On reaching the intended ironic interpretation

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Abstract
In the present article a criterion of optimal accessibility to irony is proposed from a cognitive perspective (mainly relevance-theoretic). According to Sperber and Wilson’s (1986, 1995) relevance theory, for the identification of irony it is essential to find the echoic quality of the utterance and the speaker’s attitude of dissociation towards this utterance. This identification can be speeded up with multiple activation of contextual sources. In a nutshell, according to this criterion, the fast, slow, or nonexistent identification of the attitude of dissociation underlying irony depends on the number (and quality) of incompatibilities detected by the addressee in multiple mental activations of the available contextual sources.

1. Introduction
Traditionally irony has been studied as a discursive strategy intended to communicate the opposite of what the utterance literally means. Even if it is nowadays commonly accepted that ironies convey a much greater variety of meanings than the mere opposite, there is still a great deal of scholarly discussion and practically no agreement on several points which need clarification. The present article aims to shed light on the role of context in the fast, slow, or nonexistent identification of irony. Specifically, a criterion of optimal accessibility to irony is proposed from a cognitive perspective (mainly relevance-theoretic). Basically, this criterion is based on the hypothesis that the hearer weighs the proposition expressed by the utterance against a number of incompatibilities detected in (simultaneously) activated contextual sources in order to assess the ironic quality of the utterance.

The structure of the article is as follows: In section two, Sperber and Wilson’s theory of irony as echoic mention will be sketched. In section three, several irony-relevant contextual sources are dealt with. It will be suggested that the accessible information conveyed by one or more of these sources has to be incompatible with the proposition expressed by the utterance in order to aid the hearer in the identification of an ironic interpretation. It will be hypothesized that human beings have an inherent capacity to access simultaneously the information provided by different contextual sources, and that the more contextual sources activated, the faster the identification of irony is bound to be. In section four, a gradation of contextual sources is proposed, together with the coining of new terminology to cover the fact that there is no formula to predict which contextual source will be activated in a particular conversational exchange (i.e., which source will be accessible and its information eventually made manifest), or how strong this activation will be. All this discussion yields the proposal of a criterion of optimal accessibility in section five, which is then complemented with two
recent approaches to irony which also take into consideration the role of the incompatibility between the utterance and context in the identification of ironic interpretations. Lastly, in section six, further prospects of future research are introduced, which have to do with a hypothetical modular organization of the central systems in the brain facilitating the simultaneous access and processing of information coming from different informational sources.

2. Relevance theory: echo and dissociation

Sperber and Wilson (henceforth S&W) have proposed an *echoic mention theory of irony* (S&W, 1986, 1995, 1998; W&S, 1992) as part of a general relevance-theoretic distinction between *interpretive use* and *descriptive use*, and also as a development of their former *theory of use/mention distinction* (S&W, 1981; Jørgensen et al., 1984). This theory aims at overcoming the problems which arise in the traditional view of irony as conveying the opposite of what is literally (i.e., explicitly) said with the utterance, since people can endorse the proposition expressed by the utterance and at the same time be ironic.

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

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

(1) a. *It is late and the children are not in bed*.  
b. Mother: “I love children who go to bed early”.

In situation (1a), the mother utters (1b) as a means to echo and dissociate herself from a thought, specifically a potential utterance which she would have liked to utter in a different situation such as (2), a situation in which (1b) would no longer be used interpretively, but *descriptively* (the mother would not only endorse the proposition expressed by (1b) but also communicate it as explicit information fitting situation (2)):

(2) *It is early and the children are in bed*.

In order to reach the correct ironic interpretation of (1b), the hearer needs to identify—as a contextual assumption—the (mutually manifest) existence of this situation (2) which did not occur as the mother would have expected, which triggers the mismatch between (1a) and (1b), and hence the ironic interpretation of (1b), even though the mother actually endorses the proposition expressed by (1b) (she does love children who go to be early). In Curcó’s (ibid.) words, “in [2], the speaker would be in a position to utter [1b] descriptively, and, crucially, to endorse all its potential implicatures. In [2], her utterance would logically imply that she loves her own children and that one of the reasons she loves them is because they have gone to bed early. When this situation fails to materialise, she ironically echoes the utterance she
had earlier hoped to be able to produce. In the actual circumstances, [1a], her utterance does not have the implication that she loves her children, at least, not because they go to bed early. So, the mother is implicitly expressing her attitude of dissociation from the potential implicature in [3]”:

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

The identification of the discrepancy between situations (1a) and (2) is essential to discovery the irony in (1b): “The speaker of [1b] is echoing a potential utterance that she could have produced in a situation $S_1$, different from $S_o$, when the utterance is in fact produced. She dissociates from some of the potential implicatures that the utterance would have if uttered in $S_1$. To recognise these facts, a hearer has to notice that while $S_o$, the actual context, contains [1a], the non-actual but stereotypically desirable $S_1$, contains [2]. Part of the relevance of [1b] when uttered in $S_o$ is to make strongly mutually manifest [1a]” (Curcó, ibid.). S&W (1998: 289) comment upon a similar example: In (1b) “the speaker agrees with the literal meaning of her utterance, and would not want to dissociate herself from it. So where does the irony come from? (...) [1b], literally understood, is inappropriate not because it is false, but because of the circumstances of utterance. What is being ironically echoed is the higher-order explicature... that [1b], literally understood, is relevant in the circumstances. The circumstances should be such that the mother could relevantly say [1b] without irony: that is, [an alternative situation such as (2)]”.

However, this discovery of the speaker’s ironic attitude toward the proposition expressed by the utterance may actually be facilitated by other contextual sources such as the speaker’s ostensive tone of voice and facial expression, the visual information coming from the conversational setting, etc. This role of (multiple-source) contextual information as an aid of the hearer in interpreting ironic utterances is a basic claim in this paper (see sections three and four below for a proposal of contextual sources and their arrangement during interpretation).

Another example is quoted in (4) (Curcó, ibid.):

(4) a. [The speaker is trying to get a point across and the hearer is overtly concentrating on something else].
   b. “I love it when you pay attention to me”.

Here, the speaker endorses the proposition expressed by the utterance and nevertheless it turns out ironic. There seems to be no dissociation from the proposition expressed by (4b) here, and the apparent inability to cover non-dissociative cases like this is one of the reasons why the echoic view of irony has been criticized (cf. Giora, 1995). However, as Curcó correctly claims, (4b) is not a counter-example against the echoic mention theory of irony. Curcó suggests the following scenario:

(5) Imagine that it is a habit of the hearer to get distracted when the speaker addresses him, or to dismiss her opinions. Suppose as well that, to the speaker's surprise, on this specific occasion the hearer has been particularly attentive to what the speaker had to say and has even replied ‘I think you're right. Let's do as you suggest’.

In situation (5), the speaker of (4b) endorses the proposition expressed by the utterance and also the implicatures that it produces, for instance (7), deriving from the union of (4) and the
contextual assumption (6):

(6) The hearer is paying attention to what the speaker of (4) is saying.
(7) The speaker of (4) is now pleased by the attention which the hearer has paid to her.

In this case there would be no ironic interpretation, but explicitly communicated information (as an explicature) which the speaker endorses and which fits the context in which it is uttered. Consider now the different scenario (4a): In this situation, the utterance (4b) no longer carries the implicature (7). Undoubtedly, the contextual assumption (6) is not mutually manifest to both interlocutors. Therefore, in situation (4a), (4b) is ironic not because the speaker dissociates himself/herself from the proposition expressed by the utterance (which the speaker actually endorses), but because she dissociates himself/herself from the implicatures that (4b) might have generated in a different situation such as (5). In either case, contextual information plays a crucial role in the identification of the attitude of dissociation, so that the richer this information, the easier the identification of this attitude will be.

A third example has been suggested by Giora (1995: 246) as an instance of non-echoic irony:

(8) a. [A very rainy day].
   b. “I think the washing hasn’t dried”.

Giora (ibid.) claims that “When said on a very rainy day, [8b] is highly improbable... and invokes a stronger more than interpretation in the form of "I am sure the washing hasn't dried". This serves to highlight the difference between a more desirable state of affairs, in which there is some doubt about the washing (expressed by the explicit statement), and the more unfortunate state of affairs, in which ‘the washing must be soaked through’”. She also claims that (8b) is not echoic since it need not be attributed to another speaker. However, this statement is false. Firstly, S&W do not claim that echoes should necessarily refer to another speaker (they may also refer to the same speaker at a different time). Secondly, S&W’s notion of echo is (intentionally) very broad, “and goes beyond what would generally be understood by the ordinary-language word ‘echo’. It covers not only cases of direct and immediate echoes [for example where B sarcastically repeats what A just said]... but also echoes of (real or imaginary) attributed thoughts... and echoes of norms or standard expectations” (S&W, 1998: 284). Within this broad picture, it is easy to see how (8b) would be echoic, for instance in situation (9) (Curcó, ibid.):

(9) Imagine that the speaker is just coming back home. Before leaving, he instructed his son to get the washing in when it dried, or before, if it started to rain. As he returns, it is raining, and he notices the washing hanging outside. He utters [8b], attributing it to his son or to himself in a different situation (one in which it is not raining), with an implicit attitude of dissociation.

In the next two sections, a taxonomy of contextual sources will be proposed, which are claimed to help the hearer to identify the ironic interpretation of the speaker’s utterance.

3. Multiple activation of contextual sources
The recovery of the ironic meaning of an utterance requires the hearer’s identification of the echoic quality of the utterance and the speaker’s attitude of dissociation towards this utterance. Normally, there has to be some degree of incompatibility between the proposition expressed by the speaker’s utterance and incoming information from one or several contextual sources. In Yus (1998a), six irony-relevant contextual sources were proposed (A-F below), to which a possible seventh source (G) is now added. These will be commented upon as we proceed.

A. Encyclopaedic, factual information
People have a store of mental representations and stereotypical information forming a personal mental background of assumptions against which all new incoming information is processed. For S&W (1986: 48), the combination of this store with new information typically produces contextual effects, which are essential for relevance. In short, effective processing does not demand excessive effort. Everybody aims at the economy of their mental efforts. At the same time, we are constantly aiming at a better knowledge of the world, depending on the resources available. When new information is combined with old, already stored information, there is an outcome of contextual effects that result in the production of new, more updated information. Therefore, this generative process is relevant: the more effects created in exchange for the mental effort required, the more relevance.

Needless to say, this contextual source comprises several types of information, and its activation (and subsequent incompatibility with the proposition expressed by the utterance) may be useful in interpreting ironic utterances:

Macrosocial norms and factual information constitute a powerful store of information. Within relevance theory (S&W, 1986; 1995; see Blakemore, 1992; Yus, 1997: 79-136; 1998b; 1998c for discussion and bibliography on the theory), people’s factual knowledge is a part of people’s memory store (S&W, 1986: 40, 88). Some factual assumptions constitute a background against which in-coming information is weighed. Hamamoto (1998: 266) includes “ideals, expectations, social standards or norms” in his coining of prior cognition, and Barbe (1989: 277) defines general irony as requiring “shared general knowledge among the participants, in-group as well as societal or cultural knowledge”. Both terms would fit into this contextual source. Utterances contradicting, i.e. incompatible with, strongly believed information are likely to trigger a search for an attitude of dissociation (Glucksberg, 1995: 53; Barbe, 1995: 81). Often ironists rely on highly rooted cultural norms in order to build up their ironic strategy.

Commonsense assumptions also belong to accessible information, which speakers store in frames or schemas and use in prototypical conversational situations. S&W (1986: 88) point out that “schematic assumptions and expectations are stored and accessed as a unit or ‘chunk’, that they are highly accessible, and that they will be used in default of any more specific information in processing utterances about the associated objects or events”. Their role should not be underestimated, since they usually save a great deal of cognitive effort during interpretation. For example, this contextual source helps the hearer to disambiguate sentence (10a) and unconsciously choose interpretation (10b) instead of (10c), since its stereotypical quality makes it more relevant in the balance between cognitive effects and processing effort (S&W, 1986: 186):

(10) a. The child left the straw in the glass.
    b. The child left the drinking tube in the glass.
    c. The child left the cereal stalks in the glass.
Commonsense assumptions are especially useful for irony recognition. Typical ironic strategies such as hyperbole and understatement rely on shared stereotypical values for the situations portrayed in the ironic utterance (Kreuz and Roberts, 1995: 25). For example, only by assuming a default, stereotypical idea of the amount of food that one can eat at a time, can the understatement-based irony (11b) in situation (11a) be successful (cited in Giora and Fein, 1998). The mother echoes a parallel situation such as (11c), a situation in which she could have uttered (11b) descriptively (and non-ironically):

(11) a. [After he has finished eating pizza, falafel, ice-cream, wafer and half of the cream cake, Moshe started eating coated peanuts].
   b. Mother: “Moshe, I think you should eat something”.
   c. [Moshe has not eaten anything for several hours].

It is also commonsensical to assume that friends should help us, and not the other way round, an assumption which helps the hearer understand the irony in (12) (see Martin, 1992: 82; Mariscal Chicano, 1993: 204; Curcó, 1997: ch. 9, for discussion):

(12) Our friends are always there when they need us.

Clearly, (12) is intentionally used to resemble (13):

(13) Our friends are always there when we need them.

It is only in a context where (13) is mutually manifest to both interlocutors that it makes sense to dissociate oneself from (12). Since both (12) and (13) are entertained during processing roughly simultaneously (Curcó, 1997: ch. 9), the interpretive resemblance between (12) and (13) strongly indicates the speaker’s (ironic) attitude of dissociation.

Hearers also have general (i.e., prototypical) expectations about how their conversations tend to progress. In this sense, Haverkate (1985, 1990) analyzed irony as violations of the felicity conditions that should govern every conversational exchange, and Alba Juez (1998: 14) lists a number of conventionalized strategies for irony which violate normal ways of contributing to on-going conversations. They are quoted in (14a-d):

(14) a. Answer an obvious question with an even more obvious question:
   Ann: “Are you coming to the party?”.
   Tom: “Is the Pope Catholic?”.
   b. Reply to a lie with an even bigger lie:
   Ann: “I can lift a 200kg weight”.
   Tom: “Yes, and I’m Marie the Queen of Romania”.
   c. Reply to a stupid question with an even more stupid answer:
   Ann: “Where did he go after the party?”.
   Tom: “Up Mount Everest! How am I supposed to know?”.
   d. Ask a question and give a ridiculous answer before the hearer can answer himself/herself (example from The Golden Girls):
   Dorothy: “Ma, where are you going with all that food?”.
   Sophia: “I’m taking it to my room”.
   Dorothy: “Who have you got in there, Shelley Winters?”.
Microsocial, situational expectations are often the only reliable source for the identification of irony. For instance, only if the pupil is aware of the context (15a) underlying utterances (15c) and (15e), in situations (15b) and (15d) respectively, can he grasp the teacher’s attitude of dissociation (Glucksberg, 1995: 53). (15a) is not a cultural norm or factual information, but a very specific situational expectation concerning a definite quantity suggested by one single person (what Bredin, 1997: 12 calls irony of scale):

(15) a. [Teacher: term papers should be around fifty pages].
   b. [The pupil hands in a 3-page paper].
   c. Teacher: “This is a long term paper!”.
   d. [The pupil hands in a 300-page paper].
   e. Teacher: “This is a short term paper!”.

In (15c) and (15e) the teacher is ironically echoing potential utterances that he would have been able to say descriptively if the situation was different, for instance ‘papers should be around one page’ for (15c), and ‘papers should be around six hundred pages’ for (15e). In the actual situations where (15c) and (15e) are uttered, the hearer recognizes the mismatch between situations and utterances and concludes that the teacher is dissociating himself from the proposition expressed by (15c) and (15e), and at the same time makes manifest the existence of the alternative situations.

B. Mutually manifest physical environment (setting)
When two people engage in a conversation, there is a physical context (setting) surrounding them which, at a certain stage, may become mutually manifest to both interlocutors. Barbe’s (1989: 277) situational irony, focusing on “participants’ knowledge about a particular situation, especially the immediate situation” fits the characteristics of this situation-bound source. Furthermore, this contextual source is part of the cognitive environment available for the interlocutors during the interaction, and which, in this case, reaches the interlocutors’ minds through perception (and therefore is dealt with by one of the encapsulated, domain-specific modules in the brain; see Fodor, 1983). Hence, this contextual source is essential for building up factual assumptions (S&W, 1986: 81) and for the identification of the echoic nature of the utterance and the speaker’s attitude of dissociation towards this utterance (W&S, 1992). Therefore, it is usually exploited in typical examples of irony such as (16b), (17b) and (18b), in situations (16a), (17a), and (18a) respectively. These utterances are used as echoes of potential situations such as (16c), (17c), and (18c) in which they would be endorsed by the speaker and used non-ironically:

(16) a. [Rain pouring down].
   c. [It is spitting with rain].

(17) a. [Person basking in the sun].
   b. “You have a tough life!” (Dews and Winner, 1995: 4).
   c. [Person is leaving a mine after a hard day’s work].

(18) a. [Baby in the next seat is screaming his/her lungs out].

c. [Person has watched a nice film and been attended very well by the stewardess].

C. Speaker’s nonverbal behaviour

It is commonly accepted that the speaker’s ostensive nonverbal behaviour (smiles, frowning, winks, etc. belonging to the contextual information accessible to the addressee via perceptual mechanisms) can help the hearer to identify the intended ironic interpretation. In general, it is supposed that speakers who want to facilitate the identification of an ironic message will foreground their nonverbal behaviour as an explicit irony marker, since several studies have demonstrated that human beings are very bad at identifying messages from unintentionally conveyed nonverbal signals (see, for instance, Leo, 1985; Ekman, 1996, 1997; Ekman and Sullivan, 1991; Ekman et al., 1999; and Goode, 1999, on spotting liars from their unconsciously produced nonverbal behaviour).

In (19) (Barbe, 1995: 76), for instance, an ostensive paralinguistic hehehe (an ‘alternant’—since it does not overlap with speech—having vocal but not verbal attributes, according to Poyatos’s 1993 terminology) helps the audience of a radio programme reach the speaker’s attitude of dissociation towards the proposition expressed by his utterance:

(19) National Public Radio’s Penny Dennis remarked on her show Marketplace about the business executive Frank Lorenzo, who eliminated unions at Continental Airlines: “Today is Lorenzo’s birthday: The former chairman of Continental and Eastern and hehehe a big friend of unions. He turned fifty-three”.

The so-called ironic tone of voice deserves special mention. Normally, speakers resort to this ironic tone as “an explicit cue that a nonliteral interpretation is intended [...] a speaker will probably only use the ironic tone of voice when the amount of common ground shared by the speaker and a listener is low” (Kreuz and Roberts, 1995: 28). Alterations of normal intonational patterns include heavy stress, slow speaking rate, and nasalization, while intonation does not seem to be so important in interpreting ironic messages (Gibbs and O’Brien, 1991: 526). Haverkate (1985: 346-347), for instance, underlines the fact that many ironies are conveyed by (non-prosodic) written means, which seems to imply that no particular intonation cues are required for the interpretation of irony. In general, readers of ironic written texts lack many of the contextual sources that help the hearer access an ironic interpretation in face-to-face interaction, including mutual knowledge and physical setting. Writers can only rely on a few written means in order to convey ironic readings of their texts. Specifically in academic writing, authors show an extensive use of typographical devices: “quotation marks, of course, but also footnotes, italics, highlighted lists, titles and headings, citations, and more heavy handed disclaimers like (sic) and (?!). None of these devices is exclusively a signal of irony, but all of them can be used to separate two levels of text and thus to distance the ironic writer’s intention from that of the ironicized writer, making an ironic reading possible” (Myers, 1990: 431; see also González, 1996: 61; for a general discussion of differences between oral and written discourses, see Yus, 1998d; Cutler, 1974; Haverkate, 1990: 80; S&W, 1981: 559; Mariscal Chicano, 1994: 332; Gibbs, 1994: 379; Tannen, 1984: 133, among others).

D. Addressee’s background knowledge of addresser’s biographical data

Specific beliefs and assumptions about the interlocutor’s opinions, encyclopaedic knowledge,
tastes, interests, etc., together with an awareness of the degree of familiarity which relates both interlocutors (Dews and Winner, 1995: 11), are often essential for the proper communication of ironic meanings. For example, if the speaker intends (20a) to convey the implicature (20b), then the speaker must assume that the hearer already has, as a contextual assumption, a low opinion of John’s intelligence (Gibbs, 1994: 362; see also Haerkolate, 1990: 82), and that the hearer will rely on the mutually manifest assumption about John’s intelligence in order to recognize the speaker’s dissociative attitude towards the proposition expressed by (20a):

(20) a. “John’s a real Einstein”.
   b. John’s stupid.

Within relevance theory, this information is centred upon the speaker’s knowledge of the interlocutor’s cognitive environment (S&W, 1986: 45), whose boundaries cannot be determined in a precise way and which is often foregrounded in the course of conversations. Barbe’s (1989: 277) personal irony is precisely based upon the audience’s knowledge about the ironist’s background (particular personal knowledge).

E. Mutual knowledge
In every conversation, there is certain information which both interlocutors have to assume that they share, and which is often left unsaid or implicit during interaction (Barbe, 1995: 80-81). S&W (1986) criticise the idea that there is information which interlocutors share before conversation takes place because it inevitably produces an infinite recursion of assumptions (A knows p, B knows that A knows p, A knows that B knows that A knows p, ad infinitum) which prevents interlocutors from identifying what they really share. Instead, they propose a more dynamic view of mutuality (i.e., mutually manifest assumptions) constructed in the ongoing conversation. As such, mutual information tends to overlap with other contextual sources (factual knowledge, biographical data...), but we will keep it as an independent contextual source.

For instance, for Ann’s question in (21a), Tom’s indirect answer (21b) is useful to foreground the fact that A and B now share the information about the English being good sailors (or, in S&W’s terms, this information becomes mutually manifest), and the effective continuation of the conversation in (21c) is a proof of that fact:

(21) a. Ann: “Is Jack a good sailor?”.
   b. Tom: “He is English”.
   c. Ann: “He must be very good then...”.
   d. Tom: “He is, indeed”.

Several analysts have rejected or commented upon this hypothesis (see Yus, 1997: 91-97; 1998b for discussion), and argue in favour of the possibility of some background information which both interlocutors have no doubt that they share even before conversations start (this is why this section is still called mutual knowledge following the traditional label). Obviously, speakers are constantly checking the status of this information that they supposedly share with their interlocutors.

Needless to say, the hearer’s awareness of some mutually shared information may be essential for the identification of the speaker’s attitude of dissociation toward his/her utterance (and also for the speaker in his/her expectations of successful irony, see Myers Roy, 1981:...
In dialogue (22b), arising in situation (22a), Ann assumes that Tom shares with her the fact that unemployment has increased, and this is the key to the ironic interpretation (from Yus, 1998a). Besides, Ann is ironically echoing a potential situation such as (22c), in which (22b) would have been used descriptively and non-ironically:

(22) a. [Newspaper headline: “unemployment has increased 10% in the last six months”].
   b. Ann: “Things are really looking good for young people in this country, aren’t they? No doubt we’ll soon find a well-paid job...”.
   Tom: [laughing] “You are right... We’d better emigrate!”.
   c. [Newspaper headline: “unemployment has decreased 10% in the last six months”].

F. Role of previous utterances in the conversation
S&W (1986: 139-140) claim that the assumptions derived in the course of interpreting previous utterances are part of the initial context that is available for interlocutors in the interpretation of subsequent utterances. Specifically in the interpretation of irony, previous utterances can be a helpful contextual source either because they are literally repeated (see S&W’s 1981 use-mention distinction, and Cutler’s 1974 provoked irony), or because the speaker shows an attitude of disapproval towards the proposition expressed by the utterance. Winner (in Barbe, 1995: 21) provides a good example, quoted in (23), in which the son surely will have no problem remembering that not very long before her mother asked him to wear his sweater. The mutually manifest visual evidence that he is not wearing it, together with the reference to that previous request, are easy-to-access interpretive aids foregrounding the mother’s ironic attitude of dissociation towards (23b), and at the same time she ironically underlines (i.e., makes mutually manifest) the existence of a more desirable potential situation (23c) in which she would have endorsed (23b):

(23) a. [Mother has asked her son to wear his sweater but he is not wearing it].
   b. Mother: “I see you are wearing your sweater”.
   c. [Mother has asked her son to wear his sweater and he is wearing it].

G. Linguistic cues
Certain syntactic structures and vocabulary choices of many utterances are typically used for ironic purposes. What I have labelled linguistic cues comprise a good number of heterogeneous structures and words which share their alerting role to the nonliteral, ironic quality of the utterance containing them (Myers Roy, 1981: 4). Although the use of these cues as a proper contextual source is controversial and should be further discussed (Billy Clark, p.c.), because many (if not all) of these cues are not irony-specific, they may occasionally help the hearer in the identification of irony if these cues are combined with other, more salient contextual sources manifesting the speaker’s ironic attitude.

For instance, Barbe (1995: 22-23) shows how in situation (24a), an utterance such as (24b) may be literal or ironic depending on whether the hearer is aware of the background information (24a) or not, whereas (24c) (which belongs to a general common irony) tends to be interpreted as ironic regardless of such background knowledge (although an intonational pattern stressing the word fine will surely play some role in this link between syntactic arrangement and ironic interpretation):
(24) a. [Joe has been a close friend of Jim’s. Nevertheless, Joe betrayed some secrets to a business rival].
   b. “Joe is a fine friend”.
   c. “A fine friend Joe is”.

Among other suggestions of linguistic cues triggering ironic interpretations, we can outline the following:

1. Kreuz and Roberts (1995: 24) underline the combination of adverb and extreme, positive adjective as a standard structure for communicating ironic interpretations. They even propose a ‘random irony generator’ arising from the arbitrary combination of adverbs (absolutely, certainly, perfectly...) and extreme adjectives (amazing, adorable, brilliant...). Again, the aid of other irony-triggering cues such as the ironic tone of voice is essential, since the combination of adverb and adjective does not necessarily lead to an ironic interpretation.

2. Glucksberg (1995: 52) also mentions different types of expressions, such as requests containing (striking) overpolite constructions. However, he systematically matches them to particular conversational settings indicating a violation of one or several ‘felicity conditions’ for well-formed speech acts (thanking after stepping on the interlocutor’s toes, offering a pizza to someone who has just gobbled up the whole pie, etc.).

3. Barbe (1993; 1995: 131-144) studies explicit irony markers such as “isn’t it ironic that...”. These markers disambiguate utterances by alerting the hearer about the would-be ironic quality of the subsequent stretch of discourse. Needless to say, the fact that an utterance contains these markers does not entail that the utterance will invariably be considered ironic by the addressee.

4. Kaufer (1981: 497) mentions conventional set phrases used for ironic purposes (see also S&W, 1981: 559). “These conventional uses refer to any catch phrases, slogans, maxims, etc., whose form and function have become routinized through repeated use”.

5. Yamanashi (1998: 277) analyzes unnecessary repetition as a possible indicator of the speaker’s critical attitude towards the proposition expressed by his/her utterance.

6. Seto (1998: 246f) provides other examples of linguistic cues (of a lexical, syntactic, or stylistic nature, together with some prosodic markers) which tend to be used by ironists in order to convey an ironic interpretation (see also Kreuz et al., 1999; Attardo, forthcoming a):

(25) a. Lexical: Single words intrinsically charged with a very high positive meaning.
   John is a genius.

b. Lexical: modification (by intensifiers, for instance).
   You are an absolute genius.

c. Syntactic: the superlative.
   Truly this is the sweetest of theologies.

d. Syntactic: focus topicalization.
   A lovely trip it turned out to be.

e. Stylistic: politeness.
   Could you do me the favour of shutting up?

In general, these linguistic cues require the supportive presence of other contextual sources, especially marked intonational patterns, since many of these constructions may also be used in non-ironic contexts besides their possible ironic use. Specifically in the case of expressions such as (24c) above, S&W (1998: 286) claim that “the ‘ironical’ interpretations 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. As a result, it loses both its original echoic status and its irontical force. However, as long as the original motivation remains transparent, [this kind of expression] may be revived in an appropriate context, or by conscious analysis”.

One of the main hypotheses which underlie this article (and which is related to the just introduced contextual sources A-G above) is that the human brain is capable of integrating simultaneously incoming information from multiple sources such as the ones outlined in this section. As will be illustrated in the examples provided in the next sections, this integration of information from multiple contextual sources can lead to a more/less effective and fast/slow processing of the ironic interpretation. Other researchers have also dealt with multiple activation of sources, but establish grades of processing effort depending on the contextual source activated. For instance, Mizzau (1984: 38) argues that “a comment such as “Paul is smart”, accompanied by an eloquent facial expression, produces simultaneously a characterization of the message as ironical and its antiphrastic translation. If the same sentence is said without any accompanying non-verbal indices, but everybody knows the obtuseness of the person referred to, the understanding of the irony seems to be somehow posterior to the discovery of the true meaning” (quoted in Attardo, forthcoming b, his translation).

A parallel hypothesis, presented as prospect of future research in section six below, is the possibility of a modular organization of the brain capable of gathering information from multiple sources simultaneously. According to this hypothesis, the processing of information coming from several contextual sources would require the activation of specific processing domains, not only the typical encapsulated perceptual modules, but also modular sub-domains in the mental central systems.

4. Leading versus supportive contextual sources

The main claim of this paper is that the hearer’s simultaneous access to (one, several, or all) the contextual sources A-G outlined above helps the hearer to grasp the ironical interpretation of utterances. Some kind of incompatibility between the information provided by these contextual sources and the proposition expressed by the utterance is also necessary to foreground the speaker’s dissociative attitude. In other words, these contextual sources may underline the fact that the speaker is echoing a thought of someone other than the speaker or of the actual speaker at a different time (a time in which the proposition expressed is no longer incompatible with the information provided by one or more of these contextual sources). A parallel claim in this paper is that the more simultaneous incompatibilities that the hearer is able to detect between the proposition expressed by the speaker’s utterance and the information provided by these contextual sources, the smaller the processing effort required to identify the speaker’s attitude of dissociation.

The picture outlined here is that of multiple contextual sources providing parallel reasons for the hearer to reach the conclusion that the speaker’s intended interpretation of his/her utterance might be ironic. If the level of informative support provided by these contextual sources is high enough (depending on the hearer’s processing ability and his/her accessibility to contextual information), then the ironic interpretation of the utterance will be easily identified: the hearer will have overwhelming contextual support to conclude that the speaker’s
attitude towards his/her utterance is dissociative. Similarly, another consequence of this hypothesis is that if the number of contextual sources accessed and subsequent incompatibilities detected is not high enough or even nonexistent, a misunderstanding of the ironic interpretation might take place.

At this point, one might argue that the activation of multiple contextual sources also demands processing effort and that, consequently, the more sources activated, the higher the effort (thus contradicting the effort-saving hypothesis outlined above). In reality, this is not uneconomical because hearers are constantly accessing multiple contextual sources throughout any exchange. Therefore, when a seemingly ironic utterance turns up, often the hearer has already activated, a long time before, many of the contextual sources A-G proposed above, so that what takes place in the processing is not so much an “ad hoc activation followed by incompatibility” sequence as a detected incompatibility towards a previously activated contextual source. In other words, it is not denied that the activation of multiple sources is effort-demanding; what is rejected is a necessary ad hoc activation just for the sake of processing the ironic interpretation of the utterance. Many of these sources are activated some time before the ironic utterance is actually uttered, which adds to the overall economy of human comprehension.

Another argument, pointed out by Gibbs, Glucksberg, and Giora (personal communication), is that one does not need more than one incompatibility with one contextual source to identify the speaker’s ironic attitude: “the number of incompatibilities may not necessarily make that much of a difference if it only takes notice of one source of incompatibility for one to seek a non-literal interpretation for what the speaker is saying” (Gibbs). Indeed, one hears nice weather! in the middle of a downpour, and cannot help noticing an incompatibility between the proposition expressed by the utterance and the information provided by the physical environment (contextual source B), one single source triggering an attitude of dissociation. However, it is not the ability to access irony that is being discussed in this article (although hearers do differ in their ability to integrate information from different contextual sources), but the idea of accessibility making this ability more effort-saving. The same utterance (nice weather!) when said in a typically ironic tone of voice and maybe with a smile on the speaker’s face, is bound to have so much contextual information supporting an attitude of dissociation that the effort required to process the ironic interpretation of the utterance will necessarily decrease.

Nevertheless, this discussion has consequences for how we interpret the influence of contextual sources on the identification of an ironic utterance (which were not considered in Yus, 1998a). From now on, it will be assumed that in every conversational situation in which the speaker intends to convey an ironic interpretation there is one contextual source whose information will surely be very accessible (i.e., it is highly manifest to the hearer in the course of the conversation), at least more accessible than other contextual sources. The incompatibility detected between the proposition expressed by the utterance and the information provided by this single contextual source will be enough to detect the speaker’s attitude of dissociation and reach an ironic reading of the utterance. Consequently, it will be labelled leading contextual source. There may also be one or several additional contextual sources reaffirming the hypothesis of an ironic interpretation, providing a high degree of informative support capable of leading to the ironic interpretation much faster. These will be called supportive contextual sources. Which of the contextual sources A-G outlined above is candidate to become a leading contextual source depends on the attributes of the speech situation, the utterance itself, and the hearer’s inferential capabilities and cognitive resources.
In theory, detecting the incompatibility between the proposition expressed by the utterance and the information provided by the *leading contextual source* should be enough to convey the speaker’s attitude of dissociation towards that proposition, but the interlocutors can also enrich the context with incompatibilities detectable in other *supportive contextual sources*. It depends, as it were, on how much the ironist is interested in conveying an attitude of dissociation and lead the hearer to an optimal interpretation of the utterance. As Hamamoto (1998: 267) points out, “it is up to the speaker whether he uses a regular irony or a somewhat milder or subtler variety to convey the feeling of discrepancy. The person can map his/her prior cognition into a linguistic form or use subtler ways as long as the discrepancy is being expressed in the context of the utterance”. Actually, for some analysts, the accomplished ironist should use as few contextual signals as possible (Yamanashi, 1998: 278) including an unmarked sentential structure (Haverkate, 1990: 79; Kreuz and Roberts, 1995: 24), but this idea somehow contradicts the general picture of successful communication, which implies that “a speaker who intends an utterance to be interpreted in a particular way must also expect the hearer to be able to supply a context which allows that interpretation to be recovered. A mismatch between the context envisaged by the speaker and the one actually used by the hearer may result in a misunderstanding” (S&W, 1986: 16). In general, ironists will expect one or several contextual sources to be highly accessible, so that their (intended) irony is interpreted satisfactorily.³

An example which illustrates the *leading/supportive* distinction can be found in Cutler (1974: 117, slightly adapted here):

(26) a. *[Two people walk into an empty bar].*
  b. “It sure is lively here tonight!”.
  c. *[Smiling, with a distinctive intonation] “It sure is LIVELY here tonight!”.*
  d. *[Two people walk into a crowded bar with people singing and dancing].*

Cutler (ibid.) claims that in this example the emptiness of the room in (26a) is so evident that no special intonation contour is necessary to trigger the ironic interpretation of (26b). The hearer is immediately aware of how the speaker dissociatively echoes a parallel potential situation such as (26d) in which (26b) would be communicated descriptively and with the speaker endorsing both its proposition expressed and its potential implicatures. Now, under the newly introduced dichotomy, although it is correct to claim that a single contextual source is sufficient to lead to the search for irony, this does not eliminate the possibility of enriching the context with supplementive information so that the speaker’s attitude of dissociation towards (26b) is easier to detect. Imagine that (26c) takes place instead. Now, there would be a highly salient *leading contextual source* in the immediate environment (contextual source B) providing the necessary incompatibility with *lively*. Besides, the (simultaneously activated) information from the speaker’s nonverbal behaviour (contextual source C), and perhaps also a typical “*sure is...*” linguistic cue (contextual source G), provide some *informative support* to the hearer, making the access to the speaker’s dissociation even easier.

5. The *criterion* of optimal accessibility to irony

The model of irony comprehension proposed in this article relies heavily on context, not only in the identification of irony but also in the cognitive effort required to process it. In previous
sections, it was hypothesized that the identification of the attitude of dissociation, essential for
the recognition of ironic interpretations, can be made easier by multiple simultaneous
 activations of contextual sources. All these assumptions can now be summarized in a criterion:

**CRITERION OF OPTIMAL ACCESSIBILITY TO IRONY**

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

When the incompatibility detected between the proposition expressed by the utterance and the
information provided by one or several contextual sources reaches a certain level of
redundancy, the hearer effort-sav ingly infers that the speaker is being dissociative towards this
proposition, and then a so-called *irony trigger* is activated. As was argued in section four
above, the (highly salient) incompatibility provided by the *leading* contextual source is enough
to set off this irony trigger, but its access may be accelerated by the simultaneous identification
of incompatibilities found in the information supplied by other *supportive* sources:

A. Factual information  Incompatibility with factual, encyclopaedic, and
commonsense assumptions about the world we live in.

B. Physical setting  Incompatibility with a salient phenomenon from the speech
setting surrounding the interlocutors in the course of a
conversation.

C. Nonverbal communication  Incompatibility with normal nonverbal behaviour which
typically accompanies verbal speech.

D. Biographical data  Incompatibility with the speaker’s opinions, character, habits
and attitudes about life and the world we live in.

E. Mutual knowledge Incompatibility with information which is supposedly shared between
the interlocutors.

F. Previous utterances  Incompatibility (in the current conversational context) of the
repeated utterance with the information provided explicitly by
the same utterance in previous stages of the conversation or
even farther away in time. Alternatively, incompatibility
between the assumptions arising from the interpretation of
previous utterances and the information provided by the
current utterance.

G. Linguistic cues  Incompatibility with linguistic choices and sentential
structures which are typically used for ordinary
communication.
This argumentation gives us a picture of the hearer’s optimal recognition of the essential aspects of ironic communication (echoic quality, speaker’s attitude of dissociation) related to the hearer’s ability to access contextual resources available in the course of a conversation. In general, contextual resources are prone to a high degree of variation among individuals and conversational settings. However, three prototypical cases may be isolated. The criterion fits each of these cases satisfactorily (see below).

Let us recall that within relevance theory, the comprehension of irony is not treated as a special variety of interpretation, but follows the same ‘cognitive effects vs. mental effort balancing’ procedure as any utterance interpretation. For S&W, all that is needed to pick up an ironic interpretation is to identify the speaker’s attitude of disapproval towards the utterance and the fact that the speaker is echoing a thought or norm attributed to someone else or to himself/herself at a different time (W&S, 1992: 60).

As will be shown in the three prototypical cases exemplified below, S&W’s hypothesis may be complemented with a model of contextual activation which explains the identification of the speaker’s attitude of dissociation and also the fact that the hearer may not be easily led to an ironic interpretation, or even choose a different interpretation from the ironic one intended.

For most examples of irony, S&W claim that context (mutually manifest assumptions) rules out any other interpretation and foregrounds the ironic one. For example (from W&S, 1992), in situation (27a), Mary’s utterance (27b) has, in theory, the three possible interpretations listed in (27c-e):

(27) a. [Mary has lent some money to Bill on the understanding that she will get it back next day. She wonders aloud to Peter whether Bill will keep his word. Peter replies: “Bill is an officer and a gentleman”. Next day, Bill rudely denies all knowledge of his debt to Mary. She tells Peter what has happened].
   b. Mary: “An officer and a gentleman”.
   c. Mary believes that Bill is an officer and a gentleman.
   d. Mary says that Bill is an officer and a gentleman.
   e. Mary echoes what Peter said about Bill being an officer and a gentleman while at the same time dissociating herself from this opinion.

According to W&S (1992: 69-70), (27c) cannot possibly be picked up as consistent with the principle of relevance (highest cognitive effects in exchange for least processing effort), since it contradicts facts which are now mutually manifest to Peter and Mary and, rather than eliminating assumptions, (27c) would simply be rejected as inconsistent with currently held assumptions. On the other hand, (27d) is also irrelevant considering how vivid Peter’s former utterance must be in his memory. In these circumstances, Peter will surely need no reminding of his own utterance and therefore (27d) will also be inconsistent with the principle of relevance. The conclusion is that (27b) can only be interpreted as (27e), that is, as an echo of Peter’s utterance in order to express an attitude to it, and opposed to (27c-d) which, if communicated, would have generated explicatures. What this paper would add to this view is the stress on the role that irony-triggering sources of incompatibility play in the identification of the echoic quality of (27b): MUTUAL KNOWLEDGE (source E, in order to reject (27c) as a possible interpretation) and the role of PREVIOUS UTTERANCES (source F, in order to reject (27d) as a possible interpretation), plus, perhaps, a syntactic trigger such as “indeed” (LINGUISTIC CUES, source G).
This basic claim in this paper (that the necessary ingredients of ironic utterances may be more or less easily detected depending on the quantity and manifestness of contextual sources A-G outlined above) will now be illustrated with three prototypical cases:

(28) **Case 1**

A high level of manifest information provided by multiple, simultaneously activated (*leading* and *supportive*) contextual sources leads to a fast identification of a mismatch between contextual information and the proposition expressed by the utterance, which foregrounds the speaker’s dissociative attitude underlying the ironic interpretation of the utterance without much mental effort.

An example fitting the characteristics of this case is the utterance (29b) in situation (29a) with the intended ironic interpretation (29c) (W&S, 1992: 55):

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

S&W claim that in order to reach the ironic sense of (29b), the hearer is expected to label it as a quotation (echo) towards which the speaker has an attitude of dissociation (in this particular example, (29b) may actually be a literal quotation of Dr. Johnson). Indeed, there is no problem for the effective interpretation of the ironic sense of (29b), since the contextual information invalidates any chance that the speaker intended to communicate —as an explicature—the proposition expressed by (29b). Clearly, the speaker is ironically echoing a more pleasurable situation such as (29d) (in which s/he could have endorsed the proposition expressed by (29b) and its strong implicatures, for instance (29e)), instead of the disappointing—and mutually manifest—situation (29a). Therefore, reaching (29c) is minimally effort-demanding and provides the only relevant information available. No doubt, identifying (29b) as a quote (and as a change of register contradicting normal communicative means) is just one of multiple incompatibilities that the hearer can detect simultaneously in several contextual sources, and whose contextual support triggers the ironic interpretation in the course of the conversation. As shown in (29f), several contextual sources provide multiple incompatibilities with the proposition expressed by (29b):

(29) f. **SOURCE** | **INCOMPATIBILITY**
--- | ---
Factual information  | ✓
Physical setting   | ✓
Nonverbal communication  | ✓
Biographical data  | ✓
Mutual knowledge   | ✓
Previous utterances | ✗
Linguistic cues   | ✓
In this example, there are incompatibilities with the hearer’s knowledge of typical characteristics of London (FACTUAL INFORMATION), with the terrible weather inviting the hearer to be tired (PHYSICAL SETTING), with the stereotypical nonverbal behaviour that is normally used for assertions (NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION), with the hearer’s prior knowledge of the speaker’s opinion about London (BIOGRAPHICAL DATA), with speaker/hearer shared opinions about London (MUTUAL KNOWLEDGE), and with normal, discursive structures used in casual conversations, since there is a distinctive change of register in (29b) (S&W, 1981: 559). However, previous utterances (in the conversation) do not seem to play any role in indicating the speaker’s dissociative attitude (although the actual quotation of Dr. Johnson would indeed become an important source of dissociation).

Of these contextual sources, the physical environment would be a good candidate to be labelled the leading contextual source (sufficient by itself to lead to the identification of that dissociative attitude in the speaker), while the other supportive contextual sources simply make the ironic interpretation (29c) even more accessible.

An example of fewer incompatibilities with contextual sources, but which still makes the ironic interpretation highly accessible, is (30) below (Barbe, 1989: 272). In situation (30a), speaker B is ironic in (30b) concerning A’s mistake (A is also ironic in his second utterance, but this example will not be analyzed) and intends to communicate the ironic interpretation (30c). The reason for A’s optimal interpretation of B’s ironic attitude lies in a sufficient number of contextual sources activated and the level of redundancy provided by the simultaneous incompatibilities that arise during comprehension:

(30) a. [A circle of close friends who know about each other’s strengths and shortcomings and who do not beat about the bush especially concerning the latter (Barbe, ibid.)].

b. A: Ok, let’s drink to their health again.

   [A takes B’s glass by mistake].

   B: Preferably with other people’s glasses, isn’t that so, A?

   A: Oh, sorry, this was yours? No communicable diseases. At least I hope so.

c. You took my glass!

In this example, B’s utterance provides fewer incompatibilities with activated contextual sources than example (29):

   (30) d. SOURCE INCOMPATIBILITY

   Factual information ✓
   Physical setting x
   Nonverbal communication ✓
   Biographical data ✓
   Mutual knowledge x
   Previous utterances x
   Linguistic cues ✓

However, in this case the number of incompatibilities still makes the ironic interpretation of B’s utterance in (30b) very accessible. As summarized in (30d), A knows that people do not prefer to take other people’s glasses when they want to drink (FACTUAL INFORMATION). A also knows how hypochondriac B is (Barbe, ibid.: 273), and it is unlikely that B agrees that other people’s glasses should be taken (BIOGRAPHICAL DATA). Finally, A picks up an exaggerated
intonation in B’s final tag (possibly also a linguistic cue) (Barbe, ibid. recorded this dialogue), which contradicts B’s usual paralinguistic behaviour (nonverbal communication). Therefore, an effort-saving access to irony is still predictable. Regarding S&W’s approach, (30b) would clearly indicate B’s attitude of dissociation towards his utterance. The recognition of this attitude may be speeded up by the overwhelming contextual information contradicting the proposition expressed by B’s utterance.

(31) **Case 2**

Few or no incompatibilities with the information provided by multiple, simultaneously activated (leading and supportive) contextual sources leads to a slow access to the ironic interpretation of the utterance. The hearer is cognitively aware of a literal/non-literal sequentiality, since the effort required for the hypothesis that the speaker might intend to communicate the proposition expressed as an explicature is not straightforwardly short-circuited by contextual strength.

This case includes typical ironic instances such as the so-called garden-path irony, which causes the hearer to read it first as an ordinary assertion, and after finding it irrelevant in the current on-going conversation, the hearer has to reinterpret it ironically (S&W, 1986: 242). This is a typical case illustrating the hearer’s doubts about the speaker’s intended interpretation and, even though the irony is finally accessed, this happens only after an effort-demanding explicit-implicit sequentiality.

S&W do consider the possibility of multiple doubt-producing interpretations: “Any utterance may be understood in two quite different ways: as expressing the speaker’s own opinion, or as echoing or reporting an opinion attributed to someone else; it is up to the hearer to decide which interpretation was intended” (W&S, 1992: 62, emphasis in the original). Besides, in case 2 the information provided by the proposition expressed by the utterance is a candidate to be picked up as consistent with the principle of relevance (and hence a candidate to be communicated as an explicature). If we bear in mind that further extensions of context are effort-demanding, why should the addressee do so? because contextual support (however weak it may be) provides enough incompatibilities with the proposition expressed for an extension of the search for relevance to be worth it. In other words, contextual support, however weak, leads the hearer to hypothesize that the speaker’s attitude might be dissociative, and that the relevance of the utterance lies precisely in this attitude. An example is John Lennon’s utterance (32b) in situation (32a) intending to communicate the ironic interpretation (32c) (Gibbs, 1994: 361):

(32) a. [The addressee reads an interview with John Lennon in the press].
   b. John Lennon: “The Beatles are more popular than Jesus Christ”.
   c. Isn’t this attention to the Beatles somewhat ridiculous? We really aren’t in the same class as Jesus at all but people are acting as if we were.

In this example, the proposition expressed by (32b) is only incompatible with the information provided by one activated contextual source, as showed in (32d):

(32) d. SOURCE | INCOMPATIBILITY
   Factual information | ✓
   Physical setting | ✗
In cases like these, the reader will surely formulate a hypothesis as to whether John Lennon really meant what he was saying (i.e., endorsed the proposition expressed by (32b) and intended to communicate it as an explicature), and judging by his factual commonsense information, will probably conclude that the proposition expressed cannot be the intended interpretation and that, instead, the ironic interpretation (32c) was the one really intended. Specifically, and as shown in (32d), the reader of Lennon’s statement will only find one incompatibility with general encyclopaedic (commonsense) information concerning religion and the importance of Jesus Christ (FACTUAL INFORMATION). There is no PHYSICAL SETTING which is mutually manifest, nor any explicit NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION marking the utterance as ironic. Besides, the reader who knows about Lennon’s BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION will not be surprised that someone as famous as him would go so far as to utter (32b). Lastly, there is no MUTUAL KNOWLEDGE to be accessed, nor is there any relevant information coming from PREVIOUS UTTERANCES or special irony-triggering LINGUISTIC CUES in the utterance. Lennon should not have been so surprised that his ironic utterance was misunderstood.

We can see how in case 2 the hearer follows the same interpretive procedures as in case 1, but the lack of contextual support raises doubts about the speaker’s dissociative/endorsing attitude towards the proposition expressed by the utterance.

(33) **Case 3**

There are very few or no incompatibilities with the information provided by multiple, simultaneously activated (leading and supportive) contextual sources, and the hearer concludes that the proposition expressed by the utterance matches the speaker’s intended interpretation (i.e., the speaker intends to communicate it as an explicature). In this case, due to a very weak or nonexistent contextual support, the intended ironic attitude of dissociation towards this proposition will not be reached (the proposition expressed by the utterance is the first and only information found consistent with the principle of relevance). Instead, a misunderstanding of the utterance (intended implicature turned unintended explicature) will take place. The hearer is not aware of the ironic interpretation underlying the speaker’s utterance.

Clearly, this is a case in which an echo and an attitude of dissociation fail to lead the hearer to the right interpretation. Now, the hearer faces an intended ironic interpretation of an utterance whose explicit content —proposition expressed—is found relevant enough to stop interpretation at that stage: the speaker supposedly intends to communicate the proposition expressed by the utterance. However, the interpretive procedure has not changed from cases 1-2 above. The hearer still activates in-coming information from contextual sources in his/her search for relevance, but no incompatibility makes him/her suspect that the speaker’s attitude is dissociative, or that the utterance echoes a potential thought in an alternative non-ironic situation.

For instance, in situation (34a) (from Yus, 1998a), Bill intends to communicate the ironic
interpretation (34c) with his first utterance in (34b):

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

Clearly, the proposition expressed provided by Bill’s utterance is not incompatible with any information from contextual sources, as we can see in (34d):

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

No source of incompatibility in Tom’s accessible contextual information can be found for Bill’s proposition. Not even Tom’s factual knowledge about women not deserving to be kept in the kitchen is activated, because it is also a factual assumption that not everybody agrees on the role of women in society. Tom does not find incompatibilities in the other contextual sources, not even in Bill’s nonverbal behaviour, since Bill utters his statement in a default, neutral tone of voice, without any special facial gesture and with no striking sentential structure or vocabulary choice. Tom’s misunderstanding of Bill’s ironic utterance was indeed predictable. Although Bill echoes a cultural norm and dissociates himself from the proposition expressed by his utterance, lack of contextual support on Tom’s side (rather than Bill’s defective communicative efforts) explains why Bill’s communicative intention proves unsuccessful. Besides, Bill and Tom are strangers. As such, Bill should have concentrated on very salient aspects of the physical setting for the construction of ironic interpretations. Physical co-presence (Clark and Marshall, 1981) usually helps to reach “communicative success between listener and speakers whose degree of shared common ground is unknown. If someone makes an ironic remark to a stranger at a bus stop, the reference will probably be to some perceptually salient phenomenon, such as the weather, or the fact that the bus is late. Since the listener can directly perceive the mismatch between the situation and the utterance, he or she can conclude that the speaker is employing irony” (Kreuz et al., 1999). The same can be said about Bill and Tom’s conversation.

One of the main conclusions of this case 3 is that, just as we can set an upper limit of contextual support beyond which the speaker’s ironic intention is immediately detected, we can also set a lower limit of contextual absence below which irony is not even identified as such despite the speaker’s effort to convey an attitude of dissociation and foreground the echoic quality to his/her utterance. Both limits are, needless to say, constantly subject to
constraints of the speech situation and the cognitive environments of the interlocutors, which necessarily vary from one conversational exchange to another.

One last issue that should be commented upon in relation to cases 1-3 above is whether or not the hearer chooses an ironic interpretation, that is, whether s/he is endowed with a constant, infallible ability to reach the intended ironic interpretation regardless of contextual support. S&W (1986) claim that during interpretation the hearer has to find an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance (highest cognitive effects in exchange for lowest mental effort), which in fact will be the only interpretation that the speaker might have expected to be optimally relevant to the hearer. This is precisely what happens to cases 1 and 3. In case 1, the hearer finds it easy to identify the speaker’s attitude of dissociation towards the proposition expressed by the utterance, and reaches the ironic interpretation with little or no difficulty, since the rich contextual support makes the ironic interpretation the only one yielding any relevant outcome. In case 3, the hearer is, again, naturally led to a non-ironic interpretation due to lacking contextual support, this time with the speaker’s attitude of dissociation unidentified (the speaker is thought to be endorsing the proposition expressed and hence to intend to communicate this proposition explicitly). As Carston (1988: 168) points out, “one doesn’t go on endlessly processing a new piece of information [...] but abandons the endeavour when the returns threaten not to offset the effort”. What about case 2? In this case the hearer doubts about the speaker’s attitude and has to choose, since both the explicit and the implicit interpretations are eligible as relevant to the hearer (eventually, some minimal contextual support makes the access to a possible ironic interpretation worth the mental effort). This is also the case for so-called intentional ambiguities. For example, in Peter Shaffer’s play Amadeus, Salieri asks Mozart what opinion he has about his music, and Mozart answers that he never thought that such music was possible. Salieri, when given this answer, cannot know whether Mozart has praised him or has criticised his music, because both interpretations are likely to be selected as consistent with the principle of relevance (see Morgan and Green, 1987: 727). Of course, I assume that many borderline conversational instances will overlap with the three prototypical cases illustrated above.

Before finishing this section, I would like to review briefly two approaches to irony which share with the criterion of optimal accessibility the importance of contextual support in the identification of irony:

(1) Attardo (forthcoming b) suggests a theory of irony in which context also plays an essential role in determining the inappropriateness of the utterance and hence the ulcer eventual activation of irony-searching mental operations: “The only factor in the context of the utterance which can identify an utterance as echoic is that the utterance is somehow inappropriate either to the context or to the set of beliefs that the hearer knows the speaker to have... the mentioned status of an utterance has to be determined inerentially, since by definition there is no co-textual clue to the mentioned status of the utterance. How can this status be determined? Apparently, through contextual inappropriateness”.

However, Attardo’s view reduces the requirements of irony to contextual inappropriateness: “If we compare the echoic mention theory and the traditional/Gricean view, we can easily see that their explanatory power is the same, but that the echoic mention theory involves some extra steps (labelling the utterance echoic and looking for a source of the utterance) which are unnecessary, since mere contextual inappropriateness is enough to trigger the assumption of implicature. This is not to say that one cannot have cases of echoic irony, but only that all irony is not necessarily echoic”. However, not all cases of inappropriateness lead to the hearer’s search for relevance in a potential ironic interpretation. Sometimes the
inappropriate utterance will be rejected if the hearer finds no offset of cognitive effects in exchange for the effort required to rule out the source of inappropriateness. The identification of the speaker’s attitude in determining the ironic quality of an utterance is essential, at least from a relevance-theoretic perspective in which all propositions have to be embedded in assumptions schemas incorporating the speaker’s attitude to that proposition in the act of communication (both explicit and implicit).

In his article, Attardo restricts S&W’s deliberately broad notion of echo and seems to reduce it to echoing another utterance. As an illustration, he proposes the example in (35).

(35) a. [Two farmers in a drought-stricken area].
   b. A: “Don’t you just love a nice spring rain?”.

According to Attardo, (35b) is ironic in situation (35a) without needing a mention or an echo of another utterance. Contextual inappropriateness is enough to trigger the ironic interpretation. However, we should not forget that A endorses the proposition expressed by his utterance in (35b). Therefore, contextual inappropriateness—which in this article is claimed to be undoubtedly essential—also has to foreground the speaker’s attitude of dissociation towards this proposition or irony may well end up unnoticed. What A is doing in (35b) is to echo ironically a potential situation, an area with plenty of rain, in which (35b) could be used descriptively.

Lastly, Attardo proposes a theory of irony which should satisfy the requirements (36a-e) below, and which the criterion-based view proposed in this article also satisfies. An utterance \( u \) is would be ironical if:

(36) a. \( u \) is contextually inappropriate.
   b. \( u \) is (at the same time) relevant.
   c. \( u \) is construed as having been uttered intentionally and with awareness of the contextual inappropriateness by S.
   d. S intends that (part of) his/her audience recognise points a-c.
   e. Unless H construes \( u \) as being unintentional irony, in which case c-d do not apply.

Utsumi (forthcoming), also deals with contextual attributes of irony. The basic claims in the article are as follows:

(37) a. Ironic language presupposes ironic environment (a situational setting that motivates verbal irony). Verbal irony is a language-related phenomenon, but it cannot be discussed devoid of situation.
   b. All ironic communication presumes implicit display of ironic environment. Implicit display is a presumption according to which people judge whether an utterance is ironic and infer ironic intention so that the current situation meets requirements of ironic environment.
   c. Verbal irony is a prototype-based category characterized by the notion of implicit display, a notion which provides typicality conditions characterizing the prototype ‘verbal irony’. Utterances having more properties of implicit display are perceived as being more ironic. People judge whether an utterance is ironic by assessing the similarity between the prototype and the utterance.
The key aspect of Utsumi’s theory is the so-called *ironic environment*, which is related to the stress on the role of contextual sources that is given in this article. Ironic environments consist of three events:

(38) a. The speaker has a certain expectation $E$ at time $t_0$.
    b. The speaker’s expectation $E$ fails (i.e., $E$ is incongruous with the reality) at time $t_1$.
    c. The speaker has a negative emotional attitude (e.g., disappointment, anger, reproach, envy) toward the incongruity between what is expected and what actually is.

When context includes (a-c), the situation is surrounded by *ironic environment*. When a context is not surrounded by ironic environment, which does not give the speaker the reason for being ironic, any utterances given in that context do not have [are not supposed to have, rather] ironic intention. Consequently, “verbal irony is an utterance/statement that implicitly displays ironic environment in which it is given. Therefore, utterances are clearly nonironic when they directly express at least one of the three events of ironic environment” (ibid.). Utsumi further claims —in a very close view to mine— that “there are many cases that hearer cannot recognize the properties of implicit display because they are not sure whether the situation is surrounded by ironic environment before interpreting an utterance”.

6. Prospects of future research: Modularity and simultaneous activation

One last hypothesis, which is closely related to the criterion of optimal accessibility to irony, refers to the possibility that the human brain has a modular organization designed to process multiple-source information simultaneously, so that the multiple activation of contextual sources would be a natural, modular way of processing information. However, as Sperber (personal communication) correctly states, “suggesting the existence of a specific module calls for a variety of justifications having to do with the function of the hypothetical module, its mode of operation, its developmental pattern, and even its evolutionary plausibility, its selective impairment in brain lesions, etc.”, aspects which would deserve more research and empirical testing than I can provide at this stage. What follows is a sketch of what field this hypothesis opens for research.

As was discussed in Yus (1998a), following Fodor (1983), the human mind has a series of modules characterized by domain-specificity (they process information related to a specific type), informational encapsulation (“by an informationally encapsulated cognitive faculty I mean one that has access, in the course of its computations, to less than all the information at the disposal of the organism whose cognitive faculty it is, the restriction on informational access being imposed by relatively unlabile, ‘architectural’ features of mental organization”; Fodor, 1987: 25), and innate specification, among other attributes. An example of a module is the *visual perceptual module*, specifically designed to process a particular type of information and which is innately developed in human beings.

Besides modules, the human mind has *central systems* for belief fixation. These are non-modular, domain-neutral, and encapsulated (see Kasher, 1984; S&W, 1986: 71; W&S, 1986). Unlike modules, central systems have no limits as to the amount or type of information that they can process. For instance, the management of concepts and factual information is typical of these systems, which control the efficiency and the current state of the person’s representation of the world (which is, to a certain degree, likely to be changed; see S&W,
Initially, it is commonsensical to treat pragmatic (nondemonstrative) inferences as non-modular: “the claim that pragmatics is a module is essentially equivalent to the claim that there is a pragmatic code” (W&S, 1986: 584). Both the assumption that pragmatics is a module and that communication necessarily involves the use of a code seem to be false: “if utterance interpretation is a matter of decoding the speaker’s intentions, there must be some algorithm for selecting the appropriate set of contextual assumptions, the ones the hearer was intended to use” (ibid.). This is clearly incompatible with the fact that often hearers are faced with the choice of suitable alternative interpretations yielding different interpretive outcomes, only one of which was intended by the speaker.

From this point of view, there is a code/inference mediation in human communication, within which (decoded) sentence perception would be modular, whereas (nondemonstratively inferred) interpretive hypotheses on the speaker’s utterance (ostensive behaviour) would be non-modular (see Fodor, 1989: 5-6).

However, the non-modular quality of the central systems has led many theorists to conclude that we cannot discover much about how they work. Fodor “takes the position that the[ir] study [...] is a pretty hopeless endeavour [...] Attempts within artificial intelligence to model the way in which humans fix and revise beliefs have repeatedly come up against the seemingly intractable ‘frame problem’; this is the problem of isolating any principle(s) which can account for how we decide which subset of our vast store of information to consult (and update) when interpreting some new information and adding it to our existing representation of the world” (Carston, 1997: 44; see also Fodor, 1987, and note 2 above). In short, this is Fodor’s (1983: 107) ‘First Law of the Non-Existence of Cognitive Science’ defined as “the more global a cognitive process is, the less anybody can understand it”.

In the last few years there has been some criticism and/or reformulation of this Fodorian view of the mind, specifically concerning the increasing awareness that central systems might be far more structured than Fodor thought (within RT, see S&W, 1995: 293; Sperber, 1994a, 1996), that is, that there might be a so-called central systems module. Sperber (1994a: 40) acknowledges that certain conceptual processes, not just perceptual ones, are modular. He “suggests that central thought processes are quite generally modular, that thought can be accounted for by a large network of conceptual modules whose domains crosscut those of the peripheral perception modules; there must, of course, be myriad intricate connections or pathways between such micro-modules” (Carston, 1997: 45). This is precisely the picture of modular/non-modular arrangement of interpretation that I would like to apply to the comprehension of irony: the fact that the hearer may integrate a great deal of information from different sources, either encapsulated perceptual modules or highly specialized micro-modules in the central systems in charge of such essential information as the speaker’s biographical data or mutually manifest assumptions. All this information will then be used to reach the essential aspects of ironic utterances: the speaker’s attitude of dissociation and the echoic quality of the utterance. Lack of information form contextual sources, on the other hand, will probably lead to an undetected irony.

This new view of central systems is, to a certain extent, contradictory, since the so-called encapsulation of Fodorian modules seems to go against the typical human capability of integrating “a great wealth of disparate information, of making new connections among thoughts and analogising across domains” (Carston, 1997: 46). The solution to this contradiction would be, so it seems, to acknowledge a high degree of interconnectivity among the different domain-specific sub-modules until some kind of integrative processing is
achieved. Carston (ibid.) proposes the picture of a *continuum* ranging “from peripheral perceptual systems, which are rigidly encapsulated (not diverted from registering what is out there), through a hierarchy of conceptual modules, with the property of encapsulation diminishing progressively at each level as the interconnections among domain-specific processors increase”.

If this revised conception of the mind is accurate, our *central systems module* would be in charge of the management of *contextual sources* A (FACTUAL INFORMATION), D (BIOGRAPHICAL DATA), E (MUTUAL KNOWLEDGE), and F (PREVIOUS UTTERANCES) above, while the (perceptual) *contextual sources* B (SETTING), C (NONVERBAL BEHAVIOUR) and G (LINGUISTIC CUES, for decoded sentence perception) would be managed by specialized, domain-specific Fodorian modules. The hearer would activate one or several of these sources in the course of a conversation and use them as an aid when building up an interpretive hypothesis of the speaker’s intended interpretation. The identification of echoes and dissociative attitudes can be faster, slower, or missing depending on the quality and accessibility of this contextual information.

Most important of all, this new approach gives us the picture of a dynamic human brain accessing different contextual sources *simultaneously* and integrating all this information within the *central systems* (now modular) *processor*. This is particularly interesting for the study of irony, since the identification of this discursive strategy depends upon finding incompatibilities between the proposition expressed by the utterance and the information from the (simultaneous, as claimed in this article) activation of different contextual sources. For example, Barbe (1993: 581) writes that “a successful ironist requires knowledge of the immediate [source B] and cultural context [source A] as well as of the participants” [sources D and E]. This picture is consistent with the communicator’s main responsibility in successful communication: “to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information that the audience will have accessible and be likely to use in the comprehension process” (S&W, 1986: 43).

In other words, this integrative picture of communication implies that when two people engage in a conversational interaction, they are constantly gathering information — often mutually manifest — from each other and the setting, which interlocutors eventually integrate in their central systems. In the course of a conversation, the hearer has easy access to certain encyclopedic information, which is located in the central systems where beliefs and knowledge are fixed and where the hearer’s representation of the world is constantly being updated (source A: FACTUAL INFORMATION).

The hearer also has four specialized speaker-centred central systems sub-modules or domains, two of them foregrounding particular background information about the interlocutor (likes and dislikes, personal and mutual friends, occupation, and so on; source D: BIOGRAPHICAL DATA), and also assumptions which are supposed to be mutually manifest (or shared) by the interlocutors (source E: MUTUAL KNOWLEDGE), both of which may be essential for the hearer to play a conversational part in adequate terms. A third sub-module contains default verbal/nonverbal pairings (probably also a stock of interlocutor-specific verbal/nonverbal pairings), which the hearer constantly checks for appropriateness with the aid of a module devoted to visual perception (source C: NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION). Finally, a fourth sub-module constantly updates the memory store of prior conversational encounters with the interlocutor, which contains a record of previously communicated utterances (source F: PREVIOUS UTTERANCES).

Furthermore, the conversation takes place in a space- and time-bound setting. The hearer
will, in the course of the interaction, be aware not only of time and space location, but also, with the aid of a Fodorian module devoted to visual perception, of relevant aspects of the immediate surrounding (source B: SETTING). Another encapsulated module, in this case oriented towards sentence perception, decodes the syntactic arrangement and vocabulary choice of the speaker’s words before the resulting logical form of the utterance can be enriched to yield a minimally contextualized explication in the non-demonstrative inferential central systems (source G: LINGUISTIC CUES).

It can be hypothesized that there is a high degree of interconnectivity between central systems and encapsulated modules, and eventually all the incoming information from different sources is integrated and attached, as it were, to the speaker’s words, enriching them inferentially in order to yield a hypothesis about the speaker’s intended interpretation. Besides, I hypothesize that the comprehension of utterances, and specifically of ironic utterances, involves the activation of one or more of these sources, and that the more incompatibilities detected between the explicit content of the speaker’s utterance and the information provided by these simultaneously activated contextual sources, the less effort-full the comprehension of irony will turn out to be. A similar multiple-source inferential integration of information is also envisaged by Sperber (1996: 133) when he states that if “the output of one conceptual module can serve as input to another one, modules can each be informationally encapsulated, while chains of inference can take a conceptual premise from one module to the next, and therefore integrate the contribution of each in some final conclusion. A holistic effect need not be the outcome of a holistic procedure”. Kasher’s (1991: 391) interface pragmatics as “pragmatic knowledge which involves integration of data from a linguistic channel with data from other channels” also fits this multi-source picture of comprehension, even though this term is applicable to linguistic competence, rather than to a cognitive performance theory.

How people integrate all the information reaching their minds from all these contextual sources is subject to great variation among individuals, since the hearer has a very personal background of factual assumptions and encyclopaedic information, and often the perceptual input of information does not result in straightforward processing due perhaps to the hearer’s lack of attention or inability to ascribe relevance to this information. Therefore, Barbe (1995: 15) is right in pointing out that “the discovery of conversational irony is based on very personal judgements. Not everybody agrees which utterances are ironic and which are not, precisely because irony is not in the text, but is ascribed to the text by hearers during interpretation”. This is consistent with current relevance-theoretic research, within which it is claimed that “for each item of new information, many different sets of assumptions from diverse sources (long-term memory, short-term memory, perception) might be selected as context” (S&W, 1986: 138). Actually, S&W’s (ibid.: 140-147) suggested extensions of context fit some of the contextual sources A-G outlined above: “the mind should try to pick out, from whatever sources it has available, including its own internal resources, the information which has the greatest relevance in the initial context [made up mainly of previous utterances, source F] [...] Such information is to be sought in accessible extensions of the context, whether they involve encyclopaedic memory [source A], the short-term memory store [source A], or the environment” [source B].

A final issue that should be addressed is whether or not this effort-saving integrative mental procedure during interpretation is innately rooted in the child’s brain or whether it is nurtured by the person’s developmental pragmatic experience. There has been a traditional debate between analysts who support a nativist approach to the human mind (Chomsky, Fodor) and constructivists, who stress the importance of the child’s interaction with the environment
as the key to mental development (Behaviourists, Piagetians). I agree with more eclectic positions such as Karmiloff-Smith’s (1992, 1994). She argues against nativist/constructivist radical positions. In answer to the nativists, she substitutes innate modules for a more developmental process of modularization as the child grows up. In this picture, activation levels in the brain circuits will initially be distributed fairly evenly across the brain, and only with time will specific circuits be activated in response to domain-specific inputs. To the constructivist view, she responds that there is considerably more to the initial state of the mind than they posit. The brain is not prestructured with ready-made representations which are simply triggered by environmental stimuli; it is channelled to progressively develop representations via interaction with both the external environment and its own internal environment.

Specifically, in the case of the comprehension of irony, it may be intuitively predicted that the child will need some time to develop a cognitive ability to integrate information from different contextual sources and rule out alternative interpretations, especially in those conversational settings in which explicit-italic interpretations are alternative due to weak contextual support. Some studies show that children need several years’ experience before they are able to cope with weakly manifest implicit interpretations, and become aware of alternative ironic/non-ironic distinctions. In de Groot et al. (1995) and Winner and Gardner (1993), several experiments led the analysts to place the developmental threshold at the age of six (see also Winner, 1997).

7. Concluding remarks

In this article a criterion of optimal accessibility to irony has been proposed to account for the different possibilities in the processing of ironic interpretations that can arise in ordinary conversations. The criterion relies on the hypothesis that the identification of irony (and the cognitive effort required for its processing) may be easier or more difficult depending on the hearer’s detection of incompatibilities between the proposition expressed by the speaker’s utterance and the information provided by one or several contextual sources (one of them highly salient, called leading contextual source, enough by itself to trigger irony, plus one or several supportive contextual sources) which are simultaneously activated during the interpretation of the utterance. As a result, the more (simultaneous) incompatibilities detected by the hearer, the easier to access and process the irony. This is so to the extent that “contextual strength” may even lead to a similarity in the cognitive effort required for the processing of the ironic meaning and that required for the processing of the literal meaning of a particular utterance (Yus, in preparation).
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Throughout this article the term *incompatibility* will be used to refer to the clash arising between the proposition expressed by the utterance and the information conveyed by single or multiple contextual sources, a clash which triggers the identification of the echoic mention and the speaker’s attitude of dissociation, essential for an optimal access to an implicit ironic interpretation. Some parallel terms have also been used in the study of irony, including *discrepancy* (Kreuz and Roberts, 1995: 22; Hutcheon, 1981; Bredin, 1997: 2; Hamamoto, 1998: 21; Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995: 5), *opposition* (Mariscal Chicano, 1993; Bredin, 1997: 2; Bernstein and Kennedy, 1996: 21), *dissociation* (Mariscal Chicano, 1993), *twist* (Littman and Mey, 1991: 135), *difference* (Bredin, 1997: 2), *contradiction* (Alba Juez, 1995: 14; Bredin, 1997: 2), *incongruity* (Bredin, 1997: 2; Clark, 1996: 373; Curcó, 1997), *dissonance* (Winner and Gardner, 1993: 425), and *inappropriateness* (Sperber and Wilson, 1998: 284).

A problem in the analysis of factual information is that we still do not know exactly how the hearer activates precisely the factual information that is useful for interpretation (not only of irony, but also in general terms). Downes (1998: 347) claims that the hearer is not directed to the ‘correct’ context in as mechanical a way as S&W claim, but there is a so-called *frame problem* consisting in a high quantity of potentially salient background information in all the domains which the hearer has to filter.

I am aware that in this picture of ironic communication speakers are granted a higher control over the contextual information to which their interlocutors will have access than many analysts would be ready to accept. But in my opinion it is commonsensical to assume that speakers choose, to a greater or lesser extent, how much they are going to connote their ironic utterances with accessible contextual information. For instance they can choose whether or not to smile while speaking, whether or not to resort to a highly marked register, whether to reproduce exactly a previous utterance or simply convey the same content with different words, etc. In S&W’s (1986: 43) words, “[i]t is left to the communicator to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information that the audience will have accessible and be likely to use in the comprehension process. The responsibility for avoiding misunderstandings also lies with the speaker, so that all the hearer has to do is go ahead and use whatever code and contextual information come most easily to hand”.

The incompatibility with contextual information is so weak, that many hearers may well assume that the proposition expressed by (32b) matches Lennon’s intended interpretation (in other words, that (32b) is an explicature). Actually, this is what happened at the time: “there was tremendous consternation in the United States as civic and religious leaders condemned Lennon for his apparent belief that the Beatles were more important than the spiritual leader of Christianity. Radio stations stopped playing Beatles music, there were public burnings of Beatles records, and widespread protests greeted the Beatles when they toured in 1965”
(Gibbs, 1994: 361-362). Of course, this quote does not invalidate the fact that some addressees may have detected the implicit irony despite the weak contextual support. Therefore, a distinction has to be made between those who do access the intended irony despite the contextual weakness (case 2) and those who do not access the intended irony at all (case 3).

In fact, according to Carston (ibid., 49), although pragmatic inference is not a module in a strict Fodorian sense, it does seem to satisfy broadly three of the typical requirements of mental modules: (1) it is domain-specific, since it is activated just by ostensive stimuli; (2) it is informationally encapsulated, since it is constrained by its own proprietary principle: the communicative principle of relevance (S&W, 1995); and (3) there seems to be certain evidence of innate unfolding of the pragmatic ability to communicate ostensively and to interpret ostensive stimuli.

Sperber (1994b) suggests that children start out by using a simple strategy: naive optimism (to choose the first interpretation that is relevant enough to them, considering that the speaker is both competent and benevolent). They progress to a more complicated strategy: cautious optimism (to choose the interpretation that they might reasonably have expected to be relevant enough to them, considering the speaker benevolent but no longer competent).
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