IMPLICATIONS OF THE RELEVANCE APPROACH TO THE CONTEXT FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF IRONIC UTTERANCES

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Resumen

El objetivo principal de este trabajo será mostrar las relaciones existentes entre las oraciones que admiten una interpretación irónica y en el contexto en el que tienen lugar, siguiendo el marco general de la teoría de la relevaneia o pertinencia propuesto para explicar la comunicación. Este trabajo analizará los principales enfoques planteados por la teoría de la relevancia o pertinencia, que tienden a enfatizar su naturaleza cognitiva. Si se admite que el contexto juega un papel primordial en la interpretración de las oraciones que admiten una interpretación irónica, y que, tal y como afirman los autores que trabajan en el marco de la teoría de la relevancia, el contexto es seleccionado por los participantes de cualquier interacción comunicativa, resulta que el grado de accesibilidad que los participantes pueden tener al contexto representado por el hablante repercutirá en su percepción de la ironía.

De esta forma, este trabajo intentará demostrar que el marco general de la teoría de la relevancia acerca del contexto ofrece mecanismos útiles para la comprensión de las oraciones que pueden admitir una interpretación irónica, que puede ser complementario de los enfoques existentes de la teoría de la relevancia que explican la ironía.

Palabras clave: Relevancia, selección, contexto, ironía, grado de accesibilidad

Summary

The main purpose of this work will be to show the existing relationships between ironic utterances and the context where they take place, following the general relevance framework put forward to account for communication. This work will deal with the different approaches that have been proposed by relevance theory to deal with the context, which tend to emphasize its cognitive nature. If it is assumed that the

context plays a definite role in the interpretation of ironic utterances, and that, as relevance theoreticians point out, the context is chosen by the participants taking part in any communicative interaction, it turns out that the accessibility that participants may have to the context envisaged by the speaker will influence their perception of irony.

In this way, this work will tend to show that the general framework of relevance theory about the context offers useful mechanisms for the grasp of ironic utterances, which may be complementary to the existing relevance approaches to irony.

Key words: Relevance, choice, context, irony, degree of accessibility

Résumé[1]

Le principal objectif de ce travail va être de présenter les relations qui existent entre les phrases admettant une interprétation ironique et le contexte où elles se développent, tout en suivant le cadre général de la théorie de la relevance ou de la pertinence proposé pour expliquer la communication. Ce travail analysera les principales mises au point proposeés par la théorie de la relevance ou de la pertinence, qui ont tendance à faire ressortir sa nature cognitive. Si on admet que le contexte joue un rôle primordial dans les phrases qui admettent une interprétation ironique, et que le contexte est choisi par les participants d'une interaction communicative quelconque, tel que l'ont affirmé les auteurs qui travaillent dans le cadre de la théorie de la "relevance", il se trouve que le degré d'accessibilité que les participants peuvent avoir au contexte représenté par le sujet parlant va répercuter sur sa perception de l'ironie.

Ainsi, ce travail essaie de montrer que le cadre général de la théorie de la " relevance " au sujet du contexte, offre des mécanismes utiles à la compréhension des phrases qui peuvent admettre une interprétation ironique, parfois complémentaire des différentes approches qui existent sur la théorie de la "relevance" ou de la pertinence, dans le traitment de l'ironie.

Mots-clés: Relevance ou pertinence, selection, contexte, ironie, degrè d'accessibilité

Sumario

1. The relevance approach to the context. 2. The concept of irony. 3. Context choice, context accessibility and irony. Conclusions. 4. References.

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1. The relevance approach to the context

In a 1994 paper, Deirdre Wilson defines the context as follows:

> By "context" here I mean not simply the preceding linguistic text, or the environment in which the utterance takes place, but the set of assumptions brought to bear in arriving at the intended interpretation. These may be drawn from the preceding text, or from observation of the speaker and what is going on in the immediate environment, but they may also be drawn from cultural or scientific knowledge, common - sense assumptions, and, more generally, any item of shared or idiosyncratic information that the hearer has access to at the time.
>
> (1994: 41)

The most important features of the context, according to this fragment, are that the context is above all a cognitive entity, which should not be equated with the linguistic co - text. It is, therefore, not exclusively linguistic. The cognitive nature of the context is assumed by the point that it is mainly regarded as a set of assumptions, that which the addressee must have entertained in order to infer the interpretation intended by the speaker. The "environment" referred to by Deirdre Wilson is clearly not "the physical place" that surrounds a definite word or utterance, but can most precisely be associated to the notion of *cognitive environment,* as defined by Dan Sperber and herself:

> To be manifest, then, is to be perceptible or inferable. An individual's total cognitive environment is a function of his physical environment and his cognitive abilities. It consists of not only all the facts that he is aware of, but also all the facts that he is able of becoming aware of, in his physical environment. The individual's actual awareness of facts, i.e. the knowledge that he has acquired, of course contributes to his ability to become aware of further facts. Memorised information is a component of cognitive abilities.
>
> (1986: 39)

Relevance theoreticians have investigated deeply in the nature and features of the context, and in its importance for the interpretation and processing of utterances. But the concern about the context may be said to be shared with the general mainstream of linguistics nowadays. Thus, Halliday (1973), refers to the

distinction established by Malinowski between *context of situation* and *context of culture* :

> A more useful concept is that of a range of behaviour potential determined by the social structure (*the context of culture*), which is made accessible to study through its association with significant social contexts (*generalized contexts of situation*) and is actualized by the participants in particular instances of these contexts or situation types. (1973: 67-68)

An important feature of this definition is that it seeks to undermine a purely linguistic basis for the context, but brings it close to the whole background culture with which the individual of a certain culture should be assumed to become familiar with. In this way, it relates the study of the context to the whole anthropological reality of human culture.

Deirdre Wilson had started to write about the context as early as 1979

> The assumption that a remark was intended as relevant will dramatically reduce its possibilities of interpretation in context. Essentially, its only relevant pragmatic implications will be those that follow from it in conjunction with the immediately preceding remark, together with any items of shared knowledge needed as extra premises in the deduction. The task of the hearer is, quite simply, to find the relevant pragmatic implications.
>
> (1979: 177-178)

Even though the definition of relevance was but starting to be considered, and was not stated as it was later in the 1986 book, here the connection between relevance and the context is explicitly stated. It also shows how for any information to be relevant, it tends to combine with already existing information, but it also offers new information which is supposed to improve the present state of affairs. It also states that for any assumption to be relevant it must have certain implications in a certain context, which comes close to the notion of "contextual effect" as defined in *Relevance*:

> The intuitive idea behind the notion of a contextual effect is the following. To modify and improve a context is to have some effect on that context - but not just any modification will do. As we have seen, the addition of new information which merely duplicates old

> information does not count as an improvement ; nor does the addition
> of new information which is entirely related to old information. The
> sort of effect we are interested in is a result of the interaction between
> new and old information.
>
> (1986: 109)

In their book *Relevance*, Sperber & Wilson (1986) make the point that the context is *chosen* by participants, since it is not fixed in advance or superimposed to the communicative act. Quite on the contrary, the context at large is formed up by a certain amount of encyclopaedic information, not all of which is supposed to be equally accessible to participants.

If the context were fixed all through the communicative interaction, it would mean that each new entry would have to be processed in addition to the existing information, which in turn would have to be added to each new entry. As a result of all this, the information to be processed would become increasingly difficult to be processed, and as Sperber & Wilson note, it would lead to a general loss of relevance.

The main problem about the hypothesis of the " fixed context " is that it is impossible to know exactly what assumptions are being entertained by a certain participant at each moment, and, more important, that it can hardly entail all the information that s/he can have. With a fixed context, the participants in a communicative interaction would not be able to select what aspects of the utterance and of their previous knowledge of the world might have been relevant for the understanding of the utterance. What a chosen context implies is that the communicators can just select what aspects of their encyclopaedic knowledge can improve their representation of the world and what this can bring to the understanding of the utterance :

> The defects of this line of speculation are becoming blatant. With the
> last two hypotheses, we have already assumed that the context is
> automatically filled with a huge amount of encyclopaedic information,
> most - and sometimes all - of which fails to increase the contextual
> effects of the new information being processed. Since each expansion
> of the context means an increase in processing effort, this method of
> context formation would lead to a general loss of relevance.
>
> (1986: 136)

Certainly, the context to which participant may have access to does not necessarily coincide with the accessibility that other participants may enjoy. For this

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reason, Sperber and Wilson have come to speak to the notion of " relevance to an individual", which, in their 1995 revision of the book, they define as follows :

> *Relevance to an individual* (classificatory)
> An assumption is relevant to an individual at a given time if and only
> if it has some positive cognitive effect in one or more of the contexts
> accessible to him at that time.
> *Relevance to an individual* (comparative)
> *Extent condition 1 :* An assumption is relevant to an individual to the
> extent that the positive cognitive effects achieved when it is only
> processed are large.
> *Extent condition 2 :* An assumption is relevant to an individual to the
> extent that the effort required to achieve these positive cognitive
> effects is small.
>
> (1995: 265-66)

An important consequence of this, which will be very useful to explain what happens in ironical utterances, is that different participants in a communicative act may have different degrees to the context envisaged by the speaker.

In general terms, in Sperber & Wilson's theory, the interpretive process carried out by the addressee so as to decode and to infer the meaning of the utterance is governed by its degree of *accessibility* and *consistency* with the principle of relevance:

> If the speaker has done her job correctly, all the hearer has to do is
> start computing, *in order of accessibility,* those assumptions which
> seem to be relevant to him, and continue to add them to the overall
> representation of the utterance until it is relevant enough to be
> consistent with the principle of relevance.
>
> (1995: 234, my italics)

Closely related to the choice of context is that the different participants in a communicative act may have different *degrees of accessibility* to the context necessary to process a definite utterance :

> The organisation of the individual's encyclopaedic memmory, and the
> mental activity in which he is engaged, limit the class of potential
> contexts from which an actual context can be chosen at any given time.
>
> (1995: 138)

In this paper, we shall attempt to demonstrate how this principle of context choice and context accessibility can provide a useful explanation to the interpretation of ironic utterances. But before doing so, we shall go over the different approaches that have been proposed to deal with irony.

2. The concept of irony: a review

The most important classical theories about irony tend to regard it as a basically semantic phenomenon, which comprises an hyponomous dichotomy, as either meaning the opposite of what was said, or meaning something different from what one said. This can give us an idea of the versatility of the phenomenon. According to Muecke (1970), the elusiveness of this concept makes it escape a straightforward definition, and it may have even been the case that in vernacular languages the concept of irony must have developed after the appearance of many instances of it: " (...) the phenomenon existed before it was named and consequently before there could have existed a concept of it; and the word existed before it was applied to the phenomenon" . (1970: 14)

Among the different meanings or oppositions through which irony may appear, Muecke notes the following :

> The word was defined as "saying the contrary of what one means", as "saying one thing but meaning another", as "praising in order to blame" and "blaming in order to praise" and as "mocking" and "scoffing". It was also used to mean dissimulation, even non-ironical dissimulation, understatement and parody.
>
> (1970: 16)

It can be noted that the approach to irony that one can follow will be closely related to the concept of *meaning* assumed. It is probably for this reason that the birth of Pragmatics has brought about a constant revision of the term, for the above mentioned discrepancy of meaning that seems to be inherent to irony will be best explained if factors such as the intention of the speaker, or the meaning attached to an expression in a certain context, are taken into account. As is well known, it is on these notions that pragmatics will insist in order to define the meaning of an utterance.

As early as 1957, Grice starts to criticise those traditional approaches to meaning which neglect the importance of the speaker's intention, or the context in

which communication takes place. Neither have these traditional theories taken into consideration that a definite utterance may be used with a certain meaning intended by the speaker, and different from its natural sense. In short, traditional theories of meaning have failed to assess the importance of the context of the communication, or the users of the language. As Grice himself points out:

> A further deficiency in a causal theory of the type just expounded seems to be that, even if we accept it as it stands, we are furnished with an analysis only of statements about the *standard* meaning, or the meaning in general, of a " sign ". No provision is made for dealing with statements about what a particular speaker or writer means by a sign on a particular occasion (which may well diverge from the standard meaning of the sign); nor is it obvious how the theory could be adapted to make such provision. One might even go further in criticism and maintain that the causal theory ignores the fact that the meaning (in general) of a sign needs to be explained in terms of what users of the sign do (or should) mean by it on particular occasions.
>
> (1957: 55)

In "Logic and Conversation", Grice (1975) describes irony as a flouting of the first Maxim of Quality, "Do not say what you believe to be false", which is an aspect of the super-maxim "Try to make your contribution one that is true". What the flouting of a maxim implies for Grice is that even if the speaker is able to fulfill it, s/he fails to do so. However, the speaker does aim to at being communicative, and the meaning intended must be accounted for in terms of a conversational implicature. In order to infer the meaning of a conversational implicature, the addressee will usually have in mind factors such as the conventional meaning of the words used, the cooperative principle, and also others such as the context or the background knowledge. In the case of irony, according to Grice,

> (...) the audience knows that A knows that this is obvious to the audience. So, unless A's utterance is entirely pointless, A must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward.This must be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward.
>
> (1975: 53)

However, Grice does not explain why is so that irony expresses the contrary proposition of the one made explicit by the addresser. For him, other tropes in which the first Maxim of Quality is flouted in a similar manner are metaphor, meiosis and hyperbole.

In "Further notes on logic and conversation", Grice speaks of irony and the problems of interpretation caused by it. These spring as a result of the fact that the speaker does not signal his/her intention that a given utterance should be interpreted ironically in an explicit way. According to Grice, the fact of associating a certain tone to these utterances does not solve the problem. In any case, the illocutionary value of irony usually remains implicit. There is usually no direct allusion to it:

> To be ironical is, among other things, to pretend (as the etymology suggests), and while one wants the pretense to be recognized as such, to announce it as a pretense would spoil the effect. What is possibly more important, it might well be essential to an element having conventional significance that it could have been the case that some quite different element should have fulfilled the same semantic purpose.
>
> (1978: 125)

Grice also reaffirms the connection between the expression of irony and the expression of a certain feeling, a feature which will also be retaken by Sperber & Wilson:

> But the connection of irony with the expression of feeling seems to preclude this; if speaking ironically has to be, or at least to appear to be, the expression of a certain sort of feeling or attitude, then a tone suitable to such a feeling or attitude seems to be mandatory (...).
>
> (1978: 125)

According to Sperber & Wilson (1981: 295), the traditional analysis of irony as literally saying one thing and figuratively meaning the opposite cannot cope with all the possible cases of irony, and cannot explain why the ironic utterance is preferred to its neutral counterpart.

Such traditional theories, they argue, should then provide the critic with a nitid distinction between literal and figurative meaning, and how the latter can be derived from the former. This is characteristic of the semantic approaches, although according to them the existing pragmatic approaches, such as Grice's, do not seem to improve the situation any better:

> Grice's departure from the traditional account is not a radical one. It is based on the same assumption - the assumption that what the speaker of an ironical utterance intends to get across is the opposite of what he has literally said. In fact the only disappointment between Grice and more traditional theorists is over whether the substitution mechanisms involved are semantic or pragmatic.
>
> (1981: 296)

They also hold the view that irony is not necessarily meaning the opposite of what is said, something which, contrarily to what they state, has already been considered by both some traditional and former pragmatic - based theories. In their view, if this is accepted, an ironic utterance would convey no meaning, because it would bring no substantial change to the *context* or *cognitive environment* of the communicators, and it would also be difficult to identify the intended meaning in the absence of other paralinguistic devices such as intonation. It also seems to suggest that communicators would necessarily have to know in advance whatever content the speaker was being ironic about. Therefore, even though ironic utterances often lie upon certain common knowledge between speaker and hearer, this knowledge is progressively built in the process of the unfolding of the communicative act, and it can by no means be taken for granted, except for the code on certain occasions, as a pre - requisite for the achievement of successful communication. That is to say, even though for communication to be possible, a minimal share of cultural common ground is necessary, the main purpose of communication is probably to enlarge the knowledge of the world that participants may have. In ironic utterances, even though a recognition of the allusion that may be made in them is important, this allusion is relevant in the context only in so far as it shows the speaker's attitude towards it. This attitude may often not be codified, but must be inferred by the addressee. The communication of irony will only be successful if the addressee can infer the communicative intention of the speaker :

> The standard approach to irony, which claims that the main point of an ironical utterance is to convey the opposite of what is said, would thus make every ironical utterance uninformative, both on the level of what is said and on the level of what is implicated. The speaker would be intending to communicate a certain belief, but in the absence of any special intonation, his intention would only be recognized by someone who already knew that he held that belief.
>
> (1981: 301)

They also assume that the semantic condition is necessary, but not sufficient to account for all possible cases of irony.

An important definitory trait of their approach to irony, which was also observed by some speech act and politeness theories, is that irony is connected with a certain expression of feelings, images and attitudes, and, as such, ironic utterances cannot be accounted for just in terms of propositional meaning.

According to them, if irony is accounted for just in terms of a conversational implicature which acts as a substitute for its corresponding literal meaning, then the notion of implicature itself has to be modified, because implicatures can act as *premises* in the search for the meaning intended by the addressee and conveyed by the utterance:

> The idea that an implicature could actually contradict the literal sense of an utterance - as it would in the case of irony - does not square with Grice's central claim that implicatures act as premises in an argument designed to establish that the speaker has observed the maxims of conversation in saying what he said. It follows that the interpretation of ironical utterances cannot be reduced to the search for conversational implicatures without grossly distorting the notion of implicature itself.
>
> (1981: 299)

Another point they argue about traditional approaches to irony has to do with the question whether ironic utterances are to be recognised as such by the *tone*. As was shown above, this criterion can only be valid for oral utterances, and, as it cannot be present in written discourse, it cannot constitute a definitory trait of irony. For Sperber & Wilson, it is the *context* that should be taken into account to determine the intended meaning of the utterance, and whether it receives an ironic interpretation or not :

> Ironical utterances are not always distinguishable by intonation from their literal counterparts. When there is no distinctive intonation, it is clear that the choice between literal and ironical interpretation must be based on information external to the utterance - *contextual knowledge and other background assumptions* - rather than the form or content of the utterance itself.
>
> (1981: 301, my italics)

For Sperber & Wilson, the essential point about ironic utterances is that they show an attitude of the speaker to his utterance, or an attitude of the speaker to what his utterance is about. This is further connected to the distinction which they establish between *use* and *mention*: "USE of an expression involves reference to what the expression refers to; MENTION involves reference to the expression itself". (1981: 303).That is to say, whereas the *use* of an expression is related to the actual reference of the expression, its *mention* refers back to the expression itself.

> (In) cases of irony (...) the speaker mentions a proposition in such a way as to make clear that he rejects it as ludicrously false, inappropriate, or irrelevant. For the hearer, understanding such an utterance involves both realizing that it is a case of mention rather than use, and also recognizing the speaker's attitude to the proposition mentioned.
>
> (1981: 308)

In this way, in ironic utterances, the addresser draws attention to the content and dissociates him/herself from it. Above all, what the speaker communicates is an *attitude*, his/her attitude towards what the utterance is about. What the addresser intends to do when uttering an ironic expression is to indicate that the preceding utterance has been heard and understood, and shows his/her immediate reaction towards it.

The main criticisms of this approach to irony have to do with the notion of irony as echoic mention. Thus, Martin (1992) will propose a different framework for the analysis of irony, base upon the notions of *possible worlds,* and of *universe of belief.* He also makes a critical analysis of Sperber & Wilson's proposals having to do with the rejection of figurative meaning and with the approach to ironical utterances as mentions. The problem he finds with the definition of ironical utterances as echoic is that in some cases the speaker may mean something different from what s/he really thinks and yet his/her utterance does not necessarily have to be an echo of a previous mention:

> Another objection has to do with vague or distant echoes, a type case discussed by Sperber and Wilson. We can say, ironically, *What lovely weather !* even though no actual prior utterance is involved. Sperber and Wilson nonetheless treat this as echoic: One normally sets off for a walk in the hope or expectation of good weather : *What lovely weather* may simply echo these earlier high hopes. (Sperber and

Wilson, 1981: 310).

If this is so, mention theory will have to be re - examined : we should admit that it is not always the (real or imagined) originator of the opinion echoed who is the target of the irony : the target can well be reality itself, which makes the echoed opinion false or irrelevant. (1992: 80-81)

Martin's alternative hypothesis is based on the notions of *counterfactual worlds* and *world of expectations*. In his view, an ironical utterance echoes an expectation which has not been fulfilled. (1992: 84).Counterfactual worlds are those possible worlds which contradict at least one proposition of the real world. Worlds of expectation are a special subset of the former, and their negation contradicts the speaker's own expectations about the likely course of events. According to him,

Irony of fate, narrative irony and situational irony all involve an an expectation being disappointed by the way things turn out: for example, a reasonable expectation is dashed; an unfolded expectation makes victims of those who held it.

(1992: 89)

There has also been a debate between certain critics on the approach to irony as either *pretense* or *echoic mention.* The pretense theory is proposed by Clark & Gerrig, who point forward that Grice's theory of irony assumes that the ironist is *pretending* to use his proposition, and not that the ironist is *using* one proposition in order to get across its contradictory. (1984: 121). It explains the role of the participants in an ironic utterance in the following way:

The pretense theory may be expressed as follows: Suppose S is speaking to A, the primary addressee, and to A', who may be present or absent, real or imaginary. In speaking ironically, S is pretending to be S' speaking to A'. What S' is saying is, in one way or another, patently uniformed or injudicious, worthy of a "hostile or derogatory judgement or a feeling such as indignation or contempt" (Grice, 1978: 124). A' in ignorance, is intended to miss this pretense, to take S as speaking sincerely. But A, as part of the "inner circle" (to use Fowler's phrase), is intended to see everything - the pretense, S' injudiciousness, A's ignorance , and hence, S's attitude towards S', A' and what S' said.

(1984: 122)

In fact, what this theory does is, in general terms, apply the notion of *common knowledge* or *common ground* to the interpretation of ironic utterances. The authors themselves make the point quite explicitly :

> A listener's understanding of an ironic utterance depends crucially on *the common ground* he or she believes is shared by the ironist and the audience
> (...). The pretense theory makes it clear how common ground will be needed. The mention theory does not.
>
> (1984: 124, my italics)

However, the question remains as whether it is necessary for the audience to recognise the content of the ironist, for, as the pretense theory also admits, the most important point about ironic utterances is the recognition of the speaker's attitude. In any case, it is true that whatever the speaker is ironic about will be linked to a certain knowledge about reality, and that the point may be completely missed, if the cultural allusion in point is not recognised. The most important point about ironic utterances does not seem to be just the transmission of a certain content, but the *attitude* that the speaker shows towards his utterance.

Moreover, it is clear by now why mention theory, as formulated by Sperber & Wilson, is not concerned about this common ground : for them, it is not a necessary requisite for communication, but rather, a result of the communicative interaction.

In their book, Sperber and Wilson will show that the above referred distinction between *use* and *mention* is but a particular instance of a wider distinction, established between *descriptive* and *interpretive resemblance* :

> Any representation with a propositional form, and in particular any utterance, can be used to represent things in two ways. It can represent some state of affairs in virtue of its propositional form being true of that state of affairs; in this case we will say that the representation is a *description*, or that it is used *descriptively*. Or it can represent some other representation which also has a propositional form - a thought, for instance - in virtue of a resemblance between two propositional forms; in this case we will say that the first representation is an *interpretation* of the second one, or that it is used *interpretively*. (1986:

228-229).

According to Sperber & Wilson, "irony involves an interpretive relation between the speaker's thought and attributed thoughts or utterances". (1986: 231).

Authors studying irony tend to distinguish the participants involved in an ironic situation as follows:

> The focus of irony of irony is not necessarily the propositional content, p, but the relation between H' s understanding of the utterance and H's understanding of the utterance. *The target of linguistic irony is always the class of hearers, H.*
>
> (Tanaka, 1973: 46, my italics)

This entails that in an ironic situation, three participants may be found : on the one hand, the ironist; on the other hand, the addressees of the ironist, who may either grasp or infer the ironic meaning intended by the addresser, or else may fail to do so. the latter are usually regarded as the "victims" of the ironist.

According to Mariscal Chicano, the use-mention theory of irony does not explain what common knowlege is at play in an ironic utterance, or why speakers are not just ironic, but ironic only with certain hearers:

> [La Teoría del Uso-Mención] tampoco explica los límites ni los criterios para decidir qué conocimientos comunes hay que poner en juego. Los hablantes no son sólo irónicos, sino irónicos sólo con algunos oyentes.
>
> (1994: 333)

We believe that he also provides a satisfactory solution to this problem:

> La idea de que las ironías se dirigen a una víctima en particular es algo conocido por las teorías tradicionales. (...) En su análisis [la teoría de uso mención] lo que se propone es que en vez de la incapacidad de distinguir el sentido literal del figurativo, lo que hay es una incapacidad de distinguir uso de mención. Una afirmación irónica tendrá por tanto como víctimas a los que mantuvieran esa proposición que se está mencionando, como cierta, a los originadores de esa opinión de la que se está haciendo eco. Según este esquema daría igual

que la víctima reconociera o no la intención irónica del hablante para
que se produjera la ironía, a condición de que hubiera espectadores que
sí la detectaran, (...)

(1994: 331)

The theory of irony-mention, as proposed by Sperber and Wilson, does not
certainly say much about this.However, if it is assumed that all utterances take place
in a certain context, that this context can be conceived of as being chosen by the
participants, and that this choice is constrained by the degree of accessibility that
those participants enjoy to the context, the following seems to come naturally. Those
participants who have recognised the speaker's ironic intention and have inferred
his/her meaning may be said to have had access to the context or cognitive
environment provided by the former, whereas those participants who have failed to
do so will have remained at the level of the decodification of the message, but will
have not inferred the implicatures intended by the addresser.

3. Context choice, context accessibility and irony. Conclusions

All this shows that the theory of the choice of context or cognitive
environment, as proposed by Sperber and Wilson, can be an accurate complement of
their approaches to the explanation of irony. This seems to spring most naturally if
we take into account that ironic utterances take place in a certain context or cognitive
environment, which is to be taken into account to infer the contextual implications
of any given utterance. For the addressee to rightly understand the speaker's
utterance, s/he must try to approach the former's cognitive environment. It can be
assumed that the choice of context implies that there is an adequate processing of
utterances if the context searched for by the audience tends to match with the one
intended or envisaged by the addresser. Those addressees or victims which fail to
infer the speaker's intended message may be said to lack an adequate matching of
their cognitive environment with that of the speaker's, or fail to gain access to the
context envisaged by the speaker.

Therefore, it may be said that irony is linked to the context in which it is
produced, as well to the communicative intentions of the addresser, and to the
recognition of the message intended by the latter by the addressee.

With this, the "mutual knowledge hypothesis", for which shared knowledge
is but a necessary pre-requisite for communication, can also be discarded. In any
case, the mutual knowledge to be shared by speaker and hearer would be restricted
to the code, but it is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for communication

to take place. As Sperber and Wilson remark, "the fact that some knowledge is considered mutual is generally a result of comprehension rather than a precondition for it" (1982: 62). lt may be argued that the enlargement of the cognitive environment which can become "more" shared is precisely one of the *aims* of communication, but in no way can it be considered to be either a sufficient or a necessary pre-requisite for communication.

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