vigilance). In fact, as Mascaro and Sperber (2009) suggest, this mental capacity is particularly useful in evaluating the output of spontaneous comprehension in order to decide whether or not to
believe what one is being told. It is logical to assume that inconsistencies between context and utterance interpretation should alert the hearer to the source and quality of the speaker’s attitude that justifies this incongruity (cf. Padilla Cruz 2012).

6. The speaker’s dissociative attitude is identified. This is essential for distinguishing irony from other types of attitude such as the ones involved in deception, jokes or lies.

7. The source of the echo is identified. As pointed out above, the source of the echo can be broad or specific, but all instances of irony involve an echoic quality of the utterance.

8. The intended ironic interpretation is obtained, which differs to a greater or lesser extent from the explicit interpretation of the utterance.

An illustration of these steps is provided below concerning example (19), mentioned above and repeated again as (25) for convenience:

(25) I left my bag in the restaurant, and someone kindly walked off with it (Wilson 2009: 192).

1. The speaker is about to utter her utterance. The communicative principle of relevance triggers the hearer’s mindreading activity.
2. “I left my bag…” The metacommunicative ability, devoted to step-by-step extraction of intended interpretation from decoded content, is activated. Mutual parallel adjustment of this stretch of discourse.
3. “…in the restaurant…” Mutual parallel adjustment of this stretch.
4. “…and someone kindly walked off with it.” Mutual parallel adjustment of this stretch. Incongruity arises with contextual source A (general encyclopaedic information on general norms of behaviour) and maybe also contextual source E (nonverbal communication, ostensive intonational emphasis on “kindly” and maybe an ostensive non-spontaneous smile).
5. The hearer’s metalogical ability takes over and traces the attitude that underlies this incongruity (epistemic vigilance). The speaker is dissociating herself from the “hope or wish that whoever finds a lost bag will behave kindly, and the idea that we should treat each other kindly is part of a widely shared normative representation of how people ought to behave” (Wilson 2009: 204).15

6. The source of the echo is identified. The speaker is echoing a parallel context in which people are kind and civic and do not take other people’s

15 “The search for a relevant interpretation, which is part and parcel of the comprehension process, automatically involves the making of inferences which may turn up inconsistencies or incoherences relevant to epistemic assessment. When such inconsistencies or incoherences occur, they trigger a procedure wholly dedicated to such assessment” (Sperber et al. 2010: 375).
belongings. By doing that, she communicates ironically that “that her hopes or desires were ridiculously unrealistic, or that the person who found her bag fell laughably short of acceptable standards of behaviour” (Wilson 2009: 204).

6. Conclusion

The contextual source-centred view of irony comprehension provides a picture of what may happen in the hearer’s mind when understanding irony, i.e. the kind of information the hearer might access and how he might exploit it. Therefore, this contextual source-centred model of irony would be an adequate complement to the general framework put forward by relevance theory, based on the identification of the speaker’s dissociative attitude and the source of the echo. This source-centred view provides a framework for explaining why certain ironies are very easy to understand while others demand a lot of effort or even end up undetected due to lack of contextual support. Besides, it can also be accommodated into recent developments of relevance theory in the analysis of irony which integrate three types of metarepresentation in the production and interpretation of ironic instances: mindreading, argumentative and pragmatic.

References


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