1. Historical perspective

Relevance theory (henceforth RT) is a cognitive pragmatics theory of communication by Sperber & Wilson (1986, 1995) that aims to identify “underlying mechanisms, rooted in human psychology, which explain how humans communicate with one another” (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 32). It inherits some of Grice’s ideas, while departing substantially from them (Grice 1975) [see ch. 14: Humor and Pragmatics]. As a cognitive pragmatics theory, it is interested in the inferences that the hearer makes when trying to identify the speaker’s communicative intentions (his/her intended interpretation of the utterance) based on what the speaker has coded verbally (i.e. spoken, written, typed) or nonverbally (e.g. gestures, facial expressions). The theory also addresses the predictions of relevance that speakers make when choosing an utterance or text for transferring their thoughts to other people within interactions. Finally, RT is also interested in the mental representations that underlie communication and in the mental processes that are at work in communication.

This theory has made substantial progress in a number of pragmatic issues and debates. Lack of space prevents me from providing a more in-depth description of this cognitive theory. Instead, I will list below some relevance-theoretic claims that are important to understand how this theory can be applied to the interpretation and effects of humorous texts.

1. Human cognition is geared to the maximization of relevance. We have an evolved psychological capacity to focus our attention on what might be relevant, and dismiss what is bound to demand excessive effort in exchange for little reward. This is covered by the so-called cognitive principle of relevance. There is also a sub-principle at work, specifically concerning verbal human communication, stating that every utterance conveys a presumption of its eventual relevance (communicative principle of relevance). In other words, every time that an individual says an utterance, the interlocutor expects that interpreting it is going to be worth the effort and that it will turn out relevant (which, of course, is not always the case due to irrelevant information provided, but the expectation of relevance always applies). In the case of humor, for instance when a person tells us a joke, expectations of relevance make listening to the joke worth the attention and the mental effort involved. Although we know that the joke is going to be irrelevant in informational terms and that we are bound to expend supplementary effort (e.g. in order to make sense of ambiguities, alternative referents, punning configurations, etc. that are set up for the sake of generating humorous effects), we still expect a reward in exchange for the effort demanded, this time in the shape of amusement, entertainment, and the like.

2. We cannot enter other people’s minds, but we can mind-read their inferential strategies and accessibility to contextual information. In a nutshell, when we tell a joke, we can hold more or less precise expectations about which inferential strategies and steps the hearer is going to perform or go through, and what kind of contextual information he/she is bound to access in order to understand the text of the joke and turn it into a contextualized, relevant interpretation. Due to the aforementioned psychologically rooted ability to search for the most relevant and effort-relieving information, the speaker can hold expectations that a certain situation for the joke is going to be set up by the hearer, that one sense of an
ambiguous word is going to be selected, that a specific referent for an indexical is bound to be chosen, etc. This is crucial for humorous communication because, even though it does not entail a different kind of inference (we have one single ability to turn coded inputs into fully contextualized and relevant interpretations, not a specific ability for humorous communication), the speaker exerts a great deal of control on how inferences are made, what contextual information is retrieved, what implications are derived, etc. in the course of the interpretation of the joke.

3. We have a cognitive ability to assess candidate interpretations for the same input in a specific context and rank them in terms of relevance. Upon listening to an utterance, it has several possible interpretations, all compatible with that utterance in the specific context in which it is uttered. However, not all of these interpretations are equally relevant and accessible, since they are ranked in their balances of the interest that they provide (positive cognitive effects in relevance-theoretic terminology) and the mental effort that their processing demands. RT claims that the mind is capable of assessing competing interpretations for the same utterance and opt for the most relevant one, dismissing at the same time the other interpretations. We perform this assessment at an unconscious level: we just cannot be aware of all the possible interpretations of an utterance and then opt for one; instead, we automatically opt for the most relevant one without even noticing that alternative interpretations were also possible. This is frequently exploited in humorous communication, in which hearers are often led to select an initially relevant interpretation. This choice turns out to be inadequate and has to be replaced with an initially more unlikely but eventually correct interpretation.

4. There is a substantial gap between what the speaker says and what the speaker intends to communicate (and between what the interlocutor hears and what the interlocutor eventually interprets). This gap is filled by inference. RT pictures comprehension as two phases: one of decoding, in which we simply identify a grammatical string of words (called logical form) but ascribe no communicative meaning to it (this is a context-free phase), and one of inferring, in which we turn the schematic output of the first phase and turn it into a fully contextualized and relevant interpretation. In this sense, the underlying claim is that utterances always underdetermine (i.e. are less informative than) the eventual interpretation that is obtained from them. Among the inferential strategies applied to the logical form in order to obtain a relevant interpretation, we can list reference assignment (especially for indexicals such as pronouns), as in (1a), disambiguation (1b), free enrichment (when the utterance is apparently complete but there is still an unarticulated slot that has to be filled with meaning, as in (1c)), and conceptual adjustment, since normally the concepts coded by the utterance are not relevant enough to fit the expectations of relevance and have to be adjusted, yielding a so-called ad hoc concept that is similar, but not identical, to the one literally coded in the utterance. This adjustment can work in two directions: (a) sometimes the intended concept is broader (i.e. less exact) than the concept literally coded (as in (1d); and (b) sometimes the intended concept is narrower (i.e. more exact) than the concept literally coded (as in (1e):

(1) a. She was there with her and with Thomas.  
   [Mary was at the party with Helen and Thomas Smith].  
 b. I saw John by the bank [river bank / financial institution].  
 c. Louise is a better candidate [than whom?] [for what?].  
 d. We entered the pub but we left since it was empty.
The outcome of these inferential strategies is the proposition expressed by the utterance which, if communicated, is called the *explicature* of the utterance. This explicature can further be used as one of the premises for the derivation of an *implicature*. An example would be Ann’s reply in (2), which communicates the explicature in (3) and also the implicature in (4):

(2) Tom: So... Did you buy that table I told you about?  
Ann: It is too wide and uneven.  
(3) *Explicature*: The table that you told me about is too wide to go through the bedroom door and its surface is uneven.  
(4) *Implicature*: Ann didn’t buy the table that I told her about.

The important fact for humor research is that all of these inferential strategies (and even the *coding* phase) may be exploited for the sake of generating humorous effects (Yus 2012a).

2. Core issues and topics

RT has addressed a number of typical objects of humor research. Initially, RT-based analyses fitted the incongruity-resolution pattern, but other research areas have also been analyzed. Some of them are summarized below.

2.1. RT and clashes during interpretation

Initial applications of RT to humor focused on the stretch-by-stretch comprehension procedure and how the speaker can create clashes with the interpretation brought to bear so far in the interpretation of part of the utterance. These clashes generate incongruities that the hearer has to solve by adding extra inferencing that will (hopefully) be compensated for by an offset of cognitive effects (specifically humorous ones). Yus’ (1997a, 2003) and Jodłowiec’s (1991) applications explain humor as it is generated during the cumulative processing (decoding plus inference) of the different parts that the utterance is made of (e.g. setup plus punchline), for example how the hearer invariably selects one relevant interpretation of an initial stretch of discourse which is later disconfirmed in a subsequent part. These publications also fit the incongruity-resolution model (Suls 1972), according to which in the course of interpreting the joke some kind of incongruity turns up that has to be reconciled so as to make sense of it and obtain the expected humorous effects.

An example of this incongruity plus resolution pattern is Yus’ (2003) MGI/SCI joke schema. It applies mainly to utterances with an initial part (multiple graded interpretations part or MGI part) that leads to a first accessible interpretation. The speaker knows that other possible interpretations will not be taken into account due to our cognitive ability to unconsciously rule out any other competing interpretations. Then, the speaker provokes an incongruity with the subsequent part of the joke with a covert, more unlikely interpretation (in the single covert interpretation part of the joke or SCI part), compatible with the whole joke but not with the hearer’s chosen interpretation for the initial part of the joke. This latent
interpretation is not taken into consideration until the speaker humorously foregrounds it in the second part of the joke. Such manipulation is possible because, as RT claims, the hearer retrieves or constructs and then processes a number of assumptions in a linear, cumulative way. An example is (5):

(5) The newlywed wife said to her husband when he returned from work, “I have great news for you. Pretty soon, we’re going to be three in this house instead of two.” Her husband ran to her with a smile on his face and delight in his eyes. He was glowing with happiness and kissing his wife when she said, “I’m glad that you feel this way since tomorrow morning, my mother moves in with us.”

Overt accessible interpretation in the MGI part: The wife is expecting a baby.
Covert unlikely interpretation fitting MGI/SCI parts: The wife’s mother is moving in.

Finally, Curcó’s (1995) analysis also focuses on interpretive clashes. Her analysis shows how the speaker leads the hearer to entertain two contradictory propositional contents: one is a strongly implicated premise (which Curcó labels *key assumption*). This premise clashes with an accessible (though so far unaccessed) assumption in the context of interpretation (which Curcó labels *target assumption*), but not from a subsequent part of the text of the joke. In this respect, her analysis is different from as the studies above. She analyses examples such as (6):

(6) There is something tragic about the enormous number of young men there are in England at the present moment who start life with a perfect profile and end up by adopting some useful profession (Oscar Wilde).

Target assumption: A useful profession is a cause for congratulation (from the hearer’s encyclopedic knowledge).

Key assumption: A useful profession is a cause for commiseration [strongly implicated from (6)].

2.2. Joke classifications: The Intersecting Circles Model

Within the relevance-theoretic framework, several attempts at classifying jokes have been undertaken. In one of them (Yus 2012a), a broad differentiation was made between, on the one hand, jokes whose humorous effects lie in the manipulation of the hearer’s inferential steps towards an explicit interpretation (explicature) or an implicated one (implicature) together with his/her access to contextual information; and, on the other hand, jokes that merely play with social or cultural information (collective representations), often of a stereotypical quality. However, this division does not really reflect what is at stake when jokes are devised, since often cultural representations and interpretive steps are combined in the generation of humorous effects. This is why a more recent classification was proposed: the *Intersecting Circles Model* (Yus 2013). In a nutshell, seven types of jokes are created out of the intersection of three categories generically labeled *Circles*:

1. Utterance interpretation. The aforementioned manipulation of the inferential strategies carried out to get an interpretation of the utterance (reference assignment, disambiguation, concept adjustment, etc.).

2. Make-sense frame. It basically refers to the effort-saving construction of a suitable situation or scenario for the interpretation of the joke. This term comprises similar labels
typically used in previous research for how the hearer builds up a mental situation for the utterance being processed, such as *frame, schema or script*.

3. Cultural frame. Collective representations regarding society or culture, typically made of stereotypical information about one’s nation, sex roles, professions, etc.

The combination of these three *Circles* yields seven types of jokes: (1) Make-sense frame + cultural frame + utterance interpretation; (2) Make-sense frame + cultural frame; (3) Make-sense frame + utterance interpretation; (4) Make-sense frame; (5) Cultural frame + utterance interpretation; (6) Cultural frame; and (7) Utterance interpretation (see Figure 1). The main idea underlying this classification is that often several *Circles* are used in conjunction to generate the desired effects. An example of the combination of make-sense frame and utterance interpretation (joke type 3) would be (7) below:

(7) A policeman in Washington D.C. stops a lady and asks for her license. He says “Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses.” The woman answers “Well, I have contacts.” The policeman replies “I don’t care who you know! You’re getting a ticket!”

In this example, the speaker predicts that the hearer will build up an appropriate mental scenario of the joke (make-sense frame, Circle 2). Within this make-sense frame, the word *glasses* will be disambiguated as *eyeglasses* and retained in the short-term memory store, aiding the hearer (and saving mental effort) in disambiguating the subsequent word *contacts* (part of utterance interpretation, Circle 1). This *contact lenses* meaning of *contacts* is highly relevant and accessible (it produces sufficient positive cognitive effects in exchange for a very small amount of mental effort, producing a better balance than any other sense of the word) and the hearer will not even be aware that any other sense of *contacts* was possible. When the policeman says *I don’t care who you know!*, an incongruity arises with the assumptions brought to bear so far in the interpretation of the joke, since the other sense of *contacts* (i.e. influential people the woman knows) had not even been noticed (it is incompatible with the make-sense frame constructed so far). The hearer is then forced to select this second sense despite its being less relevant in the initial context of the joke. The hearer will be amused when he/she discovers the other sense of *contacts*, entertains both senses humorously and resolves the initial incongruity.

2.3. Punning

RT has also done extensive research on punning, as part of lexical pragmatics and especially involving either disambiguation or concept adjustment of punning words [see ch. 8: Taxonomy of Puns]; [see ch. 9: Puns]. Solska (2012a, 2012b) suggests five possible pairings of concepts made possible by the punning element in the utterance: (a) puns based on homonymy, as in (8a); (b) based on polysemy (8b); (c) juxtaposing metaphorical and literal reading (8c); (d) based on perfect homophony (8d); (e) based on imperfect homophony (8e); (f) based on paronymy (8f); and (g) based on homography (8g):

(8) a. Being in politics is just like playing golf: you are trapped in one bad *lie* after another.
   b. There was a sign on the lawn at a drug re-hab center that said “Keep Off The *Grass.*”
c. Never invest in funerals, it’s a *dying* industry.
d. Everybody *kneads* it. (An advertising slogan for Pillsbury flour) [kneads/needs]
e. *Mud, Sweat and Gears.* (The name of a bicycle repair shop) [mud/blood, gears/tears]
f. The Crime of Pun-ishment. (Title of an essay on puns)
g. Poland *Polishes* Off U.S. Volleyball Team. (The Daily Herald June 17, 2011)

In Yus (forthcoming), a review of existing proposals of classifications for punning is provided, and the conclusion is that punning configurations are too heterogeneous to be given a single label. Therefore, it is proposed that each pun should be given three labels so that it is uniquely delimited. The three labels refer to three possible classifications:

Label 1: *Punning structure.* How are the two pun-related senses arranged within the utterance containing them? Four possibilities can be isolated: (a) two possible senses (entertained in parallel); (b) one sense, then another (in this structure, one sense is activated and, at a later stage during the interpretation of the utterance, another sense is activated); (c) one sense, the other sense absent (in this kind of pun, one of the senses is accessible, but the other is absent, and the hearer has to look for this additional meaning as part of the relevance-seeking interpretive); and (d) both senses absent. There is a possibility that both senses of the pun are missing from the coded input of the joke, and the hearer has to devote additional cognitive resources to work out which pun was intended in the first place, and also the relationship bearing between the two absent senses. The joke in (9) is an example, in which the ambiguous *come* in *Who comes first?* is not even mentioned in the joke, but has to be sought by the hearer in his/her search for a relevant interpretation of the joke:

(9) A chicken and an egg are lying in bed. The chicken is leaning against the headboard smoking a cigarette with a satisfied smile on its face. The egg, looking decidedly unhappy, grabs the sheet and rolls over and says, “Well, I guess we finally know the answer to THAT question!”

Label 2: *Sense relationship.* What relationship exists between the two senses that make the pun possible? In this case, traditional labels such as homophony, homonymy, polysemy, homography, paronymy, etc. would be typical relationships involved in punning.

Label 3: *Inferential strategy.* What is the inferential strategy involved in the identification (and resolution) of the punning elements? In this case, relevance-oriented inferential operations such as logical form, disambiguation, reference assignment, concept adjustment, etc. would apply.

Two examples of pun and their three labels are provided below:

(10)  

Q: How do you embarrass an archaeologist?
A: Give him a used tampon and ask him which period it came from.

In (10), the two senses of *period* are entertained in parallel (label 1), one applied to women and one applied to archeology. The punning element involves polysemy (label 2) and hence demands inferential disambiguation (label 3). The setup of the joke facilitates this simultaneity of the senses, so that both are equally relevant and likely.
Q: What’s the similarity between a penis and Rubik’s cube?
A: They both get harder the longer you play with them.

In this joke, two senses of **harder** and **play** are activated simultaneously (label 1). Although the sense relationship is polysemy (label 2), in reality the hearer has to engage in a conceptual adjustment of both senses (label 3), so that the encoded concepts **harder** and **play** can be applied to both a penis and the cube.

2.4. Stand-up comedy

RT has also addressed stand-up comedy performances (e.g. Yus 2004). The monologues told therein seem to base their effectiveness not so much on manipulations of discourse-specific inferential strategies (though they are also used), but rather on a strategy regarding the **personal vs. collective** status of the audience’s mental representations. In short, the comedian stirs the audience’s stored beliefs and mental representations in a number of ways. Sometimes they strengthen or challenge typical social issues such as professions or sex roles stereotypes, which overlap, to a greater or lesser extent, with the personal beliefs of every member of the audience. On other occasions, what the comedian does is to remind the audience that some beliefs (or habits or activities) that the audience previously regarded as personal, are actually collective, carried out by everyone in the audience, and in this personal to collective shift, the audience ends up amused. The **mutual manifestness** of certain representations leads to a change of attitude towards them: representations which the audience regarded as essentially private or personal are now treated as public, and eventually undoubtedly social or cultural.

Therefore, much of the enjoyment from stand-up performances comes from the **individual vs. collective** interface. Laughter triggers a realization in the audience that the representations regarding these issues are public, collective, and (mutually) manifest to the whole audience. The immediate effect is a cultural status for these public representations. An example is Dave Allen’s monologue regarding Christmas in (12):

(12) If it’s difficult to get a Christmas tree, it’s even more difficult to get rid of the bloody thing! [...] The dustman won’t take it... You can’t burn it... [...] And you find yourself... creeping around your neighbourhood trying to find a builder’s skip, and you can’t find one, so you dump it in somebody’s garden... and think “Thank Christ! Got rid of it!!” Come back to your own house and there’s two Christmas trees there!

2.5. Humor and translation

In Yus (2012b) it was claimed that there are degrees of translatability of jokes depending on how close the translation is to the content of the joke and, especially, to the inferential strategies that the source-language speaker expected his/her source-language interlocutor to carry out in order to obtain the intended humorous effects [see ch. 30: Translation]. A sixteen-case chart of possible cases for the translation of jokes was proposed under RT (see Table 1). These cases result from the combination of four parameters generically called **scenarios** (for translation):
(a) **Cultural scenario.** All the members of a community share a number of cultural assumptions, with greater or lesser stereotypical quality, that belong to their mutual cultural environment. However, different audiences from different cultural backgrounds may obtain different degrees of humor or even fail to get the point of the joke. This is why culture-related humor often relies on schemas, stereotypes, etc. that have inter-cultural validity.

(b) **Semantic scenario.** This scenario refers to whether the source language and the target language exhibit similar ways of coding the information, parallel ways of coding idioms, metaphors, etc. and similar options in the language for generating humorous effects.

(c) **Pragmatic scenario.** This scenario is, obviously, utterly important and the translator should do the utmost to preserve this scenario, even if that involves radically changing the semantic scenario and also, perhaps, the cultural one. Overall, this scenario has to do with all the inferential strategies leading to a relevant interpretation of the joke as intended by the communicator of the source-language joke. For practical reasons, in Yus (ibid.) this important scenario was divided into two areas: *inferential steps and balance of effects and effort*. This dichotomy aims at capturing the intuition that sometimes the inferential steps are replicated in the translation but, for some reason, the resulting balance of cognitive effects and mental effort is different from the one obtained by the source-language audience and, vice versa, sometimes the translator changes the inferential steps or strategies, but the resulting balance of effects and effort is, paradoxically, similar to the one obtained by the source-language audience.

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<th>CULTURAL SCENARIO</th>
<th>SEMANTIC SCENARIO</th>
<th>PRAGMATIC SCENARIO (A) INFERENTIAL STEPS (AS PREDICTED)</th>
<th>PRAGMATIC SCENARIO (B) BALANCE OF EFFECTS AND EFFORT</th>
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Table 1. Cases of translatability in the translation of jokes (Yus 2012b).

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An example of translation is provided in (13) below (SL = source language; TL = target language):

(13) a. SL Joke.
   Q: I’m two months pregnant now. When will my baby move?
   A: With any luck, right after he finishes college.

b. TL Translation.
   Q: Estoy embarazada de un mes. ¿Cuándo lo sentiré?
   A: Dentro de ocho meses, cuando le dé la factura.

   Q: I’m 1 month pregnant now. When will I feel it/regret it?
   A: In 8 months, when I give you my bill.

d. Case in chart: 5.
   Cultural scenario = yes; Semantic scenario = no; Pragmatic scenario (inferential steps) = yes; Pragmatic scenario (balance of effects and effort) = yes

This is an example of a joke whose semantic content has been altered in order to reproduce the inferential strategies, as intended by the source-language communicator, to generate humorous effects. This joke plays with two senses of to move: physical movement and changing residence. The hearer, by following the relevance-seeking inferential procedure, is bound to select the meaning of physical movement due to the processing of the previous stretch of discourse and the medical make-sense frame that the joke depicts (pregnancy). The resolution of this incongruity, together with the humorous entertainment of two parallel senses of move, generates the desired effects. The translation maintains the inferential steps and balance of effects and effort by replacing the polysemous move with the polysemous sentir (feel vs. regret), even if the text of the joke had been altered, thus fitting Case 5 in the chart.

2.6. Propositional versus non-propositional constraints and effects

When judging the effectiveness of a humorous text, RT has mainly focused on which inferential steps and access to contextual information the hearer is bound to perform in his/her search for relevance (cognitive effects versus mental effort). These strategies are predicted by the speaker and manipulated so as to generate humorous effects. However, the (un)successful outcome of a humorous intent also depends on other variables which are not propositional (i.e. are not tied to the actual sense-making of the humorous text) but which, nevertheless, play an important part in whether the humorous intention ends up successful or not. This is why in Yus (forthcoming), a proposal is made to enrich the default relevance formula (highest possible cognitive effects in exchange for least mental effort) with a new
pair of terms. This new terminology focuses on non-propositional aspects of communication (such as feelings and emotions) and make the formula more explanatory for humorous communication. Since non-propositional qualities are also at work in many other instances of communication, these pairs of terms should also aid in explaining non-humorous interactions.

A clear example would be phatic communication, in which the social connotation and implications of the utterances are relevant but the content itself (its informational quality) is not, as in the utterance *You had a haircut!*, whose content is pretty obvious and irrelevant to the hearer but is nevertheless relevant in its phatic qualities. And humor is often devoid of informative quality but its impact in its personal (e.g. laughter, amusement, entertainment), interactive (e.g. camaraderie, strengthening of friendship, identity shaping) and social (e.g. social bonding, community building, strengthening of cultural values) sides is worth the hearer’s attention.

In a nutshell, a first dichotomy is that between positive and negative contextual constraints, restricted to aspects that underlie or frame communication and interaction and constrain its eventual (un)successful outcome. A second pair of terms is positive non-propositional effect and negative non-propositional effect, which refers to feelings, emotions, impressions, etc. that result from processing information or interacting with others, and which play a part in the eventual (un)satisfactory outcome of this relevance-theoretic formula. The general RT formula would now be pictured as follows:

THE COGNITIVE EFFECTS GENERATED FROM THE INTERPRETATION OF AN UTTERANCE

[+] THE EXISTENCE OF POSITIVE CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS
[+] THE GENERATION OF POSITIVE NON-PROPOSITIONAL EFFECTS

SHOULD EXCEED...

THE MENTAL EFFORT NEEDED TO PROCESS THIS UTTERANCE

[+] THE EXISTENCE OF NEGATIVE CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS
[+] THE GENERATION OF NEGATIVE NON-PROPOSITIONAL EFFECTS

From this proposal of extending the relevance formula with constraints and/or non-propositional effects, successful humorous communication (that resulting in laughter, entertainment, pleasurable feelings, amusement, and so on) should be pictured as an extremely slippery endeavor in which many negative constraints and negative non-propositional effects threaten an effective humorous outcome (and in parallel, positive constraints and positive non-propositional effects facilitate successful humorous communication). Among others, the following (positive or negative) constraints can be listed: (a) suitability (e.g. of uttering a joke), (b) hearer’s background knowledge and beliefs, (c) interlocutor’s sex, (d) interlocutor’s sense of humor, (e) relationship between interlocutors, (f) group size, (g) interlocutor’s mood, (h) culture and ethnicity, and (i) situational factors (e.g. telling a joke in a very serious meeting).

Besides, when considering non-propositional aspects such as the ones listed in (a-i) above, it should be stressed that the same aspect can become both a constraint and a non-propositional effect. Take ethnic origin, for instance. The ethnic origin of the interlocutor may be a major constraint when telling an utterly racist joke, which will undoubtedly affect the eventual generation of humorous effects. At the same time, ethnic origin can be a positive non-propositional effect, since certain jokes can enhance communal feelings of ethnicity-
related identity. Besides, certain interlocutors obtain an offset of positive non-propositional effects simply by making fun of a different ethnic group, which at the same time reinforces the specificity of these interlocutors’ own ethnicity as a positive non-propositional effect.

3. New debates

There are some areas of research that RT has also addressed, even if less intensely, while others remain mainly unexplored. Some of them are briefly described below.

3.1. Humorous ironies

RT makes very specific claims about what ingredients play a substantial part in irony comprehension: (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. This ironic interpretation is spotted at some stage during the relevance-centered 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 [see ch. 18: Irony and Sarcasm].

Dissociative attitudes can exhibit a wide array of variations, but all of them involve rejection or disapproval (and also ridicule, mock, scorn...) of a thought (or utterance). On the other hand, The notion of echo is intentionally broad, since it covers direct echoes of previous utterances, and also echoes of attributed thoughts (real or imaginary), social norms and expectations.

Analyses of humorous ironies using an RT framework are scarce. An initial challenge is encountered: if irony entails a dissociative attitude with a negative quality (an expectation that is unfounded, a thought that is disconfirmed, an event that did not turn out as expected, etc.), how can ironies end up being humorous? A possible answer is suggested in Yus (forthcoming). The proposal is to incorporate the identification of a humorous intention as a second-order, feeling- or emotion-related metarepresentation (with the broad label of affective attitude) that is added to the main dissociative attitude, and to differentiate the dissociation-related (propositional) metarepresentation from the humor-related (affective) one. While the former entails an attitude towards a propositional opinion, norm, expectation or utterance, the latter fits more the qualities of feelings and emotions (maybe also impressions), rather than propositions. And the propositional-affective duality explains why in many instances of irony, despite involving a (negative) dissociative attitude, there is a feeling shared by interlocutors that this attitude is not meant to be interpreted as critical or serious, but as amusing or humorous. The following example is provided in Yus (ibid.): three dialogues involving the same ironical utterance with the same dissociative attitude and the same echoed content, but with different interpretive outcomes:

(14)  [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.

(15) [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.

(16) [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: 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.

In these examples, John has a dissociative attitude towards an opinion echoed (maybe a commonsense social norm) that he should not always be the one who calls, and that it would be nice if Mary sometimes called him for a change. However, the final interpretation varies in each case because of the feelings associated with this echoed opinion. In (14), John does think that it would be nice that Mary called him more often, but the feelings that he holds towards the opinion echoed are on the positive side, expecting a humorous result from it, and Mary infers the attitudes (dissociative and affective) correctly. The whole exchange is tinged with humor and amusement. By contrast, in (15) John also has a dissociative attitude towards the opinion echoed but the feelings that he holds towards that opinion are on the negative side. Mary, again, correctly infers that the feelings associated with this echo (affective attitude) are negative: John is angry at having to call her all the time. Hence, she reacts in a different way from the previous example: by apologizing. Finally, in (16) we find an example of misunderstanding, in which the dissociative attitude is correctly inferred but the feelings or emotions associated with the opinion echoed (affective attitude) are misinterpreted, resulting in an erroneous interactional outcome.

It seems clear, then, that one of the necessary steps resulting in a correct interpretation of the ironical utterance (humorous or otherwise) is the inference of the speaker’s affective attitude (feelings and emotions) towards the echoed content. In this sense, the most aggressive, critical ironies would be the ones in which the dissociative attitude is paired with feelings of anger, annoyance, irritation and the like. In other cases, though, the speaker will hold positive feelings or even humorous ones within a general this is play frame and, despite the existence of this dissociative attitude, the overall interpretation will result in amusement or humor.

3.2. Humorous narratives
Researchers under RT have not addressed the humor arising from the interpretation of long narratives extensively [see ch. 12: Humor and Narrative]. An exception is the work by Larkin (2000, 2005). She claims that the relevance-theoretic application to short jokes cannot be easily extended to long narratives, mainly because it is impossible to maintain typical joke-centered strategies such as incongruity-resolution for discourses that take up hundreds of pages. Besides, the humor of these long narratives is often not directed at the reader, but arises in conversations held between characters in the novel. Furthermore, she stresses the role of stereotypes in the kind of humor that is found in long narratives.

Her analysis focuses on how implicatures are produced within the context of humorous novels by certain illocutionary acts “whose possible richness of implicature is limited by the repetition of the same, or similar, salient connotations, which reinforce each other and at the same time condition the reader’s search for relevance within the on-going text” (2000: 100). This process begins in the initial chapters of the novels, thus allowing for the reader’s defined image of each of the characters in question, so that specific expectations may be conceived as to his/her behavior and reactions. This character-centered information is then manipulated for the sake of humor. That is, the reader’s expectations aroused as to the character are played with in the narrative and surprise him/her by being incongruous, both with encyclopedic knowledge of the real world and also with contextual knowledge of the specific fictional world created by the narrator up to the point in question. In this way, some form of incongruity and resolution is somehow also at work in these narratives, even if stretched into a longer piece of discourse.

3.3. Beyond one-to-one communication: Conversational humor

RT has mainly focused on a prototypical dyadic situation involving a single speaker selecting an appropriate utterance to code his/her thoughts and a single hearer that invariably aims at obtaining the most relevant interpretation by decoding of utterance as the starting point of an inferential mutual parallel adjustment between the extraction of an explicit interpretation, the derivation of implicatures (if these meet the expectations of relevance), and the access to the necessary amount and quality of contextual information. As a consequence of this dyadic picture of communication, there are very few studies within the relevance-theoretic framework that address the multifarious quality of multi-party conversations and, as an extension, also few studies that take conversational humor as their object of research.

However, conversations should not behave differently in terms of relevance, nor should explanations of how humor is handled in interactions differ radically from what has been predicted within RT for one-to-one instances of humorous communication. If information processing is relevance-oriented, then the information transmitted and exchanged in humorous conversational instances should also be relevant to the interactants and generate specific effects that compensate for the amount of mental effort devoted to its interpretation. The fact that few studies have addressed conversational issues from a relevance-theoretic stance does not imply that the object itself is beyond an RT explanation. A different issue is whether or not the effects generated by conversational humor and the functions that this humor can have for the interlocutors within interactions (often in the form of positive non-propositional effects such as increased bonding, group solidarity, identity enhancement, etc.) can be explained simply by relying on the single RT formula of effects and effort.

In Yus (forthcoming), it is claimed that at least two possibilities of RT-based analysis of conversational humor can be isolated:
1. During the conversation, one speaker holds the conversational floor and tells a joke to a number of interlocutors in the group. In this case, the general relevance-theoretic procedure also applies to this kind of communication, since the structure is the same as the prototypical one-to-one communicative situation typically studied within RT. In this case, though, the picture is that of parallel one-to-one instances, since the same joke is told to several interlocutors and each of them has to make sense of the joke (by using the prototypical mutual parallel adjustment of explicatures, implicatures and context).

2. A different issue for RT is the study of multi-party conversations in which the main source of humorous effects cannot be located in one single utterance told by one single speaker to a number of interactants, but demand the cooperation and collaboration of all the interlocutors, who co-construct the humorous effects by adding turns, humorously replying and continuing the prior joking utterance, or even completing an initiated turn that demands the help of others to achieve the expected humorous effects. The relevance of humorous communication does not lie, in this case, in one single utterance devised in such a way that it will be interpreted in a specific way by several interlocutors. Instead, there is a co-construction of the coded input that will eventually yield these humorous effects.

3.4. Media discourses

There is some research under RT on humorous discourses in the media, for example on comics (e.g. Yus 1997b) and on puns in advertising (e.g. Tanaka 1994), but this research should increase in the future, given the applicability of RT to how media discourses are interpreted. In this sense, in Yus (forthcoming), two chapters are devoted to the analysis of how cartoons in the press and advertisements are interpreted within the general search for relevance and how interpretations can be manipulated for the sake of generating humorous effects (or similar but less intense outcomes such as amusement, entertainment, and the like).

Of special interest for the analysis of both cartoons and advertisements (specifically printed ones), is the technique consisting in altering the normal relevance-based choice of an interpretation of some text or portion of text within the cartoon or ad. In short, advertisers and cartoonists can use images in ads and cartoons in order to force the reader to entertain in parallel literal/idiomatic or literal/metaphoric interpretations for the same text, thus creating incongruence and increased attention. For example, the Spanish ads (17-18) and the Spanish cartoon (19) fit this pattern:

(17) Product advertised: Travel insurance.
   Image: A man hanging with one single hand from a cliff.
   Text: No se quede colgado.  
         [Don’t be left in the lurch].

(18) Image: A personal computer. A cable departs form the slogan and crosses the ad.
   Text: Fujitsu le echa un cable.  
         [Fujitsu gives you a hand].

(19) Image: A man (A) painting a ship. The name of the ship is Capitalismo (Capitalism).
   Text: A: ¡Una manita de pintura y como nuevo!
         [A lick of paint and like new].

The Spanish ads play with literal idiomatic readings of two phrases. The advertisers use the accompanying image to force the reader into accessing a parallel literal interpretation of these
phrases. In (17), the Spanish idiom *No se quede colgado* (don’t be left in the lurch) has a possible but unlikely literal meaning in the context of this ad comprehension: *Don’t remain hanging off*. Despite being an irrelevant choice for an interpretation, the image of a man hanging from a cliff makes it as likely as the idiomatic interpretation, thus generating two parallel and equally valid (relevant) interpretations of the phrase. Something similar happens in (18), where *echar un cable* is a very common idiom in Spanish meaning *give someone a hand*, but it also has a purely literal -but unlikely- interpretation: *to throw a cable at someone*. The visual depiction of a cable levels again the accessibility to these two interpretations, producing some incongruity, and the reader has to keep both interpretations active in his/her mind, which leads to greater attention and, perhaps, to some form of pleasure or entertainment.

The cartoon (19) by El Roto is also interesting in its combination of text and image, since the main point of the cartoon cannot be interpreted from text or image alone, but demand an inferential relevance-seeking combination of both sources of information. The image makes the literal interpretation of *lick of paint* very accessible, whereas the text (i.e. “Capitalism” and the man’s utterance) forces the reader to go beyond this visual literalness and move on to a more connotative metaphoric interpretation.

**References**


