

*Some observations on the pragmatics of humorous interpretations: a relevance theoretic approach**

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1 Introduction

Most of the pragmatic literature on verbal humour is dominated by a discourse analysis approach (e.g. Raskin 1985, Pretorius 1990, Attardo 1994). The underlying assumption in these works is that being humorous is a property of texts and that looking at their structure is therefore the route to an adequate description and explanation of verbal humour. In this paper I take a different stance. I suggest that what we need to provide is not a theory of humorous texts but a theory of how hearers arrive at humorous interpretations. In order to do that, one has to shift the centre of attention from the structural features of texts to the mental processes that a hearer goes through during interpretation, concentrating on the representations he is led to entertain, and the computations such representations enter into during comprehension. I suggest that at the heart of the process that results in a humorous or witty interpretation lies a particular kind of interaction between the perception and manipulation of the incongruous and the search for relevance. Here I begin to examine several ways in which the process may occur and some of the pragmatic mechanisms it involves. Irony, as treated by Sperber and Wilson (1981, 1986) and Wilson and Sperber (1992) fits in this picture as a particular case of verbal wit.

2 Conflicting propositional forms

One rather straightforward way of leading a hearer into the entertainment of the incongruous through language is to direct his process of interpretation to the recovery of conflicting propositional forms. However, humour and the absurd are not the same. It is not just any way of arriving at contradictory assumptions that will play a

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significant part in producing a humorous interpretation or result in a witticism. Explicit conflicting propositional forms are more akin to repairs in discourse, to ritual behaviours, or to plain nonsense than to humour. Consider for example (1)-(4).

- (1) I won't go, I mean, I will.
- (2) She loves me, she loves me not.
- (3) (?) She brought me a letter, therefore, she didn't bring me a letter.
- (4) (?) Open the door, please, don't open the door.

But let us look at what may happen if in interpreting an utterance, the search for relevance forces a hearer to recover two clashing propositions that are not conveyed explicitly. This means that at least one of them will be supplied by the hearer as part of what is implicated in interpreting the utterance as consistent with the principle of relevance. The other clashing assumption may be manifest either from the current context of interpretation or alternatively, from the explicit content of the utterance¹. The examples below are cases in point. (Listed under each are the corresponding clashing propositions).

- (5) Peter: *Who was that gentleman I saw you with last night?*
Mary: *That was no gentleman. That was a senator* (Raskin, 1985)
 - (a) Senators are gentlemen
 - (b) Senators are no gentlemen²

¹Throughout this paper I use the notions of *relevance*, *ostensive communication*, *manifestness*, *assumption*, *implicit* and *explicit import of an utterance*, *context of interpretation*, *implicated premises*, and *implicated conclusions* in the technical sense of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). The *principle of relevance* as formulated by Sperber and Wilson (1986) states that every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance, where the presumption of optimal relevance means that a) the set of assumptions which the communicator intends to make manifest to the addressee is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the ostensive stimulus and b) the ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate the set of intended assumptions.

²Notice that my purpose here is merely to indicate the sort of assumptions involved in the process of interpretation. Different hearers will entertain different subsets of the assumptions made manifest by any given utterance, and the precise formulations they come up with will not necessarily bear much relation to the ones above. These are only intended to suggest the type of contents hearers are likely to manipulate. The point, however, is that in interpreting the utterance as witty or humorous, the search for relevance will lead hearers to entertain two contradictory assumptions.

Notice that (5a) will normally be strongly manifest in the context of interpretation as part of the participants' encyclopaedic knowledge attached to the concept *senator*. If the second part of Mary's utterance is to be interpreted as consistent with the principle of relevance as providing evidence for Mary's denial that the man was a gentleman, then (5b) needs to be supplied as an implicated premise. Adequate contextual effects will be achieved, for example, through a derivation comparable to the one described below.

Premises:

- (c) The man is no gentleman (explicated by Mary's utterance)
- (d) The man is a senator (explicated by Mary's utterance)
- (e) Senators are no gentlemen (strongly implicated premise supplied by the hearer in order to derive adequate contextual effects)

Conclusion:

- (f) The reason why the man is not a gentleman is that he is a senator

Something similar occurs in (6).

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

An interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance will yield the contextual effect that it is the adoption of a useful profession that destroys the good possibilities that follow from having a perfect profile. The only way for a hearer to derive it is to use (6b) as a premise. On the other hand, (6a) is an assumption that arises from the combination of the encyclopaedic entries attached to the notions of *useful* and *profession*, thus becoming part of the accessible context of interpretation. (6b) is strongly implicated by the speaker and contradicts (6a), an assumption strongly manifest in the context of interpretation.

In the process of creating an incongruity between the propositional forms of two manifest assumptions, it is possible for the speaker to pass on to the hearer a great deal of the responsibility. This can be achieved by leading the hearer to construct both clashing assumptions himself. The speaker can thus exploit the hearer's search for an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance and lead him to supply

implicated premises needed for such an interpretation at successive stages in the discourse, which nonetheless contradict each other. This is the case in the joke in (7)

- (7) As a passenger boarded the Los Angeles-to New York plane, he told the flight attendant to wake him and make sure he got off in Dallas. The passenger awoke just as the plane was landing in New York. Furious, he called the flight attendant and demanded an explanation. The fellow mumbled an apology and, in a rage, the passenger stamped off the plane. 'Boy, was he ever mad!', another crew member observed to her errant colleague. 'If you think he was mad', replied the flight attendant, 'you should have seen the guy I put off in Dallas' (Jodlowiec 1991).
- (a) The flight attendant forgot that a passenger wanted to get off the plane in Dallas
 - (b) The flight attendant did not forget that a passenger wanted to get off the plane in Dallas

Although not conveyed explicitly by any of the utterances in (7), (7a) needs to be supplied if the passage between *'the passenger awoke...'* and the punchline is to be interpreted as consistent with the principle of relevance. Nonetheless, an interpretation of the punchline which is also consistent with the principle of relevance forces the speaker to provide (7b) as an implicated premise.

Of course, humour is not only (and perhaps not even necessarily) related to the entertainment of two discrepant propositional contents. What I intend at this point is to show that a) in a considerable number of cases when a humorous interpretation arises or a witticism is produced, the hearer has been forced to supply a strongly implicated premise in order to interpret the utterance responsible for the humorous climax as consistent with the principle of relevance, that b) this implicated premise contradicts some other assumption either explicitly conveyed by an immediate utterance, or manifest in the accessible context of interpretation, and c) argue that the significance of this fact is worth exploring.

Assuming that the examples just discussed are perceived as reasonably funny by at least some people, it is clear that whatever humorous or witty effects they achieve do not simply result from this conflict in propositional content, but rather emerge as the outcome of a complex interaction of various factors. Nonetheless, if the entertainment of the incongruous (of which propositional form clash is just one instance) does effectively play some crucial role in their creation, this would suggest that witticisms and humorous effects arise from some process similar to what occurs with garden-path utterances. Having processed the material available in the most accessible

context, the hearer encounters a contradictory effect and backtracks. I will take up below the issue of how he then goes about manipulating the contradiction encountered, but first I will consider further pragmatic mechanisms frequently exploited in the instantiation of the incongruous through language.

3 Foreground and background swapping: a shift in relevance search fields

3.0 Leading a hearer to entertain two contradictory propositional forms is one way of inducing the perception of the incongruous³. There are others. For example, a hearer may be led to expect relevance in a given direction and suddenly discover some other unpredicted way in which the utterance achieves it. I now turn to discuss how this can occur.

3.1 Anticipatory hypotheses

An utterance is produced and processed over time; therefore, a hearer will access and process some of the concepts it encodes, and their associated logical and encyclopaedic entries, before others. To a large extent, parsing, disambiguation and reference assignment are top-down processes. What this means is that, on the basis of what they have already heard, hearers construct anticipatory hypotheses about the overall structure of the utterance being processed. These include hypotheses about its syntactic and logical structure on which hearers rely to resolve potential ambiguities and eliminate vagueness. Sperber and Wilson suggest a way of constructing anticipatory logical hypotheses on the basis of the syntactic hypotheses, whose role in comprehension is rather well established (1986: 205). The assumption is that logical forms, like syntactic forms, are trees of labelled nodes. The logical labels are drawn from a set of logical categories which are variables over conceptual representations. These categories are presumably part of basic human mental equipment. The pro-forms of English are used to represent them, so *someone* is a variable over conceptual representations of people, *something* over conceptual representations of things, *do something* over conceptual representations of actions, and so on. The logical form of (8) could then be represented by (9).

(8) Susan saw the senator last night

³A more detailed discussion of the notion of incongruity is provided in section 4.

- (9) [_{SOMEONE} Susan] [[_{DID SOMETHING} [[saw] [_{SOMEONE} [the senator]]] [_{SOMETIME} [last night]]]]

The idea is that a hearer who has heard *Susan* will have assigned it to the syntactic category NP and made the anticipatory syntactic hypothesis that it will be followed by a VP. By variable substitution this should yield the logical hypothesis (10).

- (10) Susan did something

The hearer will then assume that the speaker intended to raise the question *What did Susan do?* and that the rest of the utterance will answer it. Again, upon hearing *saw* and assigning it to the syntactic category VP he will make the syntactic hypothesis that it will be followed by a NP and the logical hypothesis that Susan saw *something/someone*. Most likely, he will then assume that the rest of the utterance will answer the question *Whom/what did Susan see?*, and so on. Such a process produces a set of anticipatory hypotheses. Those which turn out to be correct are logically related to one another, and can be placed in a scale where each member analytically implies its immediately preceding member. The scale of anticipatory hypotheses for (8) is represented in (11) below:

- (11) (a) Susan did something
What did Susan do?
(b) Susan saw someone/something?
Whom/what did Susan see?
(c) Susan saw the senator
When/where did Susan see the senator?

Although the question at the bottom of the scale gets answered by the end of the utterance, and at that stage in processing relevant answers to the questions in the scale will have been provided, the interpretation of the utterance itself will most probably raise still others, such as, for example, *Why did Susan see the senator?* or *Where did Susan see the senator?* The hearer will thus develop expectations about the ways in which upcoming material is most likely to achieve relevance.

In principle, a hearer could produce an indefinite number of such hypotheses. In practice, he will formulate those which seem most relevant to him and will adjust them to the direction in which the exchange or the discourse that he is processing develops. Of course, not all the hypotheses in the anticipatory scale are recovered at the same time. For each of these hypotheses the hearer will find either that it is relevant in its own right or that it raises a relevant question (i.e. a question the answer

to which is certain or likely to be relevant). Let us call an implication in the scale of correct anticipatory hypotheses that has contextual effects of its own a *foreground implication*, and an implication that is not relevant on its own, a *background implication*.⁴

3.2 Focal scales

One of the ways to find the focus of a declarative utterance is to see what wh-question it was designed or could be appropriately used to answer. Wh- questions have the form wh-p, where p is a less than fully propositional form. Once the empty slot in p is filled in, the result is a declarative proposition that answers a wh-question. Before this, although p is not fully propositional, it is a logical form that has analytic implications. We can therefore construct an ordered subset of the analytic implications of p using the empty slot as a point of departure in a way that parallels what would otherwise be a focal scale. Moreover, it is also possible to use the notion of foreground and background implications meaningfully for this scale.⁵

The procedure for constructing a focal scale consists in taking the propositional form of the utterance, replacing the smallest stressed constituent by a logical variable, then replacing by a logical variable the interpretation of the next smallest syntactic constituent which contains the focally stressed constituent, and so on until there are no more inclusive constituents to be replaced. Different stress assignments induce different focal scales. Here, we can assume that the focus is placed in the empty slot, given that it is what contains the most relevant material.

The point that interests me here is that it is possible for a speaker to present an assumption that is highly relevant in its own right as if it were not, that is, as if it were a background assumption. An immediate consequence of this manipulation is an abrupt departure from expectations about the way in which upcoming material is likely to achieve relevance. Such a case is illustrated in (12) below.

- (12) There is no question that there is an unseen world. The problem is* how far it is from midtown and how late it is open (Woody Allen).

⁴Sperber and Wilson (1986: 209) define this notion not for the scale of anticipatory logical hypotheses, but for another type of scale, which is constructed on the basis of focal stress placement, and which they call *focal scale*. The set of anticipatory logical hypotheses made during the interpretation process coincides with the focal scale only when focal stress falls on the last word of an utterance.

⁵In many cases, the scale so constructed will be the focal scale.

By the time the hearer reaches the point * he expects an answer to a question along the lines of *What is the problem that remains to be solved about an unseen world?*, probably followed by some talk about the supernatural. He is then told that the answer lies in the answers to two further questions, which his utterance formulates indirectly:

p = How far is an unseen world from midtown?
 q = How late is an unseen world open?

We can think of p' and q' as representations of the logical forms of p and q, and of p'' and q'' as the declaratives that provide partial answers to those questions. It is then possible to construct the scales below:

p' = An unseen world is _____ from midtown
 p'' = An unseen world is some measurable distance from midtown

It is conveyed that there is a completion of p' into a propositional form that would make it relevant if true. This would yield contextual effects. Therefore, any logical implications obtained by replacing by a logical variable the material that would make the propositional form relevant should not be relevant in their own right, precisely because it is some propositional completion of p' that would make it relevant if true. This means that p'' should be a background assumption. Indeed, it is treated by the speaker as such. Exactly the same occurs with q' and q''.

q' = An unseen world is open until _____
 q'' = An unseen world is open until some real time

However, because of the context in which (12) is being processed, p'' and q'' are relevant in their own right. The fact that a supernatural world should have a physically determined spatial-temporal location would yield enough contextual effects to be relevant in its own right if it were true. In fact, p'' and q'' are foreground assumptions, given that they are so much in conflict with the assumptions in the current context of interpretation, and regardless of a more specific completion of p' and q'.

The example in (13) is taken from Woody Allen's *Examining Psychic Phenomena*, a short story in which the discourse preceding (13) has made strongly manifest the assumption that the speaker is providing evidence to support the existence of the supernatural. Here, an assumption from the background is suddenly brought into the foreground and denied explicitly.

- (13) will hear voices (...)How many of us have not at one time or another felt an ice-cold hand on the back of our neck while we were at home alone?
(not me, thank God, but some have)

The speaker's question is rhetorical and as such implicates its answer. It communicates that there is some completion of p that would be relevant if true, and also that such a completion is strongly manifest to him and his audience.

p = [_____] of us have not at one time or another felt an ice-cold hand on the back of our neck while we were at home alone.

Possible completions are *all/most/many/some/few*. In the context of interpretation, the completion of p in p' is highly predictable

p' = Few of us have not at one time or another felt an ice-cold hand on the back of our neck while we were at home alone.

It is also in the background that the speaker is not part of that minority who has not gone through such experience, otherwise, he wouldn't be in a position to persuade his audience, he wouldn't be using those examples as arguments, and so on. The speaker represents himself as belonging to a group of which we are all part, and creates the expectation that upcoming discourse will proceed along the same lines. However, what follows achieves relevance in a totally different way: it achieves relevance by bringing the assumption that the speaker has experienced or witnessed psychic phenomena from the background into the foreground, and explicitly denying it.

In this section I have shown how a speaker can treat an assumption that belongs in the foreground as if it were part of the background. Such an assumption, analytically implied by the utterance, has more contextual effects than the material explicitly foregrounded. This manipulation is closely linked to the encountering of some rather abrupt deviation from the ways in which upcoming material is expected to be relevant. In a sense, the distinction between background and foreground assumptions divides the cognitive environment of a hearer into two distinct spaces. These can be conceived of as *relevance search fields*. A speaker normally exploits this fact to direct the hearer's search for relevance. The natural tendency will be for hearers to search for relevance in the answers to the questions that foreground assumptions raise (i.e. within the *foreground relevance search field*), given that information contained in background assumptions is standardly treated as not relevant enough to be worth the hearer's attention.

4 The incongruous and its role

In what sense are the features described above a manifestation of the incongruous? So far I have been using the notion of *incongruity* in a loose manner. In psychology, incongruity theories of humour have provided a number of technical definitions. The concept of incongruity I want to use here does not differ much from the meaning it receives in ordinary speech. Also, I am interested in a notion that characterizes incongruity as a feature of the relation between an object and the subject who perceives it, and not as a property of the object itself. Forabosco (1992: 54) provides a definition that captures these requirements: 'a stimulus is *incongruous* when it differs from the cognitive model of reference'. By *model* he means 'a sort of preliminary representation and minitheory which the subject uses in his relationship with reality' (1992: 54), and a *cognitive model of reference* is taken to be what a subject constructs as the result of the contents of his experience and the processes through which he organizes knowledge and knowledge acquisition methods (selection, categorization, generalization, etc.) A cognitive model therefore delineates a field of variation within which the characteristics of the stimulus must fall in order to be perceived as conforming and hence congruous.

Being led to entertain as something accepted an implicated premise that contradicts some other assumption manifest in the context of interpretation, recognizing that a foreground assumption is being presented as if it were a background assumption, and being forced to search for and find relevance in a field other than expected are all discrepancies that fit into Forabosco's definition of incongruity. In all cases, it is the attempt to interpret utterances as consistent with the principle of relevance that leads hearers to entertain the incongruous.

What I have offered so far is a description of some mechanisms that trigger the perception of incongruity in language. I have also argued that it is the principle of relevance that leads hearers to entertain different forms of the incongruous, and that this perception is central to the experience of verbal humour. There are two immediate questions that arise from this picture. First, how do ironical utterances, an archetypical form of verbal wit, fit into this model? And second, how do hearers go about processing the incongruity they encounter? In the next section I discuss how irony fits into this view. The cognitive manipulation of the incongruous as instantiated through language is dealt with in section 6.

5 Irony as a case of verbal wit

In what follows I will argue that there is a sense in which verbal irony relies on the accessing of two contradictory propositional forms and the recognition of their incompatibility. This is a claim that can be derived straightforwardly from traditional approaches to verbal irony. Nevertheless, I do not intend to pursue it in the sense implied by such treatments of irony, nor in the specific form they would suggest. In classical rhetoric, irony is seen as involving the replacement of a literal meaning with a figurative meaning, where the figurative meaning in question is the opposite of the literal meaning. However, besides there being a large number of counterexamples to the claim that an ironical utterance invariably conveys the opposite of what is literally said, it is very counter-intuitive to suggest that the operation of recovering a propositional form and then transforming it into its opposite with no principled motivation should play a natural or important role in interpretation. The calculability requirement for implicatures introduced by Grice provides some motivation for such a process. Grice (1975) reanalysed what was classically treated as figurative meaning as a figurative implicature, derived by the hearer from the recognition of the speaker's deliberate flouting of the maxim of truthfulness. According to him, the ironist thereby implicates the opposite of the proposition expressed by her utterance, or what is literally said. Again, we find that the entertainment of two contradictory propositional forms is somehow involved in this approach to ironical utterances. But even in this view, it is not always clear that in producing an ironical utterance what the speaker does is to deliberately violate Grice's maxim of truthfulness. Speakers may mean what they literally say and still intend to be ironic. Imagine a mother whose children are still around by midnight, concocting all sorts of excuses to avoid going to bed. After a while she turns to a visiting friend and says *I love children who go to bed early*. She might indeed mean what she says, she does not implicate that she does not, and yet she is ironic. In what sense is the incongruous involved in such cases then? What I explore below is the possibility of a different role for incongruous propositional forms in the perception of irony. In this perspective, these do not arise as a consequence of the hearer performing some shift to an opposite meaning, but are instead a central part of the interpretation process he must go through prior to the complete recovery of the ironic interpretation of an utterance. It is not about *replacing* one meaning with its opposite, it is not about *deriving* as an implicature a meaning opposite to the proposition expressed by the utterance, but about being forced by the search for relevance to entertain the incongruous, as a stage in processing required to identify an ironical utterance as such. It is not something unnatural that a hearer should do for no principled reason, but instead something that arises as a necessary consequence of his search for relevance. After all, incongruity does seem to play a role in irony, but not quite in the way the classical and Gricean approaches have suggested.

In their treatment of irony, Sperber and Wilson have introduced the notion of *interpretive resemblance* and of *interpretive use* (Sperber and Wilson 1986, Wilson and Sperber 1992). Given that any object in the world can be used to represent any other object it resembles, it is possible to use an utterance to represent another whose propositional content resembles its own. The notion of interpretive resemblance is defined in terms of resemblance of propositional content (i.e. sharing of logical and contextual implications): the more shared implications, the greater the interpretive resemblance. On this view, a literal interpretation is one in which two propositions share all their implications in all contexts; in a less than literal interpretation, the propositions expressed by the two utterances involved have some implications in common in some contexts.

According to Sperber and Wilson (1986) all utterances are more or less literal interpretations of a thought of the speaker. An utterance is *descriptively used* when that thought is entertained as a description of a state of affairs. It is *interpretively used* when that thought is itself an interpretation of some further thought or utterance it resembles. Ironical utterances are cases of interpretive use, in which a speaker attributes a thought to someone other than herself, or to herself at another time.

Sperber and Wilson also argue that the crucial element for the interpretation of ironic utterances is the recognition that they are *echoic* (i.e. they express the speaker's attitude to the opinion echoed), and the identification of the speaker's attitude of dissociation from what is echoed⁶. This approach can handle many of the examples which are problematic for the classical and Gricean approaches, sheds light on the issue of why irony arises, why it emerges spontaneously and does not have to be learned, and also shows that it is not a deviation from a norm, and that it does not need to follow specific rhetorical conventions.

On this view, therefore, irony is a variety of implicit interpretive use in which the proposition expressed by an utterance represents a belief attributed to someone other than the speaker or to the speaker at another time. It is possible to echo not only beliefs, or opinions, but also expectations, hopes, desires, fears or norms of groups, societies or humanity in general. More crucially, a speaker can produce an utterance to dissociate herself from another utterance to which it bears some form of resemblance. That is, a speaker can dissociate herself from the proposition expressed by her utterance, or she can dissociate herself from something else that the proposition expressed evokes.

What I want to explore here is whether the recognition of irony as echoic and as involving the expression of a dissociative attitude requires the entertainment of two

⁶An *echoic* utterance simultaneously reports what someone has or might have said or thought, and expresses the attitude of the speaker to it.

conflicting propositional forms. Notice that the issue of whether conflicting propositional forms are entertained is, in principle, independent of the approach one takes to irony. It refers to what goes on during the processing of an utterance when it is understood as ironic. It does not necessarily have any bearing on the traditional view that an ironic speaker says something and means or implicates the opposite of the proposition expressed by his utterance. It does not imply that the two contradictory propositional forms in question should be the proposition expressed by an utterance (what is *said* in Gricean terms) and what the speaker intends to communicate. If one can find the thought the speaker is dissociating herself from, the question is whether the propositional content of this thought is in conflict with some other propositional form that the hearer has to entertain somehow in order to identify the utterance as echoic and as expressing a dissociative attitude.

The best way to illustrate the point I want to make is to concentrate on cases where the speaker means what he says and yet is still ironic. Consider again the example of the mother who says *I love children who go to bed early*. She does not mean *I do not love children who go to bed early* nor *I love children who do not go to bed early*. There is a thought that the mother is echoing and dissociating herself from. The question is what this thought is. In saying *I love children who go to bed early*, what she is echoing is a potential utterance she might have expected to be able to produce in a different situation, for instance, one in which her own children would be in bed early. In such a case, her utterance would entail that she loves her own children. When this situation fails to materialise, she ironically echoes the utterance she had earlier expected to be able to produce. In these circumstances, her utterance does not have the implication that she loves her children, at least, not because they go to bed early. There is therefore a discrepancy between the proposition she hopes to be able to convey by means of her utterance, and the proposition she is actually in a position to express⁷. Notice that unless this discrepancy is accessed, there is no way, other than an ironic tone of voice, in which the speaker can be taken to be echoic and expressing an attitude of dissociation.

Take another example where the speaker endorses the truth of her utterance and is nonetheless ironic.

q = *Our friends are always there when they need us* (Martin: 1992)

Clearly, q is being used to represent

⁷I am indebted to Deirdre Wilson and Robyn Carston for detailed discussions on this example, and to Deirdre Wilson for her suggestion that what is being echoed in this case is a potential utterance.

p = Our friends are always there when we need them

It is only in a context where $\neg p$ is mutually manifest that it makes sense to dissociate oneself from the thought that p . Again, both p and $\neg p$ are entertained during processing, in a roughly simultaneous way. The interpretive resemblance between p and q is strongly linked to their analytic implications. These include s_1 - s_3 , which are also members of the set of anticipatory hypotheses for q . Being a popular saying, p is highly accessible, and expected.

s_1 = Our friends are always somewhere in some circumstances
 s_2 = Our friends are always there in some circumstances
 s_3 = Our friends are always there when something is the case.

Notice also that both q and p are of the form $v \rightarrow w$. If we take v_1 , v_2 and w to be

v_1 = We need our friends
 v_2 = Our friends need us
 w = Our friends are always there

we can think of q and p as

q = $v_2 \rightarrow w$
 p = $v_1 \rightarrow w$

It is now possible to look at the relation that holds between v_1 and v_2 . If a =we and b =our friends and we denote by N the predicate 'to need' we have that

v_1 = $N(a,b)$ v_2 = $N(b,a)$

v_1 and v_2 are propositional forms embedded in higher order predicates. They are not contradictory, nor opposite strictly speaking, but they are contrary.

There are other examples in which this device is exploited. Consider Oscar Wilde's remark:

q = *Never leave until tomorrow what you can possibly do the day after*

This echoes the popular saying

p = Never leave until tomorrow what you can possibly do today

p and q share analytic implications in the same way as the utterances in the preceding example. In particular, they share:

s₁ = Never leave until tomorrow what you can possibly do *sometime*

What happens when the hearer reaches the last constituent of the utterance is similar to what I described in section (2) in terms of deviation from expectations. Besides, the conceptual representations that the hearer accesses are also contrary: *today* (the day before tomorrow) and *the day after* (the day after tomorrow).

q can be perceived as ironic only if it is recognized as echoic, and the attitude expressed towards the thought echoed as one of dissociation. It is possible to dissociate oneself from a thought for a variety of reasons. The exhausted mother of the example discussed above finds that it would be ridiculous to maintain her hopes in the circumstances, Oscar Wilde may find it absurd that efficiency should be an outstanding value at the expense of others, say, more emotional or sensual experiences. In any case, the point is that unless the two conflicting propositional forms are entertained, it is not possible to interpret the utterance as echoic, nor the attitude expressed as one of dissociation.⁸

6 Metarepresentational inference: the manipulation of the incongruous

Experiencing humour is, among other things, a matter of cognitive manipulation and mastery. It is not enough to perceive incongruity, there is much else needed. Morreall (1989) has characterized amusement as the *enjoyment* of incongruity⁹, but what makes it possible for humans to enjoy what they perceive as incongruous? The power to do so appears to be species-specific and most likely arises from the uniquely human capacity for objective and higher order representational thinking. In this section I suggest that for humour to be experienced, the conflicting first order propositional forms one encounters in processing a humorous utterance must be embedded in higher order metarepresentations, and that inferences that take them as premises need to be performed. I also argue that the order of the metarepresentations in which clashing

⁸Sperber and Wilson point out the close connections between irony and the entertainment of incongruity in suggesting that irony 'rests on the perception of a discrepancy between a representation and the state of affairs that it purports to represent' (1990: 152)

⁹As opposed to other possible reactions towards the perception of the incongruous, such as curiosity, fear, or anger.

propositions get embedded is a determining factor in producing a humorous interpretation. Embedding the contradictory propositions in metarepresentations of lower degrees than those needed for verbal humour and wit results in a variety of different effects, relative to the metarepresentational orders involved, which I discuss below.

Assigning an utterance a humorous interpretation may or may not involve the recognition of an intention to amuse on the part of the speaker. Whether or not humour arises from a specific intention of the speaker to be witty or amusing, there must be a way for the hearer to rule out a number of other non-humorous or non-witty possibilities where first order clashing propositional contents are entertained. Cases in point are repairs in discourse, occasions when a hearer decides that a speaker is mistaken, or that she is lying, or expressing disagreement, or trying to convince the hearer of something he is reluctant to accept. In some of these cases, there may be intended or unintended falsehood, in others, the question is not one of truth, but of conflicting propositional forms, regardless of their truth value. I would like to argue that the difference between humour and wit on the one hand and any of the other cases where a propositional clash is encountered (mistakes, lies, arguments, deception) on the other is associated with the order of the metarepresentations in which the clashing propositions become embedded.

Dan Sperber (1994) has suggested that fully-fledged communicative competence involves for an audience being capable of making at least fourth order metarepresentational attributions of the speaker's communicative intentions.

An *informative intention* is a first order metarepresentation whereby a speaker desires that some information become represented in the mind of an audience. If Mary wants John to represent the content of *p* in his mind, her informative intention is as follows:

John should believe
that *p*

A *communicative intention* is the intention to have one's informative intention recognized. It is therefore a second order informative intention, and attributing it to a speaker involves entertaining at least a fourth order metarepresentation. Let us assume that Mary utters *p* and that the proposition *p* expresses is also its main explicature. In attributing Mary a communicative intention, John will have to entertain a metarepresentation with the content below:

Mary intends
me to know

that she intends
me to believe
that p

Let p be '*Mary is a good person*'. Imagine that Steve comes to Helen and says that p in a context where $\neg p$ is strongly manifest to Helen. The following are possible ways in which Helen may treat Steve's utterance:

Case 1 *Helen concludes that Steve is mistaken*

If Helen believes that Mary is not a good a person and uses the following as premises in her interpretation process, she will conclude that Steve is mistaken.

Premises:

- (a) Steve intends
 - Helen to know
 - that Steve intends
 - Helen to believe
 - that Mary is a good person

- (b) Helen believes that
 - Mary is not a good person

Conclusion: Helen believes that Steve is mistaken

Case 2 *Helen concludes that Steve is lying*

If Helen uses (a), and instead of embedding $\neg p$ as in (b) above she operates with a second order metarepresentation, she will conclude that Steve is not being truthful.

Premises:

- (a) Steve intends
 - Helen to know
 - that Steve intends
 - Helen to believe
 - that Mary is a good person

- (b) Helen believes that
 - Steve believes that
 - Mary is not a good person

Conclusion: Helen believes that Steve is lying

Case 3 *Helen concludes that Steve is trying to convince her that p , or arguing that p*
Embedding $\neg p$ in a third order metarepresentation will not result in a humorous interpretation either.

Premises:

- (a) Steve intends
 - Helen to know
 - that Steve intends
 - Helen to believe
 - that Mary is a good person

- (b) Helen believes that
 - Steve believes that
 - Helen believes that
 - Mary is not a good person

Conclusion: Steve is arguing against Mary, or trying to convince her of something she doesn't believe.

Case 4 *Helen concludes that Steve is joking, being ironic or witty*

For Helen to conclude that Steve is joking, being ironic or witty, she must embed $\neg p$ in a metarepresentation of at least fourth order.

Premises:

- (a) Steve intends
 - Helen to know
 - that Steve intends
 - Helen to believe
 - that Mary is a good person

- (b) Helen believes that
 - Steve believes that
 - Helen believes that
 - Steve believes that
 - Mary is not a good person

Conclusion: Steve is being ironical or joking

However, because understanding an ironic utterance as such involves the recognition of its echoic nature, as well as the identification of the speaker's attitude as one of dissociation, it follows that in the last case above, p can not be taken to be

the main explicature of Steve's utterance. Helen will therefore entertain as a conclusion a more complex metarepresentation, such as

Steve intends
 Helen to know
 that Steve intends
 Helen to believe
 that it is ridiculous to believe
 that Mary is a good person

In the examples above I assumed for ease of exposition that the proposition expressed by the utterance was also its main explicature, and I treated it accordingly in the description of the premises used to derive a conclusion in order to illustrate my point. However, this is not to say that in interpreting an ironic utterance a hearer first assigns to it a literal interpretation. In the last case above, instead of interpreting Steve's utterance as an ordinary assertion, Helen will interpret it echoically.

Whenever a communicated proposition contradicts another one which is strongly manifest, and the deductive device does not reject either of the two, the hearer proceeds to embed at least one of them into a metarepresentation. If this metarepresentation is a first order metarepresentation, the hearer is led to conclude that the speaker is mistaken. If it is embedded in a second order metarepresentation, the hearer will conclude that the speaker is lying. Embedding the contradictory proposition in a third order metarepresentation will produce the conclusion that the speaker is trying to convince the hearer or arguing against his position. It is only when the clashing proposition is embedded in a fourth order metarepresentation that a humorous/ironic interpretation may arise. This observation may shed some light on to what it means to miss the point of a joke, a witticism or an ironic utterance, and why some people are completely immune to the non-seriousness of some remarks. The process one needs to follow is a complex one. First, one usually needs to entertain some form of discrepancy. However, humans have been shown to have a tendency to defend themselves from the perception of the incongruous and to develop strategies aimed at avoiding it. Perhaps because of its disruptive character, in thought processes individuals tend to create the conditions that will facilitate the confirmation of their expectations (Bruner and Postman 1949). And once the incongruity becomes accepted, it demands some manipulation. The second step requires setting in motion metarepresentational inferences that take premises of the appropriate order. Both of these processes are guided by the search for relevance. I am, of course, far from suggesting that this is all that humour is about. There are the obvious issues of content, mood of participants, appropriateness of the situation, etc., and presumably,

a myriad of yet further cognitive and social factors and pragmatic mechanisms contributing to the effect. If Morreall's suggestion that amusement is the enjoyment of incongruity is right, it opens the question of how such enjoyment becomes available to human beings. In the case of verbal humour and wit, the entertainment of the incongruous is made possible through the exploitation of the tendency to interpret utterances as consistent with the principle of relevance. The enjoyment of the incongruous, on the other hand, may partly derive from the cognitive satisfaction of having manipulated it in just the right way.

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