

# Can Irony Be Phatic? A Relevance-Theoretic Proposal

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## Abstract

The relevance-theoretic (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995) analysis of ironic and phatic utterances has shown that both types of utterances are cases of *echoic interpretive (attributive) metarepresentations*. However, these utterances differ as regards the attitude that the speaker expresses: with ironic utterances it is an attitude of dissociation from a proposition, whereas with phatic utterances it is an attitude of endorsement or acceptance of a proposition. This paper discusses the conditions that ironic utterances must fulfil in order to become phatic. It argues that for ironic utterances to become phatic, there must be an echoic interpretive (attributive) metarepresentation of a previous echoic interpretive (attributive) metarepresentation (the ironic utterance) and a blend of the attitudes of dissociation and endorsement characteristic of ironic and phatic utterances, respectively.

## 1. Introduction

Within relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995), irony is analysed as a case of *echoic interpretive (attributive) metarepresentational* use of utterances with which the speaker expresses an attitude of *dissociation* or disapproval of a certain proposition, thought or opinion. Similarly, phatic utterances have been treated as echoic interpretive (attributive) metarepresentations, but the attitude expressed by the speaker in their case is one of *endorsement* or acceptance of a proposition, thought or opinion (Padilla Cruz, 2004, 2005).

Both types of utterances share some features but differ as regards the attitude expressed. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to reflect on the possibility that ironic utterances be assigned a phatic interpretation from a relevance-theoretic (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995) perspective. In order to do so, I will first introduce the extant approach to irony proposed in relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995). Then, I will summarise the main ideas of the current relevance-theoretic approach to phatic utterances (Padilla Cruz, 2004, 2005; Žegarac, 1998; Žegarac and Clark, 1999). Finally, I will discuss whether irony can be phatic and, if so, why and how that may be.

## 2. The relevance-theoretic approach to irony

The extant relevance-theoretic approach to irony reacts against the traditional account of irony, according to which the speaker literally says one thing but means or implicates the opposite (Grice, 1975). This is so because the speaker says something patently false that violates the *maxim of truthfulness* of the *Cooperative Principle* (Grice, 1975). Therefore, the hearer has to assume that the speaker is still obeying the supermaxim of truthfulness and intends to implicate some related proposition<sup>1</sup>.

However, in relevance theory, ironic utterances are considered cases of *interpretive* uses of utterances because they *metarepresent* some other possible utterances, thoughts or opinions with a similar content (e.g. Noh, 2000; Sperber, 1994; Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995; Wilson, 1999). Ironic utterances are not *descriptive* utterances, whose regular use is to represent or describe a state of

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<sup>1</sup> The Gricean explanation follows the generally-accepted account of irony proposed by classical rhetoricians such as Quintilian.

affairs in the world, but *interpretive metarepresentations* (Wilson, 1999). As such type of metarepresentations, they are not aimed at making truthful assertions, but faithful interpretations of the speaker's or another individual's utterances, thoughts or opinions. Hence, they are also *attributive metarepresentations*, since by means of them the speaker is attributing the utterances, thoughts or opinions to herself or to another individual (Wilson, 1999: 148).

Furthermore, according to Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), irony is a variety of *echoic* interpretive use of utterances because the speaker indicates her own attitude to the utterances, thoughts or opinions metarepresented. For this reason, ironic utterances are examples of *echoic interpretive metarepresentations* that achieve an optimal level of relevance because of the expression of the speaker's attitude to those utterances, thoughts or opinions. The attitude expressed by the speaker is one of dissociation, rejection or disapproval of the utterance, thought or opinion metarepresented.

Accordingly, in Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995) classical example, given the suitable intonation, facial expression or contextual assumptions, (1b) is ironic because the speaker is echoing Peter's earlier utterance with scorn, showing that she does not believe what he said, that it was ridiculous to think that that day would be wonderful for a picnic, and so on:

- (1) a. Peter: It's a lovely day for a picnic.  
[They go for a picnic and it rains]
- b. Mary: It's a lovely day for a picnic, indeed.

Ironic utterances may also be echoic interpretive metarepresentations of the hopes, social norms or expectations of a group of individuals, explicitly or implicitly expressed (2); of imaginary or unspoken thoughts attributable to another individual, provided that it is *mutually manifest* to the interlocutors in their *cognitive environment*<sup>2</sup> that those thoughts can be attributed to that person (3); or they may also involve quotations from poems, speeches, past conversations, films or songs (4) (Hamamoto, 1998; Noh, 2000: 93; Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 284-285; Wilson, 2001-2002; Yamanashi, 1998):

- (2) It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. [Opening line of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*]
- (3) That was a splendid party! Splendid! [Scornfully said by an individual who does not agree with the opinion that others may have about a recent party he went to] (Adapted from Wilson, 1999: 147)
- (4) Oh, to be in England / Now that April's there. [Said in a cold, wet, windy English spring day; echo of "Home thoughts from abroad", by Browning]

Since the aim of this paper is to reflect on the possibility that ironic utterances receive a phatic interpretation, it is also necessary to analyse the features that are characteristic of phatic utterances. The next section summarises the main ideas of the extant relevance-theoretic approach to phatic utterances.

### 3. The relevance-theoretic approach to phatic utterances

Traditionally, an utterance is considered phatic when its propositional content is obvious, trivial or minimally informative in a particular communicative situation (e.g. Abercrombie, 1956, 1998; Edmondson and House, 1981; Holmes, 2000; Hudson, 1980; Turner, 1973). Hence, the *phaticity* of an utterance is not an inherent

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<sup>2</sup> According to Sperber and Wilson (1995: 39), a fact or assumption is *manifest* to an individual if he can have a mental representation of it. The set of facts or assumptions that he can mentally represent constitute his *cognitive environment*

property, but a context-dependent feature that individuals negotiate as a conversation unfolds (Coupland, Coupland and Robinson, 1992).

Within relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995), Žegarac (1998) and Žegarac and Clark (1999) have put forward that a hearer interprets an utterance as phatic when its processing does not yield enough *positive cognitive effects* that offset the *cognitive* or *processing effort* that he has to invest in order to process it. According to the *Communicative Principle of Relevance* (Sperber and Wilson, 1995), hearers regard a certain interpretation of an utterance *optimally relevant* when (i) its processing strengthens or contradicts assumptions that they already possess, or results in new information that can only be derived from the interaction between the old information that they possess and the new one that the utterance communicates, and (ii) hearers do not have to devote much cognitive effort to process that interpretation. Nevertheless, in the case of a phatic utterance, the assumptions that it makes manifest are already manifest in the cognitive environment of both interlocutors. Hence, its relevance does not lie on those assumptions, but on the fact that the speaker speaks, i.e. on the fact that she has a *communicative intention*<sup>3</sup>.

However, phatic utterances may also achieve an optimal level of relevance in a different way (Padilla Cruz, 2004, 2005). The fact that the assumptions made manifest by phatic utterances are already manifest in both interlocutors' cognitive environment entails that interlocutors will entertain similar assumptions about the facts, events or states of affairs to which the propositional content of phatic utterances refer. Therefore, phatic utterances are also interpretive utterances (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 228-229) that metarepresent one or some of the assumptions manifest to the interlocutors sharing a particular mutual cognitive environment. In other words, phatic utterances are cases of interpretive metarepresentations (Noh, 2000; Wilson, 1999) because they metarepresent the speaker's own thoughts, assumptions or opinions and, simultaneously, the thoughts, assumptions or opinions that the speaker thinks that are manifest to the hearer. Since the speaker metarepresents with a phatic utterance the thoughts, assumptions or opinions that she thinks that the hearer entertains, a phatic utterance is an *attributive metarepresentation* (Wilson, 1999: 148) because the speaker also attributes the manifestness of those thoughts, assumptions or opinions to the hearer.

Moreover, with phatic utterances the speaker can also express her attitude towards the thoughts, assumptions or opinions that she is metarepresenting. Hence, phatic utterances are *echoic attributive metarepresentations*. The attitude that the speaker expresses is one of *endorsement*, acceptance or approval of the thoughts, assumptions or opinions metarepresented. With such attitude, she indicates that she shares the thoughts, assumptions or opinions whose manifestness she has attributed to the hearer.

#### 4. On phatic irony

As has been observed, phatic and ironic utterances share some common properties:

- (i) Both types of utterances are interpretive (attributive) metarepresentations. With an ironic utterance the speaker metarepresents her actual utterances, thoughts or opinions or those of the hearer or some other individual, whereas with a phatic utterance the speaker metarepresents the assumptions, thoughts or opinions that she thinks that are manifest to herself and also to the hearer.

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<sup>3</sup> A speaker's *communicative intention* is her intention to make manifest to the hearer that she has an *informative intention* (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 61), which is the set of assumptions that she wants to make manifest to the hearer (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 58).

- (ii) Both types of utterances are echoic metarepresentations. With irony the speaker expresses an attitude of dissociation, disapproval or rejection of the utterances, thoughts or opinions metarepresented, while with a phatic utterance the speaker expresses an attitude of endorsement, acceptance or approval of the assumptions, thoughts or opinions metarepresented.

Then, how and why can ironic utterances be phatic? In other words, what are the conditions that an ironic utterance must satisfy so as to become phatic? The fact that the assumptions that phatic utterances metarepresent must be previously manifest in the interlocutors' cognitive environment seems an essential condition. Besides, what happens when an ironic utterance becomes phatic? The fact that both ironic and phatic utterances are echoic interpretive (attributive) metarepresentations can have important consequences.

As has been stated, an utterance may be interpreted as phatic when the assumptions that it makes manifest are already manifest in both interlocutors' cognitive environment, i.e. when both interlocutors already entertain assumptions, thoughts or opinions similar to those that the utterance metarepresents. Hence, for an ironic utterance to become phatic, the thoughts, assumptions or opinions that it metarepresents must also be previously manifest to the speaker and hearer. Accordingly, consider (5), which can be ironic if the speaker is metarepresenting an extended opinion about her city and dissociating herself from it at the same time:

(5) This city is always so clean!

With (5) the speaker interpretively metarepresents an utterance, some thoughts or opinions that she can attribute to other individuals and expresses her attitude of dissociation, disapproval or rejection towards the proposition that it communicates. Thus, she indicates that she does not believe it to be the case that her city is so clean. Imagine now that (5) has been said at a particular point in a conversation and is repeated later on in the same conversation or in a different one. The assumptions that it makes manifest will already be manifest in the interlocutors' cognitive environment, so it will receive a phatic interpretation. In that case, an interpretive (attributive) metarepresentation that has made manifest to the interlocutors a set of assumptions at a particular moment (the ironic utterance) is interpretively metarepresented again.

Similarly, for (1b) above to be assigned a phatic interpretation, it must already be manifest to both the speaker and the hearer that it is not a wonderful day for a picnic, that it was stupid of either the hearer or someone other than him to think that that day would be nice, and that both individuals have similar beliefs about that day. When that ironic utterance is repeated later on in the same conversation or in a new one, the assumptions that it makes manifest, which were already made manifest as an interpretive (attributive) metarepresentation when the ironic utterance was first produced, are interpretively metarepresented again.

What happens when an ironic utterance becomes phatic is that, due to the metarepresentational nature of phatic utterances, the utterances, thoughts or opinions metarepresented by that ironic utterance are metarepresented again. Then, a phatic ironic utterance interpretively metarepresents utterances, thoughts or opinions that were previously made manifest to interlocutors by an ironic utterance, which, in turn, interpretively metarepresented similar utterances, thoughts or opinions attributable to the speaker, the hearer or some other individual. Therefore, a phatic ironic utterance is an interpretive (attributive) metarepresentation of another interpretive (attributive) metarepresentation.

In other words, if an ironic utterance is repeated at some moment later on in a conversation or in another conversation, it will become phatic because the assumptions that it makes manifest, and whose manifestness the speaker attributes to the hearer, are already manifest in both interlocutors' cognitive environment. Since those assumptions that are already manifest were previously made manifest by

an interpretive (attributive) metarepresentation (the ironic utterance), a phatic ironic utterance becomes an interpretive (attributive) metarepresentation of another interpretive (attributive) metarepresentation.

As has been mentioned, both phatic and ironic utterances are echoic interpretive metarepresentations because they convey the speaker's attitude towards the utterances, thoughts or opinions metarepresented. The attitude that the speaker expresses with an ironic utterance is one of dissociation, disapproval or rejection, while with a phatic utterance it is one of endorsement, acceptance or approval of the metarepresented content. In phatic ironic utterances it must also be already manifest to both interlocutors that the speaker dissociates herself from the metarepresented content; otherwise, an initially ironic utterance would lose its ironic nature. This dissociative attitude might seem opposed to the attitude of endorsement characteristic of phatic utterances. However, the dissociative attitude is towards a content that was previously metarepresented. When an ironic utterance is repeated and becomes phatic, both its content and the attitude expressed are metarepresented again, but this second time with an added attitude of endorsement.

As Wilson (1999: 147) comments, in many echoic utterances there can be a combination of attitudes. In fact, what happens in the case of phatic ironic utterances is that the attitude of dissociation, disapproval or rejection of the initially ironic utterance is blended with the attitude of endorsement, acceptance or approval characteristic of phatic utterances. Such a combination of attitudes could be called *dissociative agreement*, *rejecting agreement*, *agreement in dissociation* or *approval of dissociation*. Thus, the speaker communicates that she and the hearer must have a similar viewpoint about a state of affairs, idea, thought or opinion previously manifest, which they do not accept and, hence, from which they dissociate themselves. Accordingly, in the case of (5) the speaker is indicating that she and the hearer agree about the fact that the city is not so clean, whereas in (1b) they agree about the unsuitability of that day for a picnic.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested that ironic utterances, which are echoic interpretive (attributive) metarepresentations of utterances, thoughts or opinions towards which the speaker expresses a dissociative attitude, may become phatic if those utterances, thoughts or opinions are already manifest in the interlocutors' cognitive environment and it is already manifest that the speaker dissociates herself from them. Thus, when an ironic utterance is repeated and becomes phatic, the speaker interpretively metarepresents an utterance, thought or opinion whose manifestness she attributes both to the hearer and herself. Since the utterance, thought or opinion metarepresented is a previous echoic interpretive (attributive) metarepresentation, a phatic ironic utterance is an echoic interpretive (attributive) metarepresentation of another echoic interpretive (attributive) metarepresentation. Because of this twofold metarepresentational nature, I have also suggested that in phatic ironic utterances there is a combination of the dissociative attitude characteristic of irony with an attitude of endorsement characteristic of phatic utterances.

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