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Trabajo Fin de Grado

Analysis of ironical moments from
Friends according to Relevance Theory

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INTRODUCTION

The practical dimension of language in which Pragmatics is focused includes, among other things, the comprehension and explanation of the communicative act and the cognitive processes and the function of the diverse factors dealing with communication. Many different pragmaticists have presented well-structured and consistent theories that provide heterogeneous approaches towards our communicative capacity. The last 50 years have been very prolific in the development and spreading of those theories, of which the most influential and recognized are Grice's Cooperative Principle and the Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson. Regarding the latter, Sperber and Wilson did not only provide an intuitive theory that stands out for his effective simplicity, but they also presented a totally original and unique explanation for irony. However, they, as well as the majority of pragmaticists tend to present artificial and over-simplistic examples in order to support their hypotheses. Therefore, in most cases, they are not providing a genuine realistic reflection of the actual communicative process, but, on the contrary, they merely present some fictitious data that help to support their purposes. For this reason, this paper aims to present a more authentic approach towards Relevance Theory by means of selecting genuine examples from the real world. For this purpose, the paper firstly presents a condensed theoretical introduction to Relevance Theory, the Sperber and Wilson's approach to irony and its antecedents. Thereafter, the methodology section explains the procedures adopted to carry out the analysis of the examples extracted from a famous American sitcom, which are fully developed and explained in the subsequent section. Finally, the conclusions and conjectures derived from the application of the theory are discussed at the end of this paper.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:

The theoretical background for the comprehension of human cognition is certainly wide and extended, so that it would be an impossible task to procure a detailed explanation for every one of the theories. Consequently, this section merely introduces the two theoretical frameworks that have more influence over the current developments in the field: Grice's Cooperative Principle and Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory.

Grice

Grice offered a revolutionary theory that included new factors and explanations that nobody has ever proposed. Before Grice, theories of communication were based on the 'Code-model', which offered a simplistic view of language as a mere codification and decodification of linguistic symbols. However, Grice considered that many other aspects influenced communication and therefore his theory included many other complex factors. "To Grice, communication was a form of *intentional* behaviour, and understanding an utterance or other act of communication was a matter of recognising the intentions behind it." (Wilson; 1993 "Grice's pragmatics: the advantages", p. 2)

For the purpose of 'recognising the intentions behind the act of communication' the hearer has to select the correct hypothesis among a set of possibilities. The best hypothesis, according to Grice, is the one that best satisfies certain expectations we have about how speakers will behave. (p. 5-6)

At this point, it is fundamental to understand the Gricean assumptions about the act of communication and the important concerns related to it. According to Grice, human beings tend to cooperate when we communicate among ourselves, and therefore in order

to interpret an utterance we assume that the speaker is being cooperative and his/her utterance has been uttered in the most clear and communicative way. Hence, Grice proposes that the participants of a conversation are supposed to observe a general principle of cooperation that he called the *Cooperative Principle* and which was defined as follows: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." (Grice, 1975:307)

In order to explain more fully this somewhat abstract contract, Grice proposed a list of maxims which the participants of a conversation normally follow: the *conversational maxims*.

"Quantity maxim:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Under the category of Quality falls a supermaxim - 'Try to make your contribution one that is true' - and two more specific maxims:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.

2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Under the category of Relation I place a single maxim, namely, 'Be relevant.'

Under the category of Manner […] I include the supermaxim - 'Be perspicuous' - and various maxims such as:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.

2. Avoid ambiguity.

3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

4. Be orderly." (308)

Grice affirms that the participants of a conversation assume that the maxims are being observed since participants tend to cooperate in order to make their participation

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understandable. Therefore, when analysing a verbal utterance, initially we have to assume that the speaker has observed the Cooperative Principle (CP) and its maxims and try to find a possible interpretation of the utterance that may fit the CP. However, sometimes an utterance does not apparently respect all the conversational maxims, even though the speaker is able to understand it. It is at this point where the Gricean term *implicature* acquires importance. In *Logic and Conversation* (1975), Grice makes a distinction between what someone 'says'- which is "closely related to the conventional meaning of the words (the sentence) he has uttered"- and what it is "implicated", and somehow diverges from what it has been said.

In these cases, "in order to find an interpretation, they will have to assume that the speaker believes, and was trying to communicate something more than was strictly speaking said", and therefore we have to look for the implicatures of the utterance. (Wilson; 1993 "Grice's Pragmatics: The Advantages", p. 8)

A participant in a conversation may fail to fulfil a maxim in various ways: violating the maxim, opting out, facing a clash of maxims, or deliberately flouting a maxim. It is the latest that acquires importance in the creation of conversational implicatures. When a speaker deliberately flouts a maxim, the hearer has to reconcile the utterance with the "supposition that he is observing the overall CP" (Grice; 1975:310), and therefore it is understood that the speaker wanted to communicate more than it was literally said by creating an implicature.

Grice used a highly complex and almost-scientific language to describe this phenomenon and the mental connections that the hearer has to accomplish to inference the conversational implicature:

"A general pattern for the working out of a conversational implicature might be given as follows: "He has said that *p*, there is no reason to suppose that he is not observing the maxims, or at least the CP; he could not be doing this unless he though that *q*; he knows (and knows that I know that he knows) that I can see that the supposition that he thinks that *q* is required; he has done nothing to stop me thinking that *q*; he intends me to think or is at least willing to allow me to think, that *q*; and so he has implicated that *q*." (310)

However, although Grice developed a pretty innovative theory which explored some new aspects of communication by means of a definite and complex theoretical explanation, this theory presents some limitations in the practical dimension. For instance, Grice does not mention how the supposed 'contract' between speakers varies depending on the culture; and it does not provide a proper explanation to some linguistic situations such as metaphor or irony, which he just includes under the term of 'implicatures'.

Sperber and Wilson:

A rather successful attempt to overcome the limitations left by Grice's Cooperative Principle was Relevance Theory presented by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson. The theory somewhat simplifies the pretty elaborated classification of the conversational maxims presented by Grice by focusing in just one of them: Relevance.

Relevance is easier to understand because it is closer to human essence, and it is described as a universal and natural principle. We do not really think if our utterance fits the four Gricean conversational maxims, we only want to be relevant enough so that the

hearer could understand us. "What distinguishes relevance theory from most other pragmatic theories is its willingness to take seriously the fact utterance interpretation falls within the domain of *cognitive psychology* and is affected by cognitive as well as social and linguistic factors." (Wilson; 1993 "Introduction to relevance theory", p.7)

This theory is based on the assumption that "human cognition is relevance-oriented", in other words, that "we pay attention to information that seems relevant to us."(2) Therefore, when we interpret an utterance, according to the theory of relevance, we select the most relevant interpretation to the given situation. For this purpose, we do not only use the literal information, but with the help of the context, we choose the most plausible and relevant interpretation among a set of possibilities. Context is defined by Sperber and Wilson as "a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world, that affect the interpretation of an utterance." (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 15).

Among the endless amount of information, first of all the hearer has to select the information that is relevant in the context of the utterance. Information is relevant in a context when it *interacts* with it by adding new information, strengthening the already existing assumptions or providing information against the old assumptions, which therefore are abandoned. These three different interactions are called *contextual effects*. In order to recover those contextual effects, a *processing effort* is needed, so that different cognitive factors, such as the *frequency of use* or the *accessibility of the content* affect the effort needed to process an utterance.

Therefore, there are two variables that affect the assessment of relevance. Firstly, the **contextual effects**, which are "a necessary condition for relevance, and that other

things being equal, the greater the contextual effects, the greater the relevance." (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 119)

Secondly, the "processing effort needed to recover those contextual effects - the smaller the effort needed to recover the effects, the greater the relevance." (Wilson; 1993 "Introduction to Relevance Theory", p.7)

However, it is important to bear in mind that those factors do not intend to define the *maximal relevance*, because this task would be unbearable. In order to do so, a fundamental condition would be to compare all the different alternative interpretations of an utterance, which is impossible. Instead, Sperber and Wilson defined the notion of *optimal relevance,* which only happens if an utterance:

"a) achieves enough effects to be worth the hearer's attention,

b) puts the hearer to no unjustifiable effort in achieving those effects." (Wilson; 1993 "The principle of relevance", p.5)

Consequently, Sperber and Wilson defined the principle of relevance as follows: "every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance." (Sperber and Wilson, 1986:158)

The assumption of optimal relevance means that the hearer assumes that the speaker has communicated the proposition in the most relevant possibility, and as a result of that the hearer has to look for the most accessible interpretation by means of following the two previously mentioned criteria: the contextual effects and the processing effort. "The important point is that, given the cognitive environment, given the initial context, and given the stimulus, some hypotheses are more accessible than others, and this means that they require less processing effort." (167). The result is that only one interpretation is selected and the other set of possibilities are abandoned.

The last important issue related to the theory of relevance to take into consideration is the distinction between *explicatures* and *implicatures*. An assumption is an explicature "if and only if it is a development of a logical form encoded by U." (182). On the other hand, any assumption which is not communicated explicitly is an *implicature*.

Moreover, implicatures are divided into *implicated premises*, which are retrieved by the hearer from his/her own memory or by the creation of assumptions with his/her own knowledge; and *implicated conclusions*, which are "deduced from the explicatures of the utterance and the context" (195).

Accordingly, one of the most original and unprecedented hypothesis defended by Sperber and Wilson is the fact that for the first time both explicatures and implicatures are considered to follow the same principle - the principle of relevance - and none of them are considered to be deviations of the rule.

Irony and the theory of relevance:

Traditional explanations for irony tend to treat ironic utterances as violations from the norm, so that they cannot be interpreted by applying the maxims that rule the literal and straightforward utterances, but they are considered to be "governed by arbitrary rhetorical rules or conventions, which may vary from culture to culture." (Wilson; 1993 "Where Does Irony Come From" p.2) "The classical textbooks on rhetoric all propose essentially the same treatment of irony. Irony, like metaphor, is a trope, i.e. a figure of speech in which the literal meaning is replaced by a figurative one."(1)

However, Sperber and Wilson proposes a revolutionary explanation for irony that is based on the assumption that irony, as well as other figures of speech such as metaphor,

is not only consistent with Relevance Theory but it must be interpreted with its help. Irony is classified by them as "less-than-literal" interpretations, a spontaneously type of utterances "where the proposition expressed by the utterance merely resembles the opinion being represented". (6)

According to this theory, irony has three main characteristics:

a) it's a variety of interpretive use, in which the proposition expressed by the utterance represents a belief implicitly attributed by the speaker to someone else (or to herself at another time),

b) it's echoic (i.e. it implicitly expresses the speaker's attitude to the beliefs being represented); and

c) the attitude involved is one of dissociation or disapproval. (4)

Consequently, irony is created when a speaker echoes an implicit or explicit belief and by doing so he/she provides his/her own attitude or mood towards what has been echoed. The echoing of beliefs can be literal when the speaker is merely repeating the words previously mentioned by other speaker, and by doing so he/she makes clear his/her position towards the utterance, which en most cases is a feeling of disapproval. However, this is not always the case, since irony also takes place in some instances that do not "involve literal repetition of an immediately preceding utterance" (6). The following classification presents some of the types of ironical comments that do not involve literal repetition of previously said words

c)Exaggeration and caricature: Often, irony involves an element of exaggeration or caricature of the opinions being echoed. […]

d) Echoes of the thought behind the word. Often, what gets echoed is not what someone has said, but something they have assumed or implicated.

e) Echoes of unspoken thoughts. Often, you can see from someone's face what they are thinking, or you can guess from knowing them what they must be thinking, and these unspoken thoughts can be ironically echoed back.

f) Echoes of the thoughts of a group. Irony is not directed only at individuals. Political irony, for example, is often directed at the sort of thinking you find in a social group."(7)

These phenomena are not marginal and infrequent incidents, but on the contrary they occur pretty regularly in our normal communicative acts, even if we are not conscious of the variety of irony that we are employing. Hence, what is important to highlight is that although irony is always echoic, it does not necessarily echo an explicit utterance but it can echo some implicit messages, or even unsaid words. The important point is that the ironic comment does not merely want to accomplish an informative role but it also aims to provide the personal evaluation of the speaker towards the echoed remark. Therefore, in order to be understood, the hearer(s) has to perform an interpretative process in which he/she has to not only interpret the speaker's mood or intention but in some cases the hearer also has to infer the remark that is being echoed. This entanglement is what makes irony such a complex instance as well as a very demanding phenomenon to the hearer.

Empirical framework:

Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory meant an authentic revolution in Pragmatics and it has been the path-breaking of a considerable amount of authors that have followed their footsteps. The freshness and ability of the theory is undeniable, since it presents a well-argued methodology towards utterance interpretation in general and irony in particular. The most valuable characteristic of this theory is its capacity to condense the at-first-sight complex mental processes into a natural and spontaneous rule that aims to approach human nature.

However, in spite of their well-developed theoretical approach, their empirical evidence tends to be weaker. It is common among pragmaticists to apply their theories to artificial data that normally fits perfectly their requirements and purposes. This is also the case of Sperber and Wilson, who present recurrent examples which apart from being artificial are in many cases simplistic. These over-simplistic and straightforward examples are not frequent in real life, which regularly presents demanding phenomena that are difficult to classify and analyse, and for this reason they do not portray the real requirements and outcomes.

Accordingly, this paper aims to provide realistic examples of irony which will be interpreted following the Relevance Theory by Sperber and Wilson and their particular approach towards irony. By applying the theory to real examples instead of artificial or pre-invented data, it may be possible to perceive the theory and its efficiency in a more accurate and faithful way, as well as to analyse the real usages and purposes of irony in real data.

METHODOLOGY:

An exhaustive investigation about theoretical concerns related to the approach presented by Sperber and Wilson towards irony was accomplished as well as a brief research of its antecedents and the previous attitudes towards this pragmatic issue. After identifying the weaknesses of the theory in terms of empirical evidence, the aim of this paper has been to select an original data in which the theory could be applied. Since applying the theory of relevance to real and spontaneous ironic situations would be an arduous and pretty expendable pursuit, I finally opted for a more accessible but equally demanding alternative: applying the relevance theory to dialogs extracted from a sitcom. Nevertheless, I am fully aware of the fact that a real analysis of actual dialogs based on any pragmatic theory should involve many other factors that play a fundamental role in the communicative act, such as intonation, or body language. Anyway, that depth of analysis is impossible to be accomplished in this paper as only written dialogs can be presented. Consequently, the analysis is merely focused on the objective factors that can be transcribed from each of the examples and it aims to follow the basic theoretical assumptions of the Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory.

For this purpose, a well-known American sitcom, *Friends* (Crane and Kauffman;1994-2004), has been selected, with the expectation that the dialogs among characters provide enough ironic situations to accomplish a proper analysis. *Friends* is an acclaimed American sitcom "created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman which originally aired on NBC from September 22, 1994, to May 6, 2004" (Wikipedia) that tells the story and experiences of a group of friends by means of a memorable and hilarious plot. The data employed for the analysis consist of six brief extracts from the five last seasons of the programme that exemplify some of the different types of ironical comments proposed by Sperber and Wilson. The dialogs are transcribed so that they could be analysed in the

analysis and result chapter. For this purpose, a brief introductory paragraph is provided for each of the six extracts, so that the reader could easily understand the context. After the presentation and analysis of the extracts in the analysis and results chapter, the last section aims to provide a final discussion about the data, the results and the possible implications.

ANALYSES AND RESULTS:

In this section the selected ironic moments are introduced, presented and analysed according to Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory. Ironical comments are specially context-dependant, since they tend to diverge from the literal meaning of the utterance, and therefore the hearer's assumption about the context plays a fundamental role in the interpretation of the speaker's intention. For this purpose, a brief paragraph introduces each of the moments with the aim of supplying the necessary contextual information to facilitate the comprehension of the situation and the interpretation of the utterances. In each of the transcribed dialogues, the ironical comments that are the focus of the analyses have been written in italics for an easier identification.

First extract:

The first extract is located in a hotel room where Monica and Chandler are spying the adjacent rooms since they want to discover about the 'out-of-the-blue' affairs of their friends. They are surprised because none of their friends are still sharing the room with the same person that they came with. The ironic comment is uttered by Chandler, a highly sarcastic character who uses and abuses of humour even in the most dramatic situations. In order to understand the irony of the utterance, it is necessary to know that

Monica had recently changed her hairstyle and she was looking pretty alike the American humorist Weird Al, who is well-known for his peculiar curly hair.

>**Monica**: Ross and Charlie, Joey and Rachel, Phoebe and Mike. We're the only people leaving with the same person we came with!
>
>**Chandler:** *That's not true. I came with Monica and I'm leaving with "Weird Al".*
>
>("The One After Joey And Rachel Kiss" Season 10, episode 1)

The irony in this situation is created by means of the echoing of the words uttered by Monica. Chandler is rephrasing her words in order to bring to the fore Monica's hairstyle and procure in this way his attitude to it. Hence, his utterance may not appear to be relevant in relation with the affairs of their friends, but it is relevant in the context of Monica's unflattering hairstyle.

The information that interacts with the context in this example is the fact that *Weild Al* has a pretty peculiar hairstyle, which is completely relevant in the polemical circumstances of Monica's recent hairstyle. Without that piece of information, the irony cannot be retrieved, since the literal meaning of Chandler's words is apparently irrelevant in the spying situation. Therefore, the assumption that implies the lower processing effort for that situation is the one in which Chandler is transmitting his disapproval towards Monica's hairstyle in an implicit form.

Consequently, Chandler's utterance is optimally relevant, maybe not in the friends' affairs context, but definitely in the polemic about Monica's hairstyle that has been developing throughout the whole episode.

Second extract:

The second scene is a continuation of the first extract since it also deals with Monica's hairstyle, who is now exhibiting multiple slender braids with little molluscs as decorative elements.

>**Monica:** Listen to this. [She makes noises with the molluscs by moving the head]
>
>**Chandler**: *What do you know? It's a treat for the eyes AND the ears*.
>
>("The One After Joey And Rachel Kiss" Season 10, episode 1)

Similarly, in this example it is quite obvious that Chandler is not intending the literal meaning of his words, but on the contrary he is suggesting the opposite by means of irony: he is manifesting his dislike towards his girlfriend's new hairstyle, which is prejudicial both for eyes and ears due to its ugliness and bizarre noises when she moves her head. Although the general rule for irony suggested by Sperber and Wilson says that normally some previously mentioned words have to be echoed, it is important to remember that other types of echoing are also possible, such as echoing thoughts or implicit words. In this case, Chandler does not echoes any words previously mentioned in the same conversation, but he echoes a famous saying - "It's a treat for the eyes"- which is normally used positively to express the beauty of something or someone; and he modifies its meaning by adding the emphatic ending -"and the ears". For a proper understanding of the utterance, the necessary contextual effect is the interaction of the saying with the circumstance of the pretty ugly hairstyle. The effort needed for the retrieval of that contextual effect is low, since the discussion of the new hairstyle is very recent and the ugliness of the hairstyle is undeniable. Therefore, the most optimally relevant interpretation of Chandler's words is indeed that he is expressing his disapproval to Monica's irritating braids.

Third extract:

The third scene takes place in Monica and Chandler's bathroom. Chandler is taking a bath and meanwhile some of his friends enter in the bathroom for different reasons until eventually all of them but Ross are in there. In that moment, Ross enters the apartment looking for them.

> **Rachel**: Ross, I was looking for you. What are we all doing in here? Ohh, my..
> **Ross:** Hello!?
> **Chandler**: *Yes, we're all in here and we'd love for you to join us!*
> ("The One Where Chandler Takes a Bath" Season 8, episode 13)

When Chandler hears that Ross is also entering the apartment he utters the ironic comment [Yes, we're all in here and we'd love for you to join us!] in a rather solemn mode. Obviously, he is not aiming to express his real enthusiasm for Ross joining them in the bathroom, but he is highlighting the awkwardness of the situation and his desire to be left alone. In this case, he is not echoing any other person's words, but on the contrary he is putting into words the thoughts of the whole group, who are experiencing an embarrassing situation. According to Sperber and Wilson, ironic comments may not only echo previously mentioned words, but they can also echo unspoken thoughts or shared feelings. In those cases extra-linguistic elements, such as intonation or body language acquire a fundamental role in the conveyance of the real speaker's intention. In order to recover it, it is necessary to consider the awkwardness of the situation - the group of friends meeting in the bathroom while one of them is taking a bath - and the new element taking part in the situation - Ross coming. Taking into account those two contextual effects, the interpretation that requires less processing effort and therefore the most optimally relevant is that Chandler's is expressing his discomfort and he is asking for the rest to leave.

Fourth extract:

This is a rather long and elaborate example since it comprises a sequence of ironical comments echoing a highly improbable hypothesis. Ross and Rachel have forgotten the key inside the apartment where the baby is sleeping alone, so that Rachel is really worried and she imagines some hypothetical negative situations.

Ross: My mum is gonna be here in a minute and she has the key.

Rachel: I can't, I can't wait that long. You have to do something. Knock that door down!

Ross: I would but I bruise like a peach. Besides, you know, everything is gonna be fine. The baby is sleeping.

Rachel: But what if she jumps out of the bassinet?)

Ross: *Can't hold her head up, but yeah... jumped.*

Rachel: Oh my god! I left the water running.

Ross: You didn't leave the water running. Please, just pull yourself together, ok?

Rachel: Well, did I leave the stove on?

Ross: You haven't cooked since 1996!

Rachel: Is the window open? because if the window is open a bird could fly in there!

Ross: *Oh my god, you know what? I think you're right. I think...listen, listen...a pigeon, no, no... an eagle flew in, landed on the stove and caught fire. The baby, seeing this, jumps across the apartment to the mighty bird's aid. The eagle, however, misconstrues this as an act of aggression; and it grabs the baby in its talon. Meanwhile the faucet fills the apartment with water. Baby and bird, still ablaze, are locked in a death grip, swirling around the whirlpool that fills the apartment.*

Rachel: Boy, you gonna be sorry if that's true.

("The One With Phoebe's Birthday Dinner" Season 9, episode 5)

Ross, seeing the paranoiac state of the mother tries to provide a realistic point of view, but finally discharges his scepticism towards Rachel's anxiety by means of a long exaggeration of Rachel's distress. This extract can be divided into two different ironical comments; the first one is simply an echoing of Rachel's words: [**Rachel:** But what if she jumps out of the bassinet?, **Ross:** *Can't hold her head up, but yeah... jumped.*], while the second one - the last and long Ross' intervention - does not only echo Rachel's hypothesis but it introduces an intense touch of exaggeration. Dealing with the first one, Ross simply transmits his scepticism towards Rachel's words, and it is easy to interpret his feelings due to the fact that the baby is indeed too young to be able to jump from the bassinet. Regarding the second and long segment, it is a clear case of exaggerating echo of Rachel's improbable sentence, so that the speaker expressed his disagreement on the echoed utterance. The irony starts with the echoing of last Rachel's words about the possibility of a bird flying into the apartment and then deviates into the other improbable situations, the apartment being flooded or the stove on, creating in this way a totally unbelievable and unrealistic situation. The echoing of Rachel's words combined with the extreme exaggeration makes clear that Ross' comments are really unbelievable and therefore the literal interpretation of the utterance is discarded since it is not optimally relevant in this situation. On the contrary, the manifest exaggeration makes clear that Ross was being ironic and therefore the utterance is optimally relevant in that situation since it expresses Ross' scepticism and disdain towards any of the urgent situations provided by Rachel.

Fifth extract:

This extract needs an exhaustive contextual explanation. Ross and Rachel got married in a drunken night in Las Vegas. Ross is still in love with Rachel so that he wants to keep the marriage but she is willing to annul it. They are discussing about the matter and Ross tries to convince her to maintain the marriage by simplifying the fact of being married to just checking one box or the other while filling forms out.

> **Ross:** How is this going to affect you, really? I mean, you fill some form out once in a while instead of checking the box "Miss", you check the box that says "Mrs". It's right next to it.
>
> **Rachel:** *Okay, I'm sorry, you're right. You know what? We can stay married because I thought that the boxes were far away from each other.*
>
> **Ross:** No, they're right…
>
> **Rachel:** Ross!
>
> ("The One After Vegas" Season 6, episode 1)

One of the basic assumptions that the spectator needs to understand about this situation is the obvious ridicule of Ross' words, since he tries to reduce what being married implies to just the banal action of checking the correct box when filling out forms. The nonsensical argument helps to understand the ironic comment since Rachel's intention is providing her sceptical attitude towards Ross' absurd statement by means of echoing his words. Although her words may apparently agree with Ross, clearly she did not think that the boxes were far away from each other, but she is just expressing her attitude towards Ross' proposition. That is the most accessible interpretation since it is deduced from the uttered words in connection with the context - Ross' absurd argument- and therefore it is the interpretation that requires the lower processing effort.

Sixth extract:

In this example, Rachel had just told her father, a really strict man, that she was pregnant and the father has incorrectly inferred that consequently she was going to get married, but in fact she was planning to be a single-mother. Rachel was pretending that she was going to get married in order not to disappoint her father, and Phoebe expressed her opinion about the situation in the following way:

> **Phoebe:** *I'm sorry I won't make it to your imaginary wedding, but I'm busy that day.*
> *I already have a unicorn baptism and a leprechaun bar mitzvah.*
> ("The One With the Stripper" Season 8, episode 8)

With that utterance, Phoebe was comparing Rachel's non-existing wedding to other imaginary events such as a "unicorn baptism" and a "leprechaun bar mitzvah". The knowledge of the fantastic dimension of those two phenomena interacts with the imaginary-wedding context so that the spectator/hearer inferences that Phoebe aims to express that she finds ridiculous the invention of the fake wedding. This is achieved by means of echoing Rachel's lie about her wedding, since she had even invented the day that the ceremony was going to take place. The clash between the echoing of Rachel's words and the inclusion of the two fantastic events create the contextual effect that Phoebe is emphasising the burlesque nature of the situation. This is the most optimally relevant interpretation since it is the one that requires the lowest processing effort due to the fact that the situation is so absurd that spectators share the sceptical attitude with Phoebe because we all know that the lie about the wedding cannot be sustained for a long period of time.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:

From the analyses and results section some conclusions can be reached. The revision of the six extracts presented in the previous section reveals that it has been possible to apply Relevance Theory to 100 % of the selected data. The general rule of the theory of relevance has been enough to explain and interpret the ironic nature of each of the extracts, the role of contextual effects and processing effort and the information needed to comprehend each of the provided situations. Indeed 100% of the data follow the Sperber and Wilson assumption that irony is created by means of echoing. Four of the six examples (66.6 %) are ironic comments that echo explicit words that have been previously mentioned, while the two other remaining examples echo some implicit information such as common thoughts (extract three) and common knowledge (second example). For accomplishing the analysis, only the basic hypothesis of the theory of relevance have been used to interpret the ironic utterances, so that it can be assumed that in fact the theory of relevance provide an explanation not only for common and ordinary examples of literal communication but also to other cases more complex that have been traditionally considered as exceptions of the rule.

According to this theory, irony can be understood as an ordinary type of speech, since it is based upon the speaker's intention and human essence instead of on a constructed set of theoretical rules. This was a real revolution in comparison with its antecedents since it is a fresh and original approach that facilitates the comprehension of cognition and the equation of the most common literal speech with other types of speech that include the inference of implicit elements. The actual significance of this advancement can only be fully understood if we take into consideration that irony has a

fundamental role in our lives, since we tend to use it really frequently and seems inherent to the human nature.

The positive results of the analyses provides a favourable incipience for the use of realistic data that may reflect the requirements and exceptions of the real discourse, instead of prefabricated and too frequently repeated examples.

Nevertheless, this paper does not aim to be unjustifiably optimistic, since evidently the subject is much more extensive and rather more complex than simply applying the basic theoretical rules of the theory to some randomly selected data. It is rather obvious that many other factors affect interpretation: intonation, body and face expressions for instance, but as it was explained in the methodology section it would have been an impossible task to take them into consideration in this paper. There is still a considerable amount of work to do in relation with the empiric and objective evidences of the mostly-theoretical Relevance Theory, which complements the existent theories of Cognitive Psychology and the great advances in psycholinguistics.

In this field great advances have been developed in the recent times with the help of new medical technology for the measure of cerebral stimulus and the comprehension of the different areas that are involved both in the coding and decoding of language. The theory of relevance is only the first step to a bigger theoretical framework in the construction of a nature-approached explanation of the codification and decoding of language. Hence, the development of tentative experiments in the advancement of empiric evidence based on practical analyses acquires a fundamental significance in the current pragmatic scenario.

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