The constructional dimension of verbal irony: A cognitive-linguistic perspective[1]

La dimensión construccional de la ironía: Una perspectiva cognitivo-lingüística

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ABSTRACT: The constructional dimension of verbal irony has been noted by Veale and Hao (2010) and Veale (2012), who conclude that ironic interpretation may be triggered by conventionalized constructions bearing a high ironic potential, such as *about as X as Y* (*about as useful as buying one shoe*) or *You could not X even if Y* (*You could not have me even if you had all the wealth in the world*). In inferential pragmatics, Attardo (2000) identified *indices of irony* (e.g., *Yeah, right, of course*), which are often used to convey or support irony. The present article further argues that such indices can be studied from a constructional perspective together with other linguistic resources that have the ability to increase the ironic potential of a constructional strategy. Among them we find cumulative echoes (*Yeah, sure, John. Paul is the nicest guy ever; he is everyone's buddy; definitely our main man*), or echoic compounding (*Right, I sleep siesta while you do all the work, as usual*). This article explores the role of these and other strategies in the production of constructions that differ in their irony-carrying potential. The resulting study allows us to contrast these constructions in terms of such potential and to examine the formal and conceptual mechanisms in operation.

Key words: constructional strategies, echoic complex, echoic mention, implicational construction, indices of irony.

RESUMEN: La dimensión construccional de la ironía ha sido tratada por Veale y Hao (2010) y Veale (2012), quienes concluyen que la interpretación irónica puede ser detonada por construcciones convencionalizadas con alto potencial irónico, como es el caso de *Tan X como Y* (*Tan útil como comprar un solo zapato*) o *No podrías X incluso si Y* (*No podrías tenerme incluso si tuvieras toda la riqueza del mundo*). En pragmática inferencial, Attardo (2000) identifica *índices irónicos* (e.g. *Ya, claro, desde luego*), que se usan a menudo con el propósito de reforzar la ironía. El presente artículo defiende que dichos índices pueden estudiarse desde una perspectiva construccional junto con otros recursos lingüísticos que tienen la capacidad de incrementar el potencial irónico de una construcción irónica. Entre ellos encontramos los ecos cumulativos (*Ya, claro, John. Paul es el mejor tío del mundo; es amigo de todos, desde luego, nuestro mejor hombre*) o ecos compuestos (*Ya, claro, yo me echo la siesta mientras tú haces todo el trabajo, como siempre*). Este artículo explora el papel de estas y otras estrategias que intervienen en la producción de construcciones con potencial irónico. El estudio resultante nos permite contrastar estas construcciones en lo que se refiere a dicho potencial y examinar los mecanismos formales y conceptuales que intervienen.

Palabras clave: estrategias construccionales, complejo ecoico, mención ecoica, construcción implicacional, índices irónicos.

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

What makes irony "ironic" has awakened scholarly interest for a long time, spawning studies within the fields of literary theory (e.g., Muecke, 1969; Colebrook, 2004), philosophy (e.g., Lane, 2011; Warren, 2013), psycholinguistics (e.g., Giora and Fein, 1999; Gibbs and Colston, 2012), and pragmatics (cf. Dynel, 2018, Garmendia, 2018). The pragmatic dimension of irony has positioned scholars around apparently opposing theses such as Pretense Theory (cf. Clark and Gerrig, 1984; Barnden, 2017) and the echoic approach within Relevance Theory (cf. Sperber and Wilson, 1981, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2012). The core mechanisms that regulate ironic production and interpretation have also been explored by cognitive linguists, from the perspective of Blending Theory (Coulson, 2005; Tobin and Israel, 2012), which highlights the integration of expected and counterfactual knowledge structures, and in terms of the exploration of cultural issues (e.g., Athanasiadou, 2017a) and other cognitive processes (Athanasiadou, 2017b; Lozano and Ruiz de Mendoza, 2022).

Much of the work on irony has emphasized the importance of communicative and socio-cultural factors in its interpretation. This emphasis, however, should not mislead us into thinking that ironic meaning production and derivation is only a matter of knowledge and inference. Muecke (1969), within literary theory, and Attardo (2000), within pragmatics, have noted the existence of what they respectively call ironic *markers* (Muecke, 1969) and *indices* (Attardo, 2000). These are conventional linguistic and paralinguistic devices which point to the likely, or even certain, presence of irony in an utterance. An example of linguistic indices of irony is the use of double affirmation or agreement markers *yeah, right/sure* (e.g., *Yeah, right, just what we need now!*). Some scholars have also noted the existence of formal patterns that are commonly associated

with ironic meaning. One such pattern, investigated by Veale and Hao (2010) and Veale (2012), is *About as X as Y* (e.g., *About as useful as buying one shoe*), where X is an axiologically positive adjective and Y denotes an often absurd situation that contradicts X. The existence of configurations of this kind, just like indices of irony, suggest that ironic meaning derivation can also be created non-inferentially. However, beyond some incidental observations, there has been no systematic exploration of non-inferential irony-producing linguistic mechanisms in greater depth. To fill this gap, this article aims to lay out relevant criteria that may allow us to determine the formal and conceptual nature of such mechanisms, identify their ironic meaning potential, and relate them to other non-ironic linguistic phenomena.

To achieve these theoretical goals, the rest of this article is divided as follows. Section 2 discusses verbal irony from a perspective that combines insights from inferential pragmatics and the cognitive-linguistic approach to meaning construction. The aim of this section is to identify the elements of verbal irony by looking at the interplay between communicative goals and motivating cognitive factors. Section 3 provides an overview of implicational constructions as a special constructional class whose main feature is its ability to capture subjective meaning denoting speaker's attitude. Section 4 places irony within the context of attitudinal meaning and argues for the treatment of entrenched form-meaning pairings conveying speaker's dissociation in constructional terms. It discusses the criteria for such patterns to acquire ironic meaning. Finally, section 5 offers a summary of results.

2. WHAT IS VERBAL IRONY?

Before discussing the factors that enable linguistic form to afford access to ironic meaning, it is necessary to define the phenomenon in question. The approach taken here builds on some aspects of the comprehensive but preliminary work presented in Ruiz de Mendoza and Lozano (2021) and Lozano and Ruiz de Mendoza (2022). Here we focus our attention on those aspects of this previous work that are relevant to the present proposal.

2.1. ECHO OR PRETENSE?

First, let us consider the notions of echoic mention and pretense. These notions were originally used to account for verbal irony in Sperber and Wilson (1981) and Clark and Gerrig (1984) respectively.

The echoic mention was framed within the traditional use/mention distinction from the philosophy of language. According to this thesis, irony results from repeating a previous utterance or an attributed thought to question its content. For example, take a situation in which Jim, a teenage student, brags before his classmates that his older brother, John, a college student, is a mathematics "whiz". However, when John fails to solve a fairly simple math problem, Jim is taunted by his classmates: *Sure, your brother is a math whiz!* This utterance is an echo of Jim's erroneous belief. If Jim becomes aware of his mistake, it will be easy for him to infer that his classmates are more than skeptical about his claim.

The pretense account, on the other hand, postulates that, when using irony, the speaker pretends to be an unwise or ill-informed person speaking to an uninitiated hearer. The speaker's real intention, however, is for the audience to discover the speaker's

pretense and, as a consequence, his attitude toward the ironic target, the hearer, and the utterance. In the example above, *Sure, your brother is a math whiz!*, there is an expectation that Jim will discover his classmates' pretense and, consequently, their mocking attitude.

The pretense approach has been criticized by relevance theorists (e.g., Sperber, 1984; Wilson, 2006; Wilson and Sperber, 2012). An evident problem is that the notion of pretense itself is too broad and certainly applicable to other uses of language where the speaker is not telling the truth but he is neither trying to make others believe that he is. This is the case of overstatement (e.g., hyperbole) and understatement, which involve the speaker acting as if an impossible situation were real. For example, by saying *Nobody ever believes anything I say*, the speaker pretends to unrealistically think that there is no situation where what he or she says will be accepted as true. This is an example of overstatement and, when identified as such, it simply conveys the speaker's attitude of frustration when faced with repeated situations in which he or she is not taken seriously by others. Understatement provides similar illustration. Take the utterance *It doesn't hurt that much* in a situation in which the speaker, a male teenager, tries to act in a "manly" way around the girl he likes, but it is apparent to her that he is in serious pain and he suspects that she is probably aware of the severity of this pain. The speaker's pretense is not necessarily intended to deceive but only to communicate to the hearer that she should not worry about him and that, despite the seriousness of his problem, he trusts he can deal with it. In any event, although present in other figurative uses of language, pretense is certainly an ingredient of all ironic acts, since the speaker tells what someone else believes to be the case. This means that, in irony, the speaker's pretense is a necessary condition, although not the only definitional factor. The question now is which other factors are definitional of irony. But before we can address this issue, we need to come back to the notion of echoic mention to evaluate its adequacy to account for verbal irony.

The echoic explanation of irony has been questioned by some scholars. This is the case of Seto (1998), who draws attention to borderline cases of irony where it is not clear that any thought is being echoed. An example is provided by "idiomatic" ironies like *A precious lot you care about my wallflowers*, where *a precious lot you care* is used to accuse the hearer of utter neglect. Sperber and Wilson (1998) counter this criticism by pointing out that, precisely because of its highly idiomatic nature, it is hard to imagine this utterance communicating a more regular literal meaning that will allow hearers to determine whether an echo is present or not. In their view, this situation places this example and other cases of idiomatic irony, which are heavily grammaticalized, beyond the scope of an echoic account. They further point out that "a genuinely ironical reading is achievable only when an echo is perceived" (Sperber and Wilson, 1998, p. 286). However, Sperber and Wilson's argumentation actually misses the mark since their point of departure is precisely the assumption that only echoic irony is truly irony, which is what Seto argues against. In our view, the crucial issue here is not the idiomaticity of the expression in question. What matters is the fact that this utterance is not a full echo of the hearer's promise to take care of the wallflowers, but an explicit pointer to an implicit version of such an echo, based on the assumption that the hearer's goodwill did not materialize as the speaker had expected. Let us imagine that it is Hannah that accuses Hans of neglect. Part of the reasoning process behind the Hannah's complaint can be informally expressed as follows:

    (a) Hans led Hannah to believe that he cared about her wallflowers.
    (b) There is now evidence that Hans did not care for Hanna's wallflowers.

(c) Therefore, Hans did not care about Hannah's wallflowers.

The content of the belief contained in (a) is not an echo of Hans's promise but only of the reason that lent credibility to the promise (i.e., that he cared about Hannah's wallflowers). This means that the ironic load of the expression rests on its potential to point to what to Hannah is the attested situation, i.e., that Hans's promise rested on a false assumption about his credibility. The attested situation clashes with a literal understanding of what has been expressed, which points to the existence of an implicit echo containing Hans's promise to take care of Hannah's wallflowers; that is, *A precious lot you care about my wallflowers* is only a partial echo containing the reason behind Hans's failed promise. A full echo would have contained the promise and the reason (e.g., 'I will take care of your wallflowers because I care a lot about them'). The strength of this explanation will become more apparent in Section 2.2 when we discuss the role of implicit echoes in verbal irony.

An early development of pretense theory that seems to reconcile some aspects of the pretense and echoic accounts is Allusional Pretense Theory (Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995). According to this theory, in verbal irony the speaker pretends to perform a speech act (which is a form of pragmatic insincerity) on the basis of a statement that alludes to an expected state of affairs that has somehow been violated (i.e., there has been a violation of expectations). Evidently, the notion of "allusion" is reminiscent of the echoic mention account, but it remains rather vague. An allusion is an indirect reference to some assumption and, although it is true that ironic echoes can sometimes be subtle and even inexplicit, they are still echoes and have a pragmatic role that goes beyond mere allusion. Echoes can be used to express agreement:

Mary: *Jeannette is a great caregiver.*
Sally: *Certainly, Jeannette is a great caregiver.*

In the case of irony, however, agreement is only pretended (Ruiz de Mendoza and Lozano, 2021). Imagine that Sally has evidence that invalidates Mary's assertion above. Sally's response, using a different tone of voice, accompanied by vowel lengthening and longer pauses, could easily reveal the pretended nature of Sally's utterance thus pointing to her reservations about Jeannette's competence as a caregiver.

Allusional Pretense Theory is not sufficient to account for the real nature of verbal irony. Besides the vagueness of the notion of "allusion", this theory falls short of determining the exact role of pretense in irony, which is not a matter of pragmatic insincerity but of pretending to be insincere to actually raise the hearer's awareness on the lack of validity of a belief. Within this more accurate view of irony, the notion of ironic echo can be redefined from its present relevance-theoretic status to be understood as a strategy to convey pretended agreement. In this regard, Section 2.2 offers a more complete picture of the nature and scope of ironic echoes.

2.2. Implicit echoes

This re-analysis of Seto's example points to the possibility of echoic material in irony being at least partly implicit. We may wonder also if an ironic echo can be completely implicit. Let us return, in this regard, to our previous example, *Sure, your brother is a math whiz!*, and consider two alternative reactions of Jim's classmates to his boasting about his brother John's math skills:

(a) *Yes, Jim, it's amazing to see John working on math*.
(b) *Yeah, sure, just check out his latest math*.

The first utterance is not explicitly echoic but it is ironic. There is an implicit echo that has to be derived through condition-consequence inference, which is typical of implicature-derivation tasks: if it is amazing to see John doing math, it follows that he causes astonishment, which suggests that he must be very good at this discipline. The consequence part of this inferential schema is precisely an echo of Jim's incorrect belief. In the second alternative utterance, the classmates use a different strategy. They point to the attested scenario in which Jim's brother has failed to solve a simple math problem. In the context where Jim boasted about his brother's skills, the implicit echo can be easily retrieved from that context and contrasted with the attested scenario. The analysis of these two examples suggests that an utterance is ironic to the extent that it can invoke the echoed scenario either explicitly or implicitly. If the latter is the case, the echo should be recoverable through inferential mechanisms such as regular implicature or the retrieval of implicit contextual information.

The evidence presented so far points strongly in the direction of an explanation of echoic mention that favors the existence of implicit echoes, an assumption that could complete and strengthen the relevance-theoretic approach to verbal irony. There is, still, another question that needs careful examination. It is possible to express irony by using affirmation or agreement adverbs like *yeah, right, sure*, especially in combination (e.g., *Yeah, right!*), usually with an edge in the voice and falling tone. In our view, this adverbial use could convey pretended agreement while acting as a pragmatic pointer to an implicit echo (see also Ruiz de Mendoza, 2017). The following exchange illustrates this claim:

Fred: *John is the best runner in town*.
Paul: *Yeah, sure!*

Paul's response, given the right intonation pattern, which can be supported with a special facial gesture, is ironic even in the absence of an echo. This response could certainly qualify as a case of implicit echo, with the preceding adverbs acting as pragmatic pointers to it. Note that Paul could have chosen to use an explicit echo:

Paul: *Yeah, sure! John is the best runner in town*.

This strategy would have been less economical but more emphatic and hence more ironic.

Relevance theorists (e.g., Wilson and Sperber, 2012) have noted that echoic irony goes beyond the repetition of what someone has said to the repetition of attributed thoughts, which include personal and social beliefs. For example, one can echo a social stereotype ironically. Imagine a context in which, Antoine teases Paul, his American friend, of being culturally unsophisticated like most Americans. Paul takes Antoine's taunt ironically and retorts: *Yeah, sure, and I basically feed on beefburgers and pizza too*. The ironic value of this utterance is based on the combination of two implicit echoes. First, there is an implicit echo of Antoine's mocking remark, supported by the double agreement adverbial phrase. This initial echo, which exploits a social stereotype on the American education system, is followed by a second implicit ironic echo, which is based on another social stereotype, this time referring to the standard American diet. This combination of implicit echoes is highly impacting from a communicative perspective: the first echo only casts doubt on the validity of Antoine's comment; however, the second

echo is introduced to draw Antoine's attention to the futility of lending any credibility to social stereotypes. This strategy is based on analogical reasoning whereby accepting the validity of Antoine's taunt is as futile as accepting the validity of Paul's comment.

The observations made above introduce a necessary degree of refinement into the treatment of ironic echoes in Relevance Theory. Echoes can be implicit without losing communicative efficacy in so far as they are retrievable through inference, which can happen not only through textual and contextual clues but also on the grounds of reasoning, as is the case of analogy. There is yet another refinement that requires an even broader perspective from which to look at echoic mention. Echoic mention is not necessarily a complete and/or accurate representation (whether explicit or implicit) of a previous utterance or thought. It can be a partial and/or or inaccurate repetition, where each deviation from the original assumption, or its wording, can have communicative consequences. For example, for Fred's remark in our previous example *John is the best runner in town.* we could have, among others, the following two variants of Paul's full response:

> (a) *Yeah, sure! The best runner.*
> (b) *Yeah, sure! The very best.*

Changes in the original thought bring about focal shifts. In variant (a), which is a partial echo, the focus of attention is on John's questionable running skills. In variant (b), which adds an emphasizer (*very*) and further simplifies the rest of the assertion, Paul's show of skepticism is even greater with all attention being focused on the questionability of John's skills.

The interpretation of irony hinges on the hearer's detection of ironic meaning. The speaker may facilitate this interpretation by means of verbal cues such as (combined) agreement adverbs and the total or partial repetition of echoed material. Non-verbal cues may also support the identification of an ironic intent. Some are paralinguistic, as is the case of exaggerated intonation, and others involve special irony-related facial expressions (e.g., a mocking face) and gestures, often in combination. In this broader perspective, the use of the affirmation adverbs can combine with the focal emphasis produced by a modified echo to yield a communicatively more effective way of expressing apparent agreement with the hearer's belief. That is, every affirmation-conveying resource is used in subservience to the pragmatic agreement function of the utterance, echoic mention not being any different. Repetition has been a typical resource used to express agreement or to reinforce it. With ironic overtones, this resource can be used to pretend agreement thereby directing the hearer to the opposite pragmatic meaning, i.e., disagreement. This way, in contexts where what is asserted coincides with what is attested, the combination of affirmation adverbs and echoic expressions can be used to express reinforced agreement, whereas, in contexts where what is asserted clashes with what is attested, similar combinations take on ironic value.

The inferential activity underlying ironic meaning derivation is based on a reasoning schema where an initial belief is countered by evidence to the contrary. This contrary evidence is expected to become manifest to the hearer, who will thus cancel out the initial belief and substitute the right assumption. At the same time, in this awareness-raising context, showing pretended agreement for such a belief is expected to be accompanied by an attitude of dissociation from it. The specific aspects of this process go beyond the scope of this paper, but they have been described in Ruizo de Mendoza and Lozano, (2021).

2.3. IRONY VERSUS SARCASM

There is a general tendency to define sarcasm as an aggressive form of irony that is intended to criticize (Haiman, 1998, p. 20). This definition is consistent with empirical evidence, obtained from functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), which shows that processing sarcasm involves more complex neural mechanisms than standard irony, while some neural networks are shared (Filik et al., 2019). It is also consistent with an echoic approach to irony where the function of the ironic echo is one of expressing pretended agreement by virtue of the evidence available to the ironist. Pretended agreement, unlike true agreement, is not conveyed explicitly, but is to be detected on the basis of linguistic (textual or intonational), paralinguistic (tone of voice, gestures) and contextual clues. The expression of agreement, whether genuine or not, reveals the speaker's attitude toward the content of the message. Agreeing with someone generally brings about positive feelings of mutual understanding. Pretending to agree, however, causes the opposite reaction in the hearer, although different from overt disagreement. In pretended agreement, the hearer can derive the following implications on the speaker's attitude:

(i)   S is reluctant to accept assumption X.
(ii) S thinks H is most likely wrong about assumption X.
(iii) S thinks H can become aware that he/she is most likely wrong about assumption X.
(iv) S has built an opinion on H's credulity.
(v)   Due to (iv), S has a personal attitude towards H.

Implications (i)-(iii) focus on the speaker's attitude toward the erroneous assumption, whereas (iv) and (v) are directed to the hearer's role in the event that has enabled the speaker's ironic behavior. Let us go back to our previous example where Fred extols John's skills as a runner and his friend Paul is ironic about it. Compare two other alternate echoes of Fred's initial statement *John is the best runner in town*.

(a) Paul: *Yeah, sure, the best runner in town*
(b) Paul: *Yeah, sure. John's Jesse Owens incarnate.*

Paul's remark in (a) is an example of standard ironic echo. It has the potential to change Fred's mind by casting doubt on the validity of his belief while putting him down as too naïve about John's ability. Example (b) follows the same implicational pattern, with a difference. The late Jesse Owens is known to have been one of the best Olympic medalists of all times far surpassing any achievement Fred could attribute to John. This alternate echo is, therefore, extremely hyperbolic, which directly affects the attitudinal element of the ironic echo. Hyperbole very often accompanies irony, since it enhances its detectability by exaggerating the contrast between the epistemic and the attested scenarios. It also strengthens the contextually-parametrized attitudinal load. In the case of the present example, the high degree of distortion that this kind of hyperbole entails does not simply convey skepticism but turns the typical skeptic stance of irony into the extreme criticism that we associated with sarcasm.

3. IMPLICATIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

So far, our discussion of irony has been mainly focused on its grounding in inference. However, we have also noted that ironic-meaning derivation can be strongly supported by linguistic cues, like the use of repeated agreement adverbs. Such linguistic mechanisms can further be supported by paralinguistic cues such as tone of voice (Bryant and Fox Tree, 2005), and perceptual markers of irony such as winks, smiles, laughter (Bryant, 2011) and gestural codas (González-Fuente et al., 2015). Our focus of attention now turns to the linguistic marking of irony, which, in the view we defend, has a constructional nature. More specifically, we argue that linguistic constructions with a high ironic potential are a subset of a more general kind of construction that have elsewhere been termed *implicational constructions* (Ruiz de Mendoza, 2015; Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera, 2020). We take Goldberg's (1995, 2006) definition of constructions as form-meaning pairings that, at a cognitive level, lay the non-inferential groundwork for meaning representation. These pairings require a degree of frequency and stability to be considered as such (cf. Luzondo and Ruiz de Mendoza, 2015). Furthermore, following work by Barðdal et al. (2011), Croft and Cruse (2004) and Hoffmann (2013), which identifies various levels of schematicity in constructions, the constructions analyzed in the present paper are schematic (as opposed to substantive constructions). We would like to further clarify that when we note that Attardo's *indices of irony* are constructional, we mean that they have a higher level of schematicity than other constructional patterns, as is the case of resultative constructions.

The sections to follow address the general characteristics of implicational constructions (Section 3.1), which have a primarily non-denotational function, like some figures of speech including irony (Section 3.2). Then, we will deal with irony-conveying implicational constructions in Section 4.

3.1. The general features of implicational constructions

In Cognitive Linguistics, grammar is seen as an inventory of constructions which relate to one another by means of meaning extension and inheritance mechanisms (Hoffmann, 2017) thereby forming different kinds of constructional groupings or families (Goldberg and Jackendoff, 2004; Ruiz de Mendoza and Luzondo-Oyón, 2017; Iza, 2021). In this theoretical context, the notion of construction is typically defined as a cognitively entrenched and socially conventional form-meaning/function pairing (Goldberg, 1995, 2006), where meaning motivates form and form is the expression of meaning (Ruiz de Mendoza, 2013; Ruiz de Mendoza, 2014). Constructions vary in formal and functional complexity (Goldberg, 2013, p. 17), ranging from the morpheme and word levels, including idiomatic configurations, through argument-structure patterns, to implicational, illocutionary, and discourse characterizations (Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera, 2014; Ruiz de Mendoza, 2015; Iza, 2021).

Implicational constructions are form-meaning associations which socially conventionalize and cognitively entrench meaning implications conveying subjective attitudinal meaning (Ruiz de Mendoza, 2015; Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera, 2020). Take the configuration *That's a rather X (isn't it?)*, as illustrated by the utterance *That's a rather bold claim, isn't it?* This constructional pattern is implicational. Its implicational nature arises from the use of *rather*, which profiles, from the speaker's perspective, the undesirability of the state of affairs designated by the expression. The tag *isn't it*, which

is optional, is fully consistent with this entrenched meaning implication. In principle, it acts as a content-verification check (i.e., the assumption that the claim is bold), but since this content has been evaluated by the use of *rather*, it also has this meaning within its scope.

Implicational constructions are based on attitudinal scenarios, which capture the speaker's emotional response to situations and events (Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera, 2020, p. 286). In the case of *That's a rather X (isn't it?)*, the attitudinal scenario contains the following specifications:

- (a) The speaker notices that a state of affairs X is potentially undesirable.
- (b) The speaker believes that the hearer either shares assumption (a) or should share that assumption with him or her.
- (c) The speaker wants to check whether the hearer shares assumption (a) with him or her.

The attitudinal meaning of this construction arises from matching its formal elements to corresponding elements of the attitudinal scenario specified above. Thus, the undesirability element in (a) is cued for by the adverb *rather*, which tends to collocate with expressions denoting a negative state of affairs. The deictic element cooperates with this meaning implication by drawing attention to it. The result is an expression that draws our attention to an undesirable state of affairs. Since challenges can be either faced or avoided, hearers may infer that the speaker drawing attention to any such challenge is a way to confirm its nature through speaker-hearer communicative cooperation. That is why the optional question tag can be used to make sure that the hearer will understand this inference.

A paradigmatic example of implicational construction is *What's X doing Y?* This construction, which was originally studied by Kay and Fillmore (1999), and later also developed by Panther and Thornburg (2017), conveys the idea that the speaker is bothered by the situation described in it. It has two realizational variants. In one of them, the Y variable is realized by means of a gerund which serves as a specification of generic *doing*, as exemplified by the question *What's your sister doing talking to your mother like that?* Here, the fact that the speaker can determine what the hearer's sister is 'doing', as evidenced by the verbal specification of generic *doing* as *talking* in the Y variable, suggests that he does not need to know, which makes a literal interpretation of the question superfluous. In the other variant, the Y variable is saturated by any number of circumstantial complements spelling out the conditions for the action (whatever its nature) to take place. This is the case of the question *What's the child doing in the swimming pool with no adult supervision?* Here, the complements expressing location and company provide sufficient information for the hearer to infer that the speaker already knows what the child is doing. In view of these examples, the rationale behind the meaning of this construction is easy to understand. It is based on the fact that by providing so much detail in the elaboration of the Y part of the construction, speakers reveal their knowledge of the answer to their own question. Since it is not logical to ask a question which one can answer, a plausible inference is that the speaker may be trying to draw our attention to some aspect of the situation that is described and make an inference about how the speaker feels about it. That is, the speaker is taken to be addressing attitudinal rather than denotational meaning.

The *What's X doing Y?* construction relates to other constructions with similar attitudinal meaning and similar formal expression based on the use of a *wh*-interrogative

pronoun and a present perfect continuous verb (Ruiz de Mendoza, 2015, p. 269). These are some of them:

> *Who's been V-ing X?* (*Who's been reading my journal?*)
> *What's (What've) X been V-ing Y?* (*What's he been doing with that mirror?*)
> *Where's (Where've) X been (V-ing) Y?* (*Where's he been hanging out all this time?*)
> *Why's (Why've) X been V-ing Y?* (*Why's she been acting like that?*)

There is a strong tendency for these constructions to convey the meaning that the speaker dislikes the situation described, although, given the right context, they could even mean the opposite. For example, imagine that Jane is a girl that keeps a journal where she discloses feelings she would like to share with Sarah, who is her best friend. Sarah is initially reluctant to intrude her friend's privacy, but one day, upon Jane's insistence, she decides to do it. Jane realizes that Sarah has been reading her journal and, in a playful way, asks *Who's been reading my journal?* However, this is a marked context yielding a marked inference-based interpretation. Still, in other unmarked contexts, the same constructional pattern could be merely an information question. For example, the question *Who's been waiting longer than the rest?* is neutral if asked by a conscientious clerk who realizes he has too many people in line. Since the same formal layout can have two different conventional meanings, we can argue for the existence of two separate, but formally related, constructions, one being attitudinal and the other informational. The same holds for the rest of the formal layouts listed above.

In general, the reason why the implicational constructions listed above imply speaker's dislike is based on the strongly presuppositional nature of the present perfect continuous, which indicates that the speaker is asking about an event which is still taking place. Since the speaker is a witness to whatever is happening, the hearer may suspect that there is a chance that the speaker already knows the information that he or she is asking about. That is, the speaker may be pretending not to know in order to draw attention to his or her assessment of the event. This is not the only inferential solution, of course, but it is the one that has become strongly associated with this kind of interrogative sentences, thereby allowing for them to become constructional.

There are other implicational constructions that arise from rhetorical questions. To give two more examples, consider *What else could go wrong?* and *Could anything else go wrong?* In the underlying configurations *What else could + V + Y* and *Could anything* else *+ V +Y?*, the verb denotes unfortunate or otherwise undesirable events, either by pragmatic implication in context (e.g., *What else could happen?*) or through direct explication (*What else could fail/go amiss/go awry?* etc.). On one level, these questions imply that everything that could have gone wrong did go wrong; on another level, built on the previous one, they imply that it would be even more distressing to know that some other such challenge lies ahead. It is this second level that provides attitudinal meaning and it is also at this level that this meaning dimension becomes entrenched as part of a construction.

3.1. DENOTATIONAL VERSUS ATTITUDINAL MEANING IN FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Figurative language use is heavily inferential. However, as in the case of implicational constructions, meaning inferences can be conventionally associated with specific formal patterns thereby giving rise to figurative language constructions. Ruiz de

Mendoza (2020) has distinguished two broad kinds of figures of speech: denotational and attitudinal. Metaphor, simile, metonymy, paradox, and oxymoron are denotational, since they have a greater focus on content; on the other hand, hyperbole and irony are attitudinal, since their main function is to convey the speaker's emotional stance with respect to some aspect of the content of an utterance (cf. Carston and Wearing, 2015, p. 85). The difference is easily seen if we compare metaphor and hyperbole. As noted above, both figures of speech involve pretense. In metaphor we treat people as if they were animals (*You, dirty pig!*), quantity as if it were height (*Stocks are going up*), abstracts concepts as if they were material objects (*Time is gold*), and so on. In hyperbole we represent a scalar concept as if it were greater in magnitude (e.g., larger, more important, more extreme) than what it is in reality. For example, take the common expression *I'm starving*, used to show that one is very hungry. Literally, starving applies to situations of extreme hunger that can bring people close to death. The reason why we often say we are starving is one of emotional impact. We treat our discomfort or craving for food as if it were of the same kind as that of a person suffering from prolonged food deprivation.

The contrast between metaphor and hyperbole –in terms of the kind of meaning implications each figure carries with it– parallels that between standard implicature in pragmatics and implicated attitudinal meaning. The former works on the basis of descriptive scenarios, such as going to the dentist, teaching class, and watching TV. These scenarios are scripted sequences of contextualized actions. For example, when teaching their classes, teachers usually need silence. The warning *Mrs. Jones is gonna hear you!* from one student to his rowdy classmate implicates that the teacher may feel disturbed by the noise and then get upset and punish him. By contrast, attitudinal scenarios, as noted in Section 3.1, specify people's emotional reactions to situations or events, such as feeling upset when something goes wrong, feeling sad when receiving bad news, feeling accomplished when succeeding. These scenarios underlie attitudinal meaning implications.

Now, as we have already noted, irony is also, like hyperbole, a matter of attitudinal meaning. In general, the central meaning implication is one of showing dissociation from what someone else believes is the case. This attitude of dissociation can take more specific forms in context, with skepticism and mockery, among other kinds of critical reaction, being the most common (Wilson and Sperber, 2012). Ironic meaning can be produced inferentially by offering the hearer either an echoic representation of a previous utterance or thought or a representation of an attested situation which clashes with what we think someone else believes to be the case. We provided examples of each of these two analytical situations separately in Section 2.1. However, one same utterance can bring the two situations together. Imagine Ethan and Jake have made careful plans to have a perfect vacation in Punta Cana in a month where storms should only be occasional. Much to their displeasure, their vacation is unusually stormy, which ruins most of their plans. Then, on the day of their return, as they are about to board their flight, it is sunny and beautiful. With ironic disappointment, Ethan remarks: *Well, Jake, sunny and beautiful!* This expression is doubly ironic; first, because of the clash between what Ethan says, which echoes the two friends' initial expectation, and the weather reality during their vacation time; second, because Ethan's remark also denotes the attested scenario of the day in which the two friends leave, which clashes against the two friends' awareness that they no longer need good weather (an implicit echo of their shared thought). That is, the same utterance takes on a doubly ironic role profiled against two different but related

aspects of the same context. From an attitudinal perspective, the result is one of increased disappointment and perplexity.

Since ironic meaning is attitudinal and attitudinal meaning can be captured through constructions, our next question is whether this can happen and, if so, how it can happen in the case of irony. We address these questions in Section 4.

4. CONSTRUCTIONS BEARING IRONIC POTENTIAL

Our data reveal the existence of four kinds of constructional pattern that have a discernible potential to convey ironic meaning. These patterns are the result of the interplay between two factors:

(i)   The speaker's intuitive awareness of the communicative role played by the two clashing elements of verbal irony: pretended agreement (often in the form of echoic mention) and an attested situation.

(ii) The speaker's ability to shape and use formal linguistic clues, which afford fixed access to the same range of meaning implications provided that certain conditions hold; these conditions work on constructional variables, without making them fixed constructional elements.

This second property of irony-conveying constructional strategies is fully at home with the general properties of all implicational constructions. Thus, in *What's X doing Y?*, a greater elaboration of the Y variable endows the formal layout with a higher potential to convey the speaker's feeling that there is something wrong about the situation denoted by the question. How this constructional potential increases is evident from the comparison of the following realizations:

(a)   *What's the child doing?*
(b)   *What's the child doing in the swimming pool?*
(c)   *What's the child doing in the swimming pool with no adult supervision?*
(d)   *What's the child doing in the swimming pool with no adult supervision at this time of the day?*

The greater the elaboration the clearer the implication that the speaker does not lack the information that he or she appears to demand. Greater elaboration involves greater knowledge and a decrease in the likelihood that the speaker may not have the information in question.

The following sections deal with four different kinds of constructional choices resulting from the interplay between the two factors identified above. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 focus on axiological issues, whereas 4.3 and 4.4 deal with different aspects of formal specification.

4.1. AXIOLOGICALLY NON-NEUTRAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Let us consider the expression *How I love a bummer day!* within the context of the scenario of feeling upset when something goes wrong, which we applied in Section 3.1 to the analysis of two related constructional patterns: *What else could + V + Y?* and *Could anything* else *+ V +Y?* We have a similar analytical situation for *How I love a bummer day!*, with the difference that, in this case, the result of the second level of activation is ironic meaning. The construction *How I love X* (and variants with other "like"

verbs) can be used to show (more or less intensely) strong liking (e.g., *How I love a nice siesta/a good concert/being in the mountains*, etc.). This meaning arises when the X element of the construction is presented as positive either through textual clues or on the basis of the context. However, if the variable element is felt to be negative, the clash with the expression of strong liking involved in *How I love* calls for an ironic interpretation. For example, *How I love a day of good rest* is ironic if the speaker has not been able to have any rest. That is, although *How I love X* is not necessarily used to convey ironic meaning, it can readily be used in this way. It depends on the axiological load of the variable X once realized in context. This means that the ironic potential of *How I love X* is higher than for other axiologically more neutral expressions. Some of these will be examined in Section 4.2.

Now, take the sentence *I love people who make me laugh*, based on the syntactic pattern *I love people who X*, consisting of a relatively fixed part and a variable element. It expresses liking on the part of the speaker. To express dislike, this sentence can be changed by negating the verb of the main clause: *I don't love people who make me cry*. What is interesting about the pattern with a positive main clause is the fact that it can be polysemous if the subordinate clause conveys a situation that is admittedly undesirable: *I love people who gossip behind my back*. It is this pattern that gives rise to a construction with a high ironic potential: *I love people who spit on my face/laugh at my hairdo/take me for granted*, etc. This means that the ironic potential of *I love people who X* hinges on the ability of the Y variable to fulfil the axiological condition specified above. A word of caution is necessary here. The use of *I love people who X*, where X is admittedly desirable, can also yield an ironic interpretation. For example, *I love people who treat me kindly* can be ironic in a situation in which the speaker feels hurt by the hearer. In this case, however, irony is a matter of inference in context. Other expressions could have achieved a similar communicative purpose through comparable inferential mechanisms: *I love people who treat me kindly*; *It's always good to be treated kindly*; *I like it when people are nice to me*, etc.

Let us now consider a construction which is related to *How I love X*, examined above: *X just like(s)/love(s)/adore(s) Y*, where Y is a dislikeable state of affairs, as illustrated by the sentence *My father just loves how you all drive in California*. This sentence is echoic of what the hearer thinks, i.e., that Californian drivers are likeable because they are good. However, this echo clashes with what to the speaker is attested reality: the assumption that Californian drivers are careless, a situation that the speaker's father does not like. The use of *just* in this construction is central to it. From a syntactic perspective, it is an optional clausal element: *My father loves how you all drive in California* could also be used ironically (as well as literally), but *just* is functionally an emphasizer conveying exactness (it increases the existing axiological intensity invoked by *love*). The echoic implication, when used in the example above, is that the speaker's father likes exactly the Californian driving style, while the opposite is the case. The adverb *just* acts, within the context of the rest of the elements and conditions of the construction, as a pointer to irony and, as such, as a *facilitator* of ironic reading.

4.2. AXIOLOGICALLY NEUTRAL CONSTRUCTIONS

For axiologically neutral expressions to acquire ironic value, there are other linguistic mechanisms. To illustrate this, take the following statement: *Mr. Smith owns a hardware store*. In principle, this statement is not evaluative. It simply provides

information about Mr. Smith's profession. However, imagine that this statement is uttered by John as an answer to Peter's question about what Mr. Smith does for a living. Sometime later, they find, to their astonishment, that Mr. Smith is arrested on charges of using his store as a cover to launder money. Peter remembers John's statement and repeats it: *I see; Mr. Smith owns a hardware store!* The expression *I see* has pragmatic value. It shows that Peter is now aware of the real situation about Mr. Smith's business. This real situation clashes with the content of John's initial statement, which is now echoed. Thus, the initial statement, by being echoed, acquires evaluative overtones that point to Peter's skepticism about the veracity of its original content. The use of the expression *I see*, like *just* in *My father* just *loves how you all drive in California*, which we discussed above, facilitates this interpretation. However, its presence is not absolutely necessary for the irony to be conveyed provided that we have a context where it is evident that the speaker pretends to believe that Mr. Smith's business is only used for legal purposes; that is, this expression only acts as an optional facilitator of the ironic reading and cooperates to this end in the context of an echoic representation that clashes with the situation to which this device refers. Other facilitators of ironic meaning that work by pointing to the attested situation could be listed: *It's evident/clear that X*; *Evidently/clearly X*; *You see, X*; *So/therefore, X*; etc. These resources, like *How I love*, can increase the ironic potential of a statement given the textual and contextual conditions specified above. Such conditions operate on the constructional variable X, which falls within the scope of the facilitators.

Let us now return to the adverbial expressions *yeah*, *sure*, *right*. We mentioned their role as echoic pointers or, from a broader perspective, as pretended agreement markers. They also act as irony facilitators, but they fulfill this function by reinforcing the expression of pretended agreement rather than pointing to the attested situation, as seen from this variant of the previous example: *Yeah, sure, Mr. Smith owns a hardware store!* In this example, the two adverbs cooperate with echoic mention to produce an almost unequivocal case of ironic utterance. As observed above, voice tone and facial and bodily expression can also cooperate in this regard. On some occasions, these non-verbal expressive devices (e.g., a head-nod, a slow and firm hand-shake) reinforce the idea of pretended agreement, but on other occasions they address the attitudinal component (e.g., a mocking tone of voice, a wry facial expression, an unconcerned shrug of the shoulders, a weary smile).

4.3. ECHOIC COMPLEXITY

Reinforced pretended agreement is also achieved by means of echoic complexity. There are several strategies in this regard (Ruiz de Mendoza and Lozano, 2019). One of them, called *echoic cumulation*, is of interest here. This strategy is iconic with nature: cumulation increases weight and size measures, which underlies the experiential correlation between psychological and physical impact. In language, it takes the form of the successive aggregation of synonymic expressions, sometimes in combination with hyperbole, and it is used to intensify certain aspects of such expressions. In the case of irony, cumulation builds an inaccurate echo for similar purposes. For example, imagine John erroneously thinks that his friend Paul is really nice. Another friend, Fred, tries to open John's eyes to reality: Paul can be less than nice in certain situations. One day, John and Fred witness Paul fly into rage over a petty issue. John still defends Paul's character despite the evidence. Fred ironizes: *Yeah, sure, John. Paul is the nicest guy ever; he is everyone's buddy; definitely our main man.* This cumulative use of

near synonyms provides a stronger ironic effect than a mere literal echo: *Yeah, sure, John. Paul is really nice*. Hyperbole cooperates too. As some scholars have noted (e.g., Carston and Wearing, 2015, p. 90), hyperbole easily combines with irony because of its ability to increase the impact of its attitudinal component.

Cumulation is a constructional strategy because of its conventional nature. It relates to other constructions based on exact repetition, like those featuring the consecutive repetition of the same clausal element (e.g., *You, you, you did it!*; cf. Ghomeshi et al., 2004; Ruiz de Mendoza and Agustín-Llach, 2013), including intensifiers (*He's so, so poor!*). These constructions could also be used to produce intensified ironic meaning: *Yeah, sure, John. Paul is nice, nice, nice /Yeah, sure, John. Paul is so, so nice!* The difference is the cumulative echoes, by being inaccurate, allow the speaker to intensify different aspects of the echoed material instead of acting on the echoed representation as a whole.

Finally, as a constructional strategy, cumulation can combine with irony-prone constructions based on aggregation. A case in point is *X, and Y too*, where X contains a cumulative succession of echoic near-synonyms and Y is any number of additional items that further specify the most relevant item in the echoed thought. The items in Y can be synonyms of one another or not. An example is *Yeah, sure, John. Paul is really nice, very friendly, definitely agreeable; and meek and mild, too*. Here, *meek* and *mild* are not synonyms of *nice*, but they are epithets from the same lexical field. As such, they can easily hold for people who have agreeable characters. The function of the aggregation is to further elaborate on the pretense by listing additional positive traits that can be ascribed to Paul, but which also clash with reality.

Another constructional strategy which endows echoic mention with complexity is echoic compounding. It consists in the syntactic combination of two or more echoes (or aspects of the same echo) within an ironic context. Let us illustrate how it works. Imagine that two friends, Jan and René, share an apartment downtown. They have an agreement about how to take care of the household chores, but Jan is an inborn procrastinator, who is completely unaware of his somewhat neglectful habits. Jan even thinks that he does his fair share, although maybe not exactly when René wants, since his friend is a typically impatient person. One day, tired of this situation, René ironizes about it: *Oh, sorry, Jan. Here I am again, stressing you out as you take utmost care of all the housework.* The first clause (*Here I am again, stressing you out*) is echoic of Jan's belief that René can be too impatient and put undue pressure on him, whereas the second clause (*as you take utmost care of all the housework*) is echoic of Jan's belief that he does his fair share. The first echo clashes with what René believes about his own behavior and the second echo with what he thinks about Jan's approach to his duties. Note that the syntactic combination involved in compounding does not need to be explicitly marked by means of a connector (e.g., *as*). Mere juxtaposition can have the same effect. Take a new situation in which Jan and René are talking about some good moments that they enjoyed together as longtime friends. They talk about a trekking experience that they had together with some other friends. Jan loved it but René found it particularly distressing. After Jan talks positively about the event, René ironizes:

Jan: *Oh, boy, it was a wonderful experience!*
René: *Yes, sure, Jan, it was a wonderful experience. You sure loved it.*

The first clause in René's turn explicitly echoes Jan's utterance; however, the second juxtaposed clause echoes an implicit derivation from the content of Jan's

exclamation, which is thus made explicit. The function of this elaboration of the first echo is to create a sense of cumulation through clausal aggregation.

The function of compounding in these examples comes close to that of the cumulative repetition of phrase-internal elements. It affects ironic meaning through the intensification inherent in the repeated and consecutive use of expressions having the same, similar, or contextually related denotata.

An additional function of compounding is to bring together two or more loosely connected echoes thereby tightening the degree of conceptual dependency that holds between them. This function of compounding is but a side-effect of clausal aggregation: when two apparently unrelated clauses are brought into syntactic dependency, hearers tend to apply the default relevance assumption that the two somehow belong together. The following contextualized example can serve as illustration. An employee, Bob, has a less than impressive track record. It could be worse, but he is lucky that one of his workmates, John, manages to cover him up when he fails to attend his duties as he should. Sadly, Bob is not really aware of this situation and, one day, when John asks for his help, Bob thinks it will be too much for him and refuses to do anything for his colleague. Deeply hurt, John cannot refrain from ironizing about Bob: *Yeah, sure, Bob, it was inconsiderate of me to ask you, especially because I never do anything for you*. This remark brings together two ironic echoes: one addresses Bob's misperception about John's right to ask for a favor (*it was inconsiderate of me to ask you*), and the other Bob's inability to realize how much his workmate has done for him (*I never do anything for you*). These two echoes could have stood independently of each other, but the context allows them to be associated in terms of a consequence-cause relationship that is marked syntactically (*especially because*). As with other cases of cumulation, the combination of the two echoes has an intensifying effect arising from their complementary nature once seen in context.

It should be noted that compounding is formally less restricted than cumulation. Cumulation requires the formal aggregation of successive synonymic expressions. On the other hand, the role of compounding is to combine echoic expressions that would otherwise stand by themselves. In any event, these two echoic complexity strategies exhibit the lowest degree of formal fixity of all the constructional formulations that we have examined. They consist of sets of conditions on formal composition. In Section 4.4 we discuss more restricted formulations.

4.4. FORMAL ELABORATION

Some of the constructional patterns discussed so far are characterized by little to no specificity. To the extent that this happens, meaning derivation rests more heavily on the set of conditions that the variable elements of the construction need to meet. An extreme case is cumulation, which is but a set of conditions on form, with no specific fixed element. A less extreme case is ironic marking, whose ultimate value is highly but not fully dependent on accompanying textual and contextual factors.

However, there are constructions, which, as we have seen, have a more elaborated fixed part, like *How I love X* or *What else could V+Y?* These constructions have a high ironic potential. There are also other patterns with a similar potential. One of them, which, because of its derogatory nature can give rise to sarcasm, is *You couldn't X even if Y*. Consider, by way of illustration, the sentence *You couldn't have me even if you had all the wealth in the world.* This constructional pattern is not intended to be explicitly echoic, but, as was the case with other examples examined in Section 2.2, it affords access

to an implicit echo obtained by inference on the basis of a hyperbolic version of the attested scenario. In terms of its form, this construction makes use of hypothetical conditional hypotaxis (for the role of constructions in irony evocation, and conditional constructions in particular, although from a different perspective, see Athanasiadou 2020). The explicit attested situation is described in its consequence part, which denotes an impossible state of affairs (*You couldn't X*). On the other hand, the condition part (*even if Y*) sets up a virtually counterfactual (hence hyperbolic) hypothetical scenario, which accounts for why the speaker thinks the consequence part holds true. The echo is implicit: 'You think you could X'. It derives inferentially from the fact that the consequence part is linguistically presented as negating a previously held assumption: 'You think you could X, but you couldn't X' (i.e., 'You think you could have me but you couldn't have me even if you had all the wealth in the world'). Finally, the ironic meaning arises from the clash between the implicit echo and what the speaker presents as the attested situation in the consequence part. Such meaning is strengthened by the fact that the condition part of the sentence endows the consequence part with a high degree of certainty by conveying the idea that there is no conceivable situation in which the hearer's belief could be true.

Another construction, with a relatively elaborated fixed formal part, which also has a high ironic potential is *About as X as Y*, where X is an axiologically positive adjective and Y an expression which contradicts the content of X (e.g., *That's about as useful as a clock with no hands*). This construction has been explored by Veale (2012) in some detail. It should be noted that "about" constructions using the same formal pattern are not necessarily ironic. They can be literal (e.g., *That's as useful as a microscope*) or they can be humorous but not ironic, as is the case of the sentence *She's about as lost as Paris Hilton in a library* (Veale, 2012, p. 118). Following our analytical rationale, in this example, people's stereotypical assumptions about Paris Hilton as a shallow party girl heiress and a naive blonde are not at odds with the general belief that people who feel at home in libraries are likely to be well educated and intellectually sophisticated. In the absence of a cross-domain clash, which is characteristic of irony, the result is simply one of stereotype reinforcement. In our view, it is this reinforcement of an otherwise questionable stereotype that prompts for a humorous interpretation of the "about" comparison. However, as Veale himself shows in his corpus searches of the *about as X as Y* pattern, the vast majority of the occurrences are ironic. We would add that they are mostly humorous too, or even sarcastic due to the ridiculousness of considering the Y element useful. In fact, the Y variable can vary in degrees of oddity. Compare the following examples, which we number for convenience:

(1) *That's about as useful as a clock with no hands.*
(2) *That's about as useful as a buying a clock with no hands.*
(3) *That's about as useful as a trap door on a canoe.*
(4) *That's about as useful as Godzilla googling how to fix car windows.*

The Y variable in (1) ("a clock with no hands") has a low degree of oddity. We can easily think of a broken clock which has lost its hands. However, if we take (2), it may be harder to think that someone wants to buy a watch without hands, although this is not a completely inconceivable situation. For example, the clock may be an extremely valuable collector's item even though it is damaged. Sentence (3) profiles a radically different situation. It is rather absurd to place a trap door on a canoe, at least for two reasons. First, a canoe is an open boat that has only one deck, and trap doors are used to allow access from one deck to another. Second, fitting a canoe with a hatch would be

dangerous because it could leak water in and sink the boat. The situation depicted in (3) is more striking than the one in (2) thereby endowing the expression with a greater humorous potential. Finally, in (4) we have a fictional situation, which depicts an absurdity. Godzilla's beastly and destructive behavior clashes with the idea that this monster may cleverly use a computer to figure out how to repair just a small part of what it has previously destroyed. In part, the humorous effect of (4) arises from the absurdity of this scenario and in part from thinking that the real situation referred to in (4) is useful. This second level of humor is ironic. It is based on an ironic echo (that someone may think that a certain action is useful), which clashes with the attested situation where the usefulness of such an action is compared to that of the absurd scenario. Interestingly, examples (1)-(3) are ironic on account of the same basic comparison strategy: what the hearer thinks is useful is not in reality as depicted by the speaker. However, examples (2)-(4) are more humorous than (1) because of the increasing degree of oddity of the content of the Y variable.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has provided evidence in favor of a constructional dimension in irony that needs to be considered alongside the more traditional inferential approach. Speakers can produce formal linguistic clues that afford conventionally stable access to ironic meaning. This means that there are constructional strategies to express ironic meaning, which require detailed examination. The present article provides a preliminary approach in this respect.

Constructions capable of conveying irony can be axiologically loaded or neutral. When their fixed part is positive and the variable is implicitly or explicitly negative, their formal patterns exhibit a higher ironic potential. When the fixed part is axiologically neutral, the use of evidential expressions can act as irony-facilitating devices, provided that the situation which they point to clashes with the content of an echoic expression. Evidential expressions point to the attested situation. However, there are other irony-facilitating devices, called indices of irony or ironic markers in the literature, which work by expressing pretended agreement, a pragmatic function which, in irony, is often achieved through echoic expressions.

Echoic mention is of utmost importance. It is a more complex phenomenon than previously recognized in the literature. This article has examined the constructional dimension of echoic complexes in the form of cumulative and compounded echoes. The former echoes consist in the successive aggregation of almost synonymous expressions, which yields an intensifying effect. The latter are based on the syntactic combination of echoic clauses. The main function of this strategy –which may have a subsidiary intensification effect– is to offer a broader picture of the ironic event by bringing together echoes that can be seen as complementary but might otherwise be regarded as unrelated.

Finally, the present study has contrasted the ironic potential of cumulation and compounding with other constructional strategies. It has argued that compounding is formally less restricted than cumulation, which is in turn less restricted than indices of irony and other facilitators of ironic meaning. There are, however, irony-conveying constructions that have more elaborated fixed parts. This greater degree of formal elaboration correlates with a higher ironic potential. In this regard, the paper has studied *You couldn't X even if Y* and *About as X as Y*, both of which exploit counterfactual configurations and hyperbole. In the former, the ironic meaning arises when the

consequence part is endowed with a high degree of certainty on account of the condition part, which suggests that there is no conceivable situation in which the hearer's belief could be true. The strengthened consequence part calls up the attested situation, while the echoic one, which is implicit, is derivable from the textual clues provided by the consequence part itself. In the latter construction, X is an axiologically positive adjective and Y an expression which contradicts the content of X. The conflict involved in both constructions is humorous provided that the *Y* element presents a distorted or counterfactual picture, whether on its own or in its relationship with the rest of the expression.

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