IRONY: CONTEXT ACCESSIBILITY AND PROCESSING EFFORT

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Resumen

La ironía se considera una estrategia discursiva en la que el sentido literal del enunciado diverge de su interpretación real, esto es, la pretendida por el emisor La ironía es etiquetada, por lo tanto, como un enunciado indirecto, y se afirma que es más difícil de procesar que los enunciados literales. En este artículo se propone un *principio de accesibilidad óptima a la ironía*, que responde al intento de arrojar luz sobre la validez o incorrección de esta afirmación.

Palabras clave: ironía, teoría de la relevancia, lo indirecto, pragmática, principio de cooperación

Abstract

Irony is considered a discursive strategy in which the literal sense of an utterance differs from its real interpretation, that is, the one intended by the sender. Therefore, irony is labelled as an indirect utterance, and is said to be more difficult to process than literal utterances. In this article a *principle of optimal accessibility to irony* is proposed, which is motivated by the attempt to shed light on the validity or incorrection of this argument.

Key words: irony, relevance theory, indirectness, pragmatics, cooperative principle

Résumé

On considère l'ironie comme une stratégie du discours dans laquelle le sens littèral de l'énoncé diverge de son interprétation réelle, celle recherchéepar l'émetteur. Ainsi, on étiquette l'ironie comme un énoncé indirect et l'on affirme qu'il est plus difficile à traiter que les énoncés litéraux. Dans cet article, on propose un principe d'accessibilité optimale à l'ironie qui répond à la validité ou incorrection de cette affirmation.

Mots clés: ironie, théorie de la pertinence, pragmatique, principe coopératif, l'indirect

1. Introduction

Irony has been defined as "a strategy used by a speaker or writer, which is intended to criticise or praise in an indirect, off record way, but which can occur in combination with some typically on record strategies as well   It generally shows or expresses some kind of contradiction (which can be realised at different levels)" (Alba (1995. 14)). It is commonly regarded as a useful discursive tool fitting different communicative purposes, among them the speakers' (or writers') dissociation from what they are saying literally, forcing the addressee to look for an alternative (i.e. implicative) meaning with the help of contextual information (Wilson & Sperber (1992), Dews & Winner (1995)).[1]

The analysts interested in the role of irony in face-to-face interaction have focused on the speech acts performed in its production (Haverkate (1985, 1990), Glucksberg (1995: 52)), or on the degree of indirectness required for an ironical sense of the message (Gibbs (1994)). Others have concentrated on the study of irony in

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[1] Among the uses of irony, Cohen (1977: 157), Myers Roy (1981· 409) and Glucksberg (1995: 54) list the following: *Cohen*: irony as tool for aggression and avoidance of problems. *Glucksberg*: irony as a means to express attitudes and feelings in face-saving ways; irony as a way to be funny, clever, or humorous while simultaneously expressing attitudes and evaluations in relatively nonthreatening ways. *Myers Roy*: irony either as an individual strategy for immediate attention and control or as a strategy to build or display group solidarity.

literature and rhetoric, as in Hutcheon (1981), Handwerk (1984), Haverkate (1985 351), Booth (1986), Salvador (1987), Peña-Marín (1989), González (1996), or Florén (1996), among others.

Even though it seems as if everything has already been said about irony, some issues are still left to be explained or clarified. One of them is the current scholarly discussion on whether irony necessarily takes longer (or is harder) to process than literal utterances. In this article, an attempt at clarification is proposed from a cognitive perspective.

In the next section, a brief review of traditional approaches to irony will be provided, basically Grice's (1975) *Cooperative Principle* approach, Sperber & Wilson's (1981, Wilson & Sperber (1992)) *echoic-mention theory*, and Clark & Gerrig's (1984) *pretense theory*. The main insight of the article will be developed in section 3, with the coining of a cognitive *principle of optimal accessibility to irony* and section 4, in which examples showing its applicability to different ironic situations will be commented upon.

2. Traditional approaches to irony

The most extended idea of irony is that it is used to convey the opposite meaning of what the utterance literally means. Many analysts have fallen for this idea, to a greater or lesser extent, among them Cutler (1974), Searle (1979), Myers Roy (1981. 407), Haverkate (1990: 81), and de la Vega (1989) Needless to say, irony conveys many other meanings other than "the opposite", as the well-known examples provided by Sperber & Wilson (1981) corroborate (see also Salvador (1987. 204), Kaufer (1981 496) for discussion)

A second traditional idea of irony is the one proposed by Grice (1975). For him, irony is just another instance of speakers or writers flouting the *maxim of quality* from the so-called *Cooperative Principle* (see Mariscal Chicano (1993: 199), Myers Roy (1981: 412), Kaufer (1981: 500), Sperber & Wilson (1986 31ff), Wilson & Sperber (1992 53-56), and González (1996: 59-60)). Since the addresser is supposed to be cooperating in the conversational exchange, and his utterance is a lie in its literal reading, he must be trying to convey a second, underlying meaning or *implicature* (cf. Chen (1990), Torres Sánchez (1994))

Several analysts disapprove of this over-simplistic approach, either to reject it, or to extend the flouting to the other conversational *maxims* (as in Alba (1995)). Kaufer

(1981. 502) summarizes the inadequacies of Grice's theory in two statements. (a) "it fails to specify the conditions under which an utterance is produced or perceived as ironic because the condition of 'overtly violating a cooperative maxim' is not sufficient (much less necessary) for ironic production or recognition"; and (b) "the only reliable pragmatic generalization about the use of irony seems to be that it is designed to affect the rhetorical impact of a message".

A third idea of irony was proposed by Sperber & Wilson (1981, Wilson & Sperber (1992)) and their *echoic-mention theory* This is part of a preliminary distinction between *mention* and *use*, which can be illustrated in the following dialogue from the comic *Yob* (1988, quoted in Yus Ramos (1997a: 286)), despite not being itself an ironical exchange:

(1)   [*in A, B and C's house*]
        A: Dad, can you lend me a fiver?
        B· PISS OFF.
        A· Hi, mum. Can you lend me a fiver?
        C: PISS OFF.
        [*outside the house, with friend D*]
        D· Well What did they say?
        A: PISS OFF
        D: I only bleedin' asked!

The humour in this example arises from the fact that character D understands the expletive as *use* and not as *mention*, as it really was. According to Sperber & Wilson (1981), mention is essential in understanding irony, since speakers of ironic utterances usually detach themselves from what they are saying by means of an echoic connection to (a) a previously uttered utterance, (b) facts and norms of behaviour shared by the interlocutors, or (c) general factual information shared by the whole community (cf. Mariscal Chicano (1994. 327)). For example, *you're a big help* is ironic if it echoes some previously mentioned statement or belief, or perhaps some unspoken agreement between the interlocutors (cf. Gibbs (1994: 384), Martin (1992: 79)). Another example would be the irony (2b) in situation (2a), which might refer to a previous statement by the child's mother, or an unspoken mother-child agreement, or a "general-knowledge factual oddity" (Gibbs & O'Brien (1991· 526)):

(2)   (a) [*a child's room absolutely dirty and untidy*]
       (b) Mother "I love children who keep their rooms clean!".

According to Mariscal Chicano (1994 333ff), this theory presents certain drawbacks, among them the following (a) It leaves unexplained what mechanisms are activated in the identification of what might be echoic and what is not; and (b) it leaves unexplained what criteria have to be used in order to decide what degree of mutual knowledge between interlocutors is required for the identification of irony.

Lastly, a fourth theory of irony was proposed by Clark & Gerrig (1984), called *pretense theory*. As its name indicates, in this case it is suggested that irony involves the speaker's pretense rather than echoic mention (cf Kumon-Nakamura (1993)). From this (rather limited) perspective, a person uttering *what lovely weather!* in the pouring rain would be pretending to be someone else, an unseeing person, perhaps, and even pretending to be talking to some person other than the listener. According to Gibbs (1994 386), "when listeners recognize this pretense, they should understand that the speaker is expressing a derogatory attitude toward the idea expressed, the imaginary speaker, and the imaginary listener".

Again, Mariscal Chicano (1994· 339) finds limitations in this theory. For instance, it poses even more restrictive criteria of identification than the *echoic-mention theory*, since the hearer has to recognize who or what kind of person the ironic speaker is pretending to be and who he or she is pretending to address

3. Context accessibility and processing effort

In this paper, no alternative theory of irony is proposed. Instead, the issue of whether ironic utterances necessarily take longer (and demand extra effort) to process is addressed.

Traditionally, since ironic utterances have been regarded as indirect utterances, they have to demand extra processing effort from the addressee in order to access the intended interpretation. Consequently, in the following example (from *Viz Comic*, quoted in Yus Ramos (1997a: 255)), in situation (3a), the ironic utterance (3b-B1) should require more effort than the non-ironic and direct (3b-B2), because the listener has to access encyclopaedic information (3c), weigh up mutual knowledge (3d), and finally conclude (3e), rather than opting for a straightforward decoding of the utterance·

(3)   (a) *[characters A and B planning a holiday]*
       (b) A· Where do you fancy, then?
            B1: Majorca or Benidorm   Y'know, classy and unspoilt
            B2· Majorca or Benidorm, despite being over-exploited by tourism.
       (c) Majorca and Benidorm are two towns which are over-exploited by tourism.
       (d) Both of us know that Majorca and Benidorm are over-exploited by tourism..
       (e) If (c) and (d) are correct, then B could not mean a literal interpretation of her
            utterance but, rather, an ironic one.

Myers Roy (1981 416) corroborates this hypothesis when she argues that "irony requires
some extra processing and gives the speaker a temporary edge of control over the
conversation because the listeners have to cast about for what he really means, since the
structure may be on the surface pragmatically anomalous". In this perspective, ironic
utterances would only take less effort to process if the speakers explicitly stated, via
ironic markers such as *isn't it ironic that...*, the underlying irony (cf. Barbe (1993)).
        Contrary to this assumption, Gibbs (1994· 382) claims that "the experimental
evidence in psycholinguistics does not support the traditional view [of irony demanding
extra processing effort], in that (a) the listener need not analyse the literal meaning of
a statement before deriving its ironic interpretation, and (b) people can understand irony
quite easily even when there are no special intonation cues" (see also Gibbs & O'Brien
(1991. 525))
        Which theoretical position is right? *Both¹*, but both theories are also too
restrictive. As will be demonstrated in this paper, ironic utterances may take longer and
demand more effort to process than literal utterances, but they may also take *less* time
and effort.   it all depends on how optimal is the listener's activation of *contextual
sources*, and how many simultaneous incompatibilities between these *sources* and the
speaker's ironic utterance are detected.
        In my opinion, for the interpretation of ironic utterances, the addressee's access
(and simultaneous activation) to six *contextual sources* will be considered specially
relevant:
        (1) **Encyclopaedic, factual information** People have a store of (strong) mental
representations and stereotypical situations and sequences (organized in *frames, schemas,
scripts*, etc., depending on terminology) forming a personal mental background of
assumptions against which all the new incoming information is processed For Sperber
& Wilson (1986 48), the combination of this store with new incoming information

typically produces *contextual effects*, in other words, is *relevant*. For example, this *contextual source* helps the hearer to disambiguate sentence (4a) and unconsciously choose interpretation (4b) instead of (4c), since it is more relevant in terms of the balance between cognitive effects and cognitive effort (Sperber & Wilson (1986 186))

(4) (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

Several analysts have pointed out how important this *contextual source* is for the interpretation of irony (cf. Gibbs (1994· 383), Mariscal Chicano (1993), Gibbs & O'Brien (1991. 524), Glucksberg (1995· 54)). Many ironic utterances are simply a contradiction of well-known encyclopaedic information

  (2) **Mutually manifest physical context** When two people engage in conversation, there is physical context surrounding them which, at that stage, may be mutually manifest for both interlocutors This is part of the cognitive environment available for the interlocutors during the interaction, and which, in this case, accesses the interlocutors' minds through perception (and therefore is dealt with by one of the encapsulated, domain-specific modules in the brain, cf Fodor (1983), Sperber & Wilson (1986. 81)) This *contextual source* is essential in typical examples of irony such as (5b) in situation (5a) or (6b) in situation (6a) (this second example in Glucksberg (1995· 54))

(5) (a) [*rain pouring down*]
     (b) It seems to be raining!

(6) (a) [*the car ahead suddenly and abruptly turns left*]
     (b) I just love people who signal when turning!

  (3) **Speaker's nonverbal behaviour** As part of the contextual information accessing the addressee via perceptual mechanisms, human nonverbal communication has been pointed out as one of the key *sources* for the correct identification of irony Two areas of nonverbal behaviour as especially relevant: kinesics and paralanguage. The former has to do with the speaker's facial behaviour. The speaker's smile, for instance, while saying an ironic utterance, can help the interlocutor access the opposite meaning

of what he has said The latter refers to alterations of the speaker's voice which are usually a clue for the understanding of irony (see Gibbs (1994: 379), Kreuz & Roberts (1995. 22ff), Tannen (1984: 133), Haverkate (1985: 347; 1990: 79)), Mariscal Chicano (1994. 332)). These alterations include heavy stress, slow speaking rate, and nasalization, while intonation does not seem to be so important to access ironic messages (Gibbs & O'Brien (1991· 526))

(4) **Addressee's background knowledge of addresser's biographical data**. Often this background information helps addressees in the recognition of irony. For example, if we know that someone is prone to using irony in any conversational interaction in which he or she is engaged, this information will make us be *on our guard* against possible ironic messages underlying this person's utterances (Tannen (1984: 132)).

(5) **Mutual knowledge** In every conversation, there is certain information which both interlocutors assume that they share, and which is often left unsaid or implicit during interaction. Sperber & Wilson (1986) criticise this notion because, as they argue, it 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 which is constructed in the *on-going* conversation. For instance, for A's question in example (7), B's indirect answer is useful to foreground the fact that A and B share the information about the English being good sailors (or, in Sperber & Wilson's terms, this information is *mutually manifest*), and the effective continuation of the conversation is a proof of that fact:

(7)   A: Is Jack a good sailor?
        B. He is English.
        A: He must be very good then...

Many analysts have rejected this hypothesis (for bibliographical discussion, see Yus Ramos (1997b: 91-97; forthcoming)), and argue for the possibility of some background information which both interlocutors have no doubt that they share (for example Sperber and Wilson surely have no doubt that they co-wrote the book *Relevance* and this information need not be pointed out or constructed in their conversations). Obviously, speakers are constantly checking the information that they share with their interlocutors,

and on some occasions they wrongly assume that there is mutual knowledge of some information, as can be seen in example (8) which happened to me when one day I took my dog to the vet and saw a cat in a cage:

(8) A· *[to the cat's owner]* Nice cat. . is it male or female?
 B· It is three-coloured
 A· So what?
 B All three-coloured cats are female.

Needless to say, the hearer's awareness of some mutually shared information might be essential for the identification of irony (and also for the speaker in his expectations of successful irony, see Myers Roy (1981· 413), Barbe (1989· 272), Haverkate (1990· 82), Torres Sánchez (1994: 436)). In dialogue (9), speaker A assumes that B shares with him the fact that unemployment has increased, and this is the key to the irony·

(9) *[newspaper headline: "unemployment has increased 10% in the last six months"]*
 A· Things are going bright for young people in this country, don't you think? No doubt we will soon find a well-paid job...
 B: *[laughing]* You are right. We'd better emigrate!

(6) **Previous utterances of the conversation** For Sperber & Wilson (1986: 139-140), previous utterance(s) are part of the initial context that is available for interlocutors in the interpretation of subsequent utterances. In the interpretation of irony, previous utterances can be a helpful *contextual source* either because they are repeated (establishing here a connection with Sperber and Wilson's (1981) *echoic-mention theory*), or because they are contradicted, as in dialogue (10):

(10) A: Did you work hard last night?
 B: I stayed up until four o'clock in the morning!
 A. Oh dear
 B: I might well go for a 20 km. jog in order to stretch up a bit after so much sleep..
 A· Yeah, do. I will have your coffin ready when you return!

These are six *contextual sources* which can determine the successful outcome in the interpretation of ironic utterances. Now, how are these sources accessed or activated while the addressee is interpreting the ironic sense of an utterance? In order to answer this question, some brief notes on the theory of the *modularity of mind* are required. I will devote the next paragraphs to a clarification of this term, using Fodor (1983) and Carston (1997) as the main theoretical support. After that, a proposal of accessibility to *contextual sources* will be proposed.

According to Fodor (*ibid.*), the human mind has a series of modules characterised by domain-specificity, informational encapsulation, and innate specification. An example of modules is *perceptual modules*, specifically designed to process a particular type of in-coming 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 *un*encapsulated (see Kasher (1984), Wilson & Sperber (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 also typical of these systems, which control the efficiency and the current state of the person's (to a certain degree likely to be changed) representation of the world (cf. Sperber & Wilson (1997)).

The non-modular quality of the central systems has provoked a certain ignorance of 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)).

In the last few years, there has been some criticism of this Fodorian view of the mind, specifically concerning the increasing awareness that central systems might be far more structured than Fodor thought (Sperber & Wilson (1995: 293), Sperber (1996)), that is, that there might be a so-called *central systems module*

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* 1, 4, 5, and 6 outlined above, while the (perceptual) *contextual sources* 2 and 3 would be managed by specialised, domain-specific Fodorian modules. Most important of all, this new approach gives us the picture of the human brain accessing different contextual sources *simultaneously* and integrating all this information within the *central systems* (now modular) *processor*

The main claim of this paper is that the hearer's simultaneous access to (one, several, or all) the *contextual sources* 1-6 outlined above, is essential for a proper understanding of how people interpret ironic utterances. After that, some kind of incompatibility between the information provided by these *contextual sources* and the ironic utterance is also necessary, so that *the more incompatibilities detected, the less processing effort*

The picture outlined here is that of multiple *contextual sources* providing parallel inputs for the hearer to suspect that the speaker's utterance might be ironic If the level of *redundancy* provided by all these *contextual sources* is high, then the ironic interpretation of an utterance will be even easier to process than the literal decoding of the utterance. Obviously, this hypothesis works at a theoretical level only. We are trying to describe mental operations which occur at inextricable areas of human cognition, but it can be predicted that, at some point, the level of redundancy provided by *contextual sources* will reduce processing effort so much as to require even less than a purely literal decoding of the utterance.

Another consequence of this hypothesis is that if the number of *contextual sources* accessed and/or incompatibilities detected is not high enough, a misunderstanding of the ironic interpretation might, in fact, take place. We will analyse instances of this in the examples provided in the next section.

At this point, one might argue that, in reality, the activation of multiple *contextual sources* also demands processing effort and that, consequently, the more *sources* activated, the higher the effort (hence contradicting the *effort-saving hypothesis*

outlined above). In reality, one of the most economical aspects of the comprehension of utterances is that it does not take place in isolation but, rather, utterances are sequentially decoded in a conversational exchange. Therefore, when a seemingly ironic utterance turns up, often the hearer has already activated, a long time before, many of the *contextual sources* proposed above, so that what takes place in the processing is not so much an *"ad hoc activation followed by incompatibility"* sequence but, rather, a detected *incompatibility of 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.

We can now propose what will be labelled *principle of optimal accessibility to irony*, defined as follows·

PRINCIPLE OF OPTIMAL ACCESSIBILITY TO IRONY

The processing effort required for the interpretation of an ironic utterance decreases in parallel with the increase in the number of incompatibilities (detected by the addressee) between the simultaneously activated *contextual sources* and the information provided by the ironic utterance

In the next section, some examples will be provided which will show the applicability of this principle. In all the examples a three-fold distinction between (a) previously activated *contextual sources,* (b) simultaneous activation of these *sources,* and (c) incompatibilities detected will be dealt with.

4. Some examples of irony from a new cognitive perspective

The first example of successful interpretation of irony is dialogue (11b) taken from Barbe (1989· 272) In situation (11a), speaker B is ironic concerning A's mistake (A is also ironic in his second utterance, but this example will not be analysed). The reason for A's optimal interpretation of B's irony lies in the number of *contextual sources* activated and the *redundancy* provided by the simultaneous incompatibilities that arise during comprehension, as is summarised in (11c), where "PREV.ACT " means *activation of contextual source prior to the ironic utterance,* and "ON-LINE ACT." means *activation*

of contextual source during the interpretation of the ironic utterance It might be predicted that, due to the level of redundancy acquired throughout the processing activity, B's ironic utterance should not take longer to process than a literal utterance such as (11d):

(11)   (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) SOURCE	PREV ACT.	ON-LINE ACT.	INCOMPATIBILITY
Factual information	✓	✓	✓
Physical surrounding	✓	✓	✗
Nonverbal comm.	✓	✓	✓
Biographical data	✓	✓	✓
Mutual knowledge	✗	✗	✗
Previous utterances	✓	✓	✗

    (d)   B· You took my glass!

Explanation· 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 so 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 question (Barbe (*ibid.*) recorded dialogue (11b)), which contradicts B's usual paralinguistic behaviour (NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION). These three incompatibilities produce a high level of redundancy, making B's ironic utterance very easy to identify and process

The second example is dialogue (12a) taken from Edward Albee's play *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf,* and quoted in Gibbs (1994: 360). All the conversational exchange is highly ironic, but let us concentrate on George's second utterance This ironic utterance presents the incompatibilities shown in (12b), whose level of redundancy also leads us to predict that it should not take longer to process than a more literal utterance such as (12c).

(12)   (a) *Martha*:   Why don't you want to kiss me?

          George   Well dear, if I kissed you, I'd get all excited... I'd get beside myself, and I'd take you, by force, right here on the living room rug, and then our little guests would walk in, and... well, just think what your father would say about that.

          [.]

          Martha: It's the most... life you've shown in a long time

          George: You bring out the best in me, baby.

(b) SOURCE	PREV. ACT.	ON-LINE ACT.	INCOMPATIBILITY
Factual information	✓	✓	✓
Physical surrounding	✓	✓	✗
Nonverbal comm.	✓	✓	✓
Biographical data	✓	✓	✓
Mutual knowledge	✗	✓	✓
Previous utterances	✓	✓	✓

(c) *George*   You bring out the worst in me!

Explanation: Martha knows about George's prior behaviour in the play (BIOGRAPHICAL DATA), and both characters know what they feel for each other (MUTUAL KNOWLEDGE). George's utterance also contradicts his previous utterance which would imply that "the best in me" is behaving like a wild animal (role of PREVIOUS UTTERANCES, and contradiction with FACTUAL INFORMATION) Besides, although it is not explicitly expressed, it is normal that George should be smiling mischievously while saying this utterance, incompatible with normal behaviour in these situations (NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION). Again, the number of

incompatibilities detected produces a high level of redundancy, making George's ironic utterance easy to process.

The third example shows a situation, (13a), in which exchange (13b) takes place. A and B have just met, but they strike up a conversation. In order to break the ice, A makes a comment on one of the headlines in the paper B's ironic remark lacks the minimum number of incompatibilities required for its optimal interpretation, as shown in (13c), and the result is a misunderstanding. In this case, the ironic sense of the utterance not only takes longer to process than a literal utterance such as (13d), it is not even identified as such:

(13)   (a) [*passengers A and B sitting together on a train. After a while they strike up a conversation. A is reading a paper and makes a comment on one of the headlines*]

        (b) A. Listen, it says here that sixty per cent of women are still unemployed in this country!
             B: Yeah! Keep them in the kitchen where they belong!
             A: Do you think all women should be housewives?
             B. Of course not! I was only joking, for God's sake!

(c)	SOURCE	PREV. ACT.	ON-LINE ACT	INCOMPATIBILITY
	Factual information	✓	✓	✓
	Physical surrounding	✓	✓	✗
	Nonverbal comm	✓	✓	✗
	Biographical data	✗	✗	✗
	Mutual knowledge	✗	✗	✗
	Previous utterances	✓	✗	✗

(d) Yeah! It is sad to think that so many women are unemployed

Explanation. The only source of incompatibility is A's stereotypical knowledge about women not deserving to be kept in the kitchen (FACTUAL INFORMATION). A does not find incompatibilities in the other *contextual sources*, not even in B's nonverbal behaviour, since B utters his statement in a grave, neutral tone of

voice and without any special facial gesture. A's misunderstanding of B's ironic utterance was predictable

The problems in identifying ironic utterances increase when there is not a physical co-presence of addresser and addressee in the communicative situation, for instance in the reception of media discourses and literary texts. An example is provided by Gibbs (1994. 361). in 1964, the famous singer John Lennon said the utterance (14a) in an interview for the press, meaning ironically (14b). Yet, "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" (*ibid*: 361-362). The reason for this misunderstanding is clear: there were not enough incompatibilities detected (not even a prior activation of *contextual sources*) for the utterance to be considered ironic, as shown in (14c):

(14)   (a) "The Beatles are more popular than Jesus Christ".

      (b) 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

(c) SOURCE	PREV. ACT.	ON-LINE ACT.	INCOMPATIBILITY
Factual information	✓	✓	✓
Physical surrounding	✗	✗	✗
Nonverbal comm	✗	✗	✗
Biographical data	✓	✓	✗
Mutual knowledge	✗	✗	✗
Previous utterances	✓	✓	✗

Explanation. The reader of Lennon's statement only finds one incompatibility, specifically with general encyclopaedic information concerning religion and the importance of Jesus Christ (FACTUAL INFORMATION) There is no PHYSICAL SURROUNDING 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 (14a) Lastly, there is no MUTUAL KNOWLEDGE to be accessed, nor is there any relevant information coming from PREVIOUS UTTERANCES Lennon should not have been so surprised that his ironic utterance was misunderstood.

In the reception of literary discourse there is a similar problem when the reader tries to access the intended ironical interpretation. Writers have to rely on very few written sources in order to convey ironic readings of their texts, for example "the rich use of typographical indices, such as quotation marks, footnotes, italics, and special titles and headings, and heavy handed disclaimers like *[sic]* and *[?!]*" (Myers (1990), quoted in Gibbs (1994· 379); see also González (1996. 61) and Peña-Marín (1989))

One of the most famous examples of irony in literature is Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), in which a striking suggestion is made that babies should be eaten, and which we reproduce in (15a). Readers were unable to grasp Swift's "absurd suggestion with apparent sincerity" (Gibbs (1994 361)) and even recently, the book was banned from a school on the ground that it was in bad taste. Again, the reasons for this misunderstanding lie in the lack of activation of *contextual sources* and the subsequent absence of the necessary number of incompatibilities detected, as shown in (15b).

(15) (a) I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked or boiled, and I make no doubt that it will serve in a fricassee, or a ragout

(b)

SOURCE	PREV ACT	ON-LINE ACT	INCOMPATIBILITY
Factual information	✓	✓	✓
Physical surrounding	✗	✗	✗
Nonverbal comm.	✗	✗	✗
Biographical data	✓	✓	✓
Mutual knowledge	✗	✗	✗
Previous utterances	✓	✓	✗

Explanation· Here the only two incompatibilities detected are the one based of stereotypical information about the world (FACTUAL INFORMATION), according to which babies are not eaten by any animal, let alone human beings, and the reader's BIOGRAPHICAL DATA about the famous author, which would surely contradict such unfortunate text. Very few incompatibilities, and very few activations of *contextual sources* to guarantee a successful interpretation of the underlying ironic interpretation of (15a).

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper a *principle of optimal accessibility to irony* has been proposed, which takes into account the fact that hearers access multiple *contextual sources* simultaneously during interpretation, and that the higher the number of incompatibilities detected between the information provided by these *sources* and the supposedly ironical sense of the utterance, the less effort the hearer has to make in the processing of irony. Several examples have shown how relevant these *sources* are, and how the number of incompatibilities plays a part in the (un)successful outcome of interpretation.

The main conclusion of this article is that ironic utterances may in fact demand less processing effort than literal (i.e. explicit) utterances when there is an increased redundancy of simultaneous incompatibilities provided by *contextual sources*. However, no hard-and-fast rule can be proposed for when this is bound to happen, since it all depends on the hearers' personal cognitive capabilities and the amount of contextual information available for them in specific communicative situations. At least, when this lesser processing effort of irony takes place, we can now explain why. The cognitive approach outlined in this paper opens up new ways of studying indirectness and discourse, including other implicit discursive strategies such as understatement, metaphor, sarcasm, etc.

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