Introduction: Relevance-theoretic claims on irony
(a) it is a variety of interpretive use in which the proposition expressed by the utterance represents a belief implicitly attributed by the speaker to someone other than herself at the time of utterance; (b) it is echoic (i.e., it implicitly expresses the speaker’s attitude to the beliefs being represented); and (c) the attitude involved in the echo is one of dissociation from the thoughts echoed (Curcó, 2000: 261).

1. Source of the echo and dissociative attitude
1.1. Echo
The notion of “echo” has broadened conveniently from the initial use-mention distinction (Sperber & Wilson, 1981) to cover all cases in which irony is conveyed.¹

1.2. Attitude
Irony necessarily entails a dissociative attitude.² Typically, the attitude is said to be held by somebody other than the speaker at the current time.³ However, very often, the speaker expresses a dissociative attitude that the speaker attributes to herself in a different context from the current one. This has also been commented upon by Curcó.⁴ This attribution means that the speaker dissociates herself from the proposition expressed by the utterance but she wishes context was different so that she could support it.

This is so especially in the “canonical type” of irony (a positive expectation is violated), since it feels as if the speaker is echoing a parallel context in which her utterance would be communicated as an explication with an attitude of endorsement, not as an irony with attitude of dissociation.

Examples:
(1) A man who is completely burnt is escaping from an FBI agent. The agent manages to grab him from behind as he is running away. Both men fall down on the pavement. The burnt man gets up and feels his chin, where he has received a blow. The burnt man says to the FBI agent: “Do you think that will leave a scar on my face?” (The X Files, season 9).

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¹ “The thought being echoed may not have been expressed in an utterance; it may not be attributable to any specific person, but merely to a type of person, or people in general; it may be merely a cultural aspiration or norm” (Wilson & Sperber, 1992: 60).
² “The attitude expressed by an ironical utterance is invariably of the rejecting or disapproving kind. The speaker dissociates herself from the opinion echoed and indicates that she does not hold it herself” (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 239).
³ “The point of irony is not to commit the speaker to the truth of the proposition expressed but, on the contrary, to express a certain type of derisory or dissociative attitude to a thought with a similar content that she attributes to some source other than herself at the current time. In other words, the speaker in irony is not expressing her own thoughts, but echoing a thought she attributes to someone else” (Wilson, 2009: 197).
⁴ “Nothing in the definition of echoic use (and hence of irony) imposes the requirement that an echoic ironic utterance should represent a belief attributed to another speaker. Echoic utterances are those that achieve relevance by informing the hearer that the speaker is entertaining a certain attributable thought and that the speaker simultaneously holds an attitude to it. Echoic utterances, therefore, include those cases where the speaker attributes a thought or an utterance to herself at a time different from the time of utterance” (Curcó, 2000: 261-262).
⁵ “The main point of irony is to dissociate the speaker from an attributed thought or utterance which she wants to suggest is more or less obviously false, irrelevant or under-informative” (Wilson, 2006: 1730-1731).
(2) [After a very difficult meeting] Mary: That went well.

Besides Wilson’s explanation\(^6\) in note six, this example can be rewritten as Mary hoping that the context in which the utterance (2) was produced was different, a context in which the meeting actually went well, and in which the attitude was that of endorsement and the interpretation was explicitly communicated.

(3) [Bill is a neurotically cautious driver who keeps his petrol tank full, never fails to indicate when turning and repeatedly scans the horizon for possible dangers]

Mary: “Don’t forget to use your indicator” (Wilson, 2006).\(^7\)

Besides Wilson’s explanation in note 7, this example can also be explained as the speaker wishing that the context was different, a context in which Bill was a normal driver who is not obsessed and has to be reminded of how to drive, that is, a context in which Mary’s utterance would be communicated as an explication with a supportive attitude.

2. Contextual inappropriateness triggers ironic interpretation

2.1. Contextual sources

During interpretation, some information from context is inconsistent with the explicit interpretation of the utterance that the hearer is currently inferring, which triggers a search for the underlying ironic attitude. Spotting the attitude as dissociative is essential to differentiate irony from other types of incongruity such as the one found in jokes (Yus, 2003, 2008, 2011, forthcoming):

(4) Jake was on his deathbed. His wife Susan, was maintaining a vigil by his side. She held his fragile hand, tears ran down her face’. “My darling Susan,” he whispered”. I have something I must confess to you”. “Everything’s all right, go to sleep,” replied the weeping Susan. “No, no. I must die in peace, Susan. I slept with your sister, your best friend and your mother”. “I know,” she replied. “That’s why I poisoned you”.

Irony entails the activation of contextual information -identified as inappropriate- which is basically any of the following seven types, called “contextual sources” in Yus (2000, 2009):\(^8\)

CONTEXTUAL SOURCE A

General encyclopedic knowledge (general information on the world we live in, our culture, collective beliefs, social stereotypes, commonsense assumptions, moral standards etc.).\(^9\)

(5) [Luis arrives at work soaking wet. His friend Antonio talks to him].

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6. “[Mary’s utterance] might be understood as echoing Mary’s earlier hopes or expectations, or the reassurances of her friends, that the meeting would go well, in order to show that she now finds them ridiculously over-optimistic or ill-founded” (Wilson, 2006: 1730).

7. “It is easy to see them as ironically echoing thoughts which the speaker attributes to him (‘It always helps to indicate’, ‘It’s never too early to stop for petrol’), and which she wants to suggest he is taking much too seriously (Wilson, 2006: 1732).

8. The list of contextual sources has changed from the 2000 to the 2009 publications. The contextual sources listed in this paper correspond to Yus (2009).

9. (a) “[Sometimes we can find] the speaker’s attitude or reaction to thoughts which are not tied to a particular individual, time and place, but are widely entertained or expressed by a certain group of people (or people in general), and which are, as it were, endemic in that group” (Wilson, 2009: 203).

(b) “Cultural norms are widely represented in human minds, and are always available for ironical echoing. This is what happens in ‘As I reached the bank at closing time, the bank clerk helpfully shut the door in my face’, where the bank clerk’s behaviour (which clearly violates a cultural norm) is ironically described as helpful” (Wilson, 2006: 1735).
Irony should be more easily understood when the thought the speaker is echoing is made more salient by being overtly expressed in a previous utterance (Wilson, 2009: 197).

The most easily recognisable cases of echoic use are those that convey the speaker’s attitude or reaction to a thought overtly expressed in an immediately preceding utterance [...] we would expect to find echoic utterances conveying the speaker’s attitude not only to immediately preceding utterances but to more distant utterances (Wilson, 2009: 202).

The ironical tone of voice is a natural cue to the particular type of mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude that the speaker intends to convey (Wilson, 2009: 213).

Antonio: Hi Luis! You look angry...
Luis: No no, actually I am very happy... I love to forget my umbrella on a rainy day...

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

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

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

(7) [Luis is walking in the street and a car passes by getting him soaking wet].
Luis says: “This is fantastic!!!”.

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

Assumptions inferred from previous utterances are useful to save effort in subsequent inferencing, and they can also be used with ironic purposes.10

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

(9) [Juan told Sara not to take the umbrella to the restaurant because he was sure it was not going to rain. However, when leaving the restaurant it’s pouring down].
Sara: “I’d better not take my umbrella. I am sure it’s not going to rain”.

CONTEXTUAL SOURCE E
Speaker’s nonverbal communication, either vocal (tone, intonation...) or visual (smile, gestures, wink...).

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

CONTEXTUAL SOURCE F

10. (a) “Irony should be more easily understood when the thought the speaker is echoing is made more salient by being overtly expressed in a previous utterance” (Wilson, 2009: 197).
   (b) “The most easily recognisable cases of echoic use are those that convey the speaker’s attitude or reaction to a thought overtly expressed in an immediately preceding utterance [...] we would expect to find echoic utterances conveying the speaker’s attitude not only to immediately preceding utterances but to more distant utterances” (Wilson, 2009: 202).

11. “The ironical tone of voice is a natural cue to the particular type of mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude that the speaker intends to convey” (Wilson, 2009: 213).
Lexical or grammatical choices by the speaker which work as linguistic cues about the speaker’s ironic intention.

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

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

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

2.2. Combination of contextual sources
Relevance theory pictures comprehension as a mutual parallel adjustment of decoded content, inferred explicit information, implicated premises and conclusions, and context accessibility.

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

2.3. Saving mental effort while activating sources in sequence or simultaneity
On paper, activation of multiple contextual sources should increase mental effort, thus reducing eventual relevance. But human cognition has evolved in such a way that it tends to minimize effort, and this applies to all contextual sources:

General encyclopedic knowledge
Certain general assumptions about culture and society are accessed more often and strengthened by the media, thus acquiring a higher level of accessibility. Strangers often refer to these cultural assumptions when attempting to be ironic.

Linguistic cues
Due to grammaticalization or conventionalization, certain lexical choices, syntactic arrangements or stylistic features become typical in irony comprehension, and are retrieved almost automatically.

Physical surrounding
The filtering ability of human cognition selects from the environment those stimuli that are worth attending to in the processing or ironies.

12. (10) A precious lot you care about my wallflowers.
   (11) Fat chance there is of Arsenal winning the Cup.
   The ‘ironical’ interpretations [of 10-11] have become grammaticalised to such an extent that it is hard to imagine these utterances communicating more regular ‘literal’ meanings. [...] What starts out as a genuine irony becomes associated with an automatic interpretive routine which assigns it a standard, though impoverished, interpretation (Sperber & Wilson, 1998: 286).

13. A Criterion of Optimal Accessibility to Irony was proposed in Yus (2009) to account for this fact: “The processing effort that interpreting an ironic utterance demands decreases in proportion to the increase in the number and quality of incompatibilities (detected by the addressee) between information from contextual sources activated (simultaneously or in sequence) and the explicit information provided by the utterance”.

14. “The believability of newly communicated information must be assessed relative to background beliefs which are themselves open to revision. Obviously, new information cannot be assessed relative to the whole of one’s ‘mental encyclopaedia’. To keep processing time and costs within manageable limits, only a very small subset of that encyclopaedia, closely related to the new piece of information, can be brought to bear on its assessment” (Sperber et al., 2010: 374).
Previous utterances
The information provided by previous utterances is often still active when ironies focussing on this contextual source are intended.

Nonverbal communication
Typically processed in parallel to the interpretation of verbal stimuli and often stored as part of the information about the speaker, in terms of typical gestures and intonational contours that are systematically used by the speaker in similar situations, hence acquiring higher accessibility.

Recent actions
Effort-saving vivid connection between the event and the utterance, still stored in the hearer’s short-memory store.

Information about the speaker
When we come across a friend, not all the information about him, which belongs to both interlocutors’ mutual cognitive environment is equally accessible. Some information about him/her has been accessed frequently in previous conversations, and these assumptions have acquired a certain prominence or salience in their accessibility when the interlocutors start a conversation. It would make a difference if, instead of activating contextual information about the speaker “on the fly”, the hearer found inconsistencies with information about the speaker which has already acquired certain accessibility because it is salient and accessed almost unconsciously.

Proposal of narrowed mutual cognitive environment, made up of assumptions which are very salient or prominent, and which are almost unconsciously activated due to repeated interactions with the interlocutor in which this information has been commented upon. This area is typically exploited for ironic purposes but the effort to identify the dissociative attitude and the source of echo decreases due to the accessibility to this information located in the narrowed mutual cognitive environment.

The individual, then, can be pictured as a sort of “cluster of information”, some of which is highly manifest due to repeated interactions with him/her. Upon starting conversations with friends, some information is very salient, to the extent that it is almost unconsciously made accessible.

[1. Reiterative interactions] lead to [2. certain topics being systematically addressed] which leads to [3. certain mutually manifest assumptions becoming more salient] which leads to [4. a narrowed mutual cognitive environment] and [5. irony typically exploits assumptions included in this narrowed environment] which leads to [6. certain assumptions being strengthened and acquiring higher salience] which leads to [7. a more fine-grained narrowed mutual cognitive environment] which leads to [8. this

15. “Frequently used or chronically accessible knowledge exerts a greater influence on judgment than does other relevant but less accessible knowledge [...] chronically accessible mental representations become active upon the presence of relevant environmental information” (Bargh et al., 1996: 105).

16. This narrowed environment would also include information about the interlocutor’s tendency to be ironic and individual-specific nonverbal behaviour, both of which also save effort when activating these particular contextual sources and when detecting dissociative attitudes and underlying intentions to be ironic.

17. This reminds me of the so-called Automaticity Model of Priming Effects, according to which perceiving people and situational cues is expected to activate thoughts, emotions, and actions linked to particular concepts and situations.. This associative connection between social perception and the activation of internal representations of the outside world is thought of as an automatic response with no involvement of human volition (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999, 2000)

18. The use of irony typically produces an effect of enhanced mutuality between interlocutors: “Irony serves as a mark of intimacy between speakers and listeners, and brings them even closer together (Gibbs & Colston, 2001: 190).
narrowed environment becoming a preliminary context for subsequent interactions].

3. Dual stage processing? Direct access view? Graded salience hypothesis?
How much attention does the hearer pay to the explicit content of the ironic utterance? Does it have to be computed before an irony is accessed? (dual stage processing, Grice). Is irony accessed directly without paying much attention to the explicit content of the utterance? (direct access view, Gibbs). Is it invariably computed due to its salience during comprehension? (graded salience hypothesis, Giora).

My proposal. It depends...
(1) On which contextual source is activated.
(2) On whether only one source is activated or other sources aid with contextual saturation.
(3) On whether several contextual sources are activated in sequence or simultaneously.
(4) On how accessible the information from the contextual source(s) is...
(5) On the stage of the processing of the utterance in which dissociative attitude is detected and irony is identified (the stage in which some contextual source plays a part in the identification of irony).

If (1-5) above are taken into account, certain prototypical cases of irony are identified:

1. Fast ironic interpretation when the interpretation of explicit content has just started.

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

2. Ironic interpretation half-way through the interpretation of the utterance.

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

3. Ironic interpretation at the end of the interpretation of the utterance.

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

4. Explicit interpretation and ironic interpretation intended and in parallel.

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

19. “Solidary relationship is a cue to irony and also a product of irony” (...). “By commenting on the addressee’s attributes and behavior, the speaker can demonstrate and enhance social closeness with the addressee; the speaker and addressee are enough and know each other well enough to be entitled to make such comments” (Pexman and Zvaigzne, 2004: 159 and 144-145).

20. “Only the word ‘kindly’ is echoically used [...] it is quite reasonable to hope or wish that whoever finds a lost bag will behave kindly, and the idea that we should treat each other kindly is part of a widely shared normative representation of how people ought to behave. By dissociating herself from a particular implication of this widely shared representation, the speaker might communicate that her hopes or desires were ridiculously unrealistic, or that the person who found her bag fell laughably short of acceptable standards of behaviour” (ibid. 204).

21. “In many cases, speakers actually do mean what they literally say but are still speaking sarcastically. For example, a driver can say to a passenger “I love people who signal,” when another car has just cut in front without signaling and mean this sarcastically even though the statement is literally true” (Gibbs, [1986] 2007: 175).
5. Explicit interpretation first, ironic interpretation at a subsequent stage.

(17) [Mary is in class, taking notes. A new student -John- turns up and sits down beside her].
John: “You know, this subject is really fascinating”.
[Mary looks at him, wondering whether to believe his words or not. Suddenly John starts smiling ostensively].
Mary: “Indeed... And I can hardly sleep waiting for this lesson”.

6. Ironic interpretation undetected

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

4. Metarepresentations and the interpretation of irony

Three types of metarepresentation (Wilson, 2009):

1. **Mindreading ability** (or metapsychological) ability to represent and think about one’s own thoughts and those of others.
2. **Pragmatic ability** (or metacommunicative) ability to represent and think about utterances and other overt communicative acts.
3. **Argumentative ability** contributing to a more general capacity for epistemic vigilance: the capacity to defend oneself against mistakes or deliberate deception by communicators.

Proposal (a): These metarepresentations are also activated as parallel adjustment of 2 and 3 within the general framework of 1 while interpreting utterances.23

Proposal (b): The argumentative ability (hard-wired for epistemic vigilance) will be the one in charge of detecting contextual inconsistencies and activating attitude-tracking inferential activity in the hearer while the utterance is being inferred.24

Proposal of steps:
1. The communicative principle of relevance triggers mindreading activity.
2. The metacommunicative ability, devoted to step-by-step extraction of intended interpretation from decoded content, is activated.
3. The hearer engages in a mutual parallel adjustment of decoding, extraction of explicit content, derivation of implicatures and context accessibility.
4. During mutual parallel adjustment some incongruity with contextual source(s) arises, which makes explicit interpretation inappropriate.
5. Metalogical ability takes over and traces the attitude that underlies this incongruity (epistemic vigilance).

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22. The abilities for overt intentional communication and epistemic vigilance must have evolved together, and must also develop together and be put to use together (Sperber et al., 2010: 360).

23. “Given the parallels between irony comprehension and the ability to cope with deliberate lies, it seems reasonable to assume that irony comprehension also has both an epistemic and a mindreading component” (Wilson, 2009: 219).

24. “It could be that any piece of communicative behaviour activates two distinct processes in the addressee: one geared to identifying the relevance of what is communicated on the assumption that it is trustworthy, and the other geared to assessing its trustworthiness” (Sperber et al., 2010: 363).
vigilance).  

6. The speaker’s dissociative attitude is identified.  
7. The source of the echo is identified.  
8. The intended ironic interpretation is obtained.

References


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25. Mascaro and Sperber (2009) suggest that this mental capacity is particularly useful in evaluating the output of spontaneous comprehension in order to decide whether or not to believe what one is being told.