

The Pragmatics of Humorous Interpretations: A Relevance-Theoretic Approach

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Per al meu pare

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to provide a pragmatic account of how humorous discourse is interpreted within the cognitive framework of Relevance Theory. I argue that being humorous is not a property of texts, but of the type of mental representations that hearers are led to entertain during their processing, and the specific way in which these representations are manipulated.

One of my objectives is to provide a psychologically plausible explanation of how humorous effects are created and understood in language, and to relate it to philosophical views of humour. In order to place my account in this broader perspective, in Chapter 1 I review the main philosophical and psychological approaches of verbal humour. From this discussion it emerges that the notion of incongruity plays a central role in most contemporary treatments of humour. I raise the question whether a theory of . . . humorous interpretations should endeavour to develop a better defined notion of the precise type of incongruity that is at stake in humour, or should rather explore the cognitive impact of encountering something incongruous as a result of processing an ostensive stimulus. I take the second line.

In Chapter 2 some linguistic approaches to the study of verbal humour are discussed. I argue that they are flawed because they assume that verbal humour is inherent in the linguistic code, and that the alternative interpretations of an utterance derive fully from structures of meaning present in the text and the co-text. I question their conclusion that humorous language is deviant, and argue that the proper field to approach verbal humour is not linguistics, but pragmatics.

Chapter 3 and 4 assess recent pragmatic analyses of verbal humour. Although these approaches take into account the role of inference in the interpretation of humorous effects, without exception they either assume or conclude that humorous language transgresses the rules that regulate the operation of non-humorous discourse, that special principles are needed for its interpretation, and that humans possess a domain-specific "humour competence" that enables them to create and produce verbal humour. I argue against all these claims.

Chapter 5 outlines the relevance-theoretic framework, and discusses the few analysis of verbal humour and related issues that have been carried out within it, so it sets the ground for the approach I develop in the remaining chapters.

In Chapter 6 I single out a number of pragmatic mechanisms that seem to be typical of the generation and interpretation of humorous effects and argue that they fit one particular definition of the notion of incongruity. I suggest that leading hearers to entertain the incongruous in the ways described is only a device exploited by speakers to give rise to additional cognitive effects, the precise nature of which is discussed in Chapter 7. It is claimed that in dealing with the incongruity encountered, hearers perform inferences that take metarepresentations of various orders as premises. Different orders of these metarepresentations produce different effects. This suggests that the ability to engage in humour is a direct consequence of the capacity to attribute (false) beliefs and intentions to others.

Finally, Chapters 8 and 9 consider the implications of my proposal for humorous figurative language. Poetic and humorous metaphors are contrasted in Chapter 8, while Chapter 9 extends and elaborates on the standard relevance-theoretic approach to irony, and addresses some recent attacks against it.

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Chapter One

Introduction: The Philosophy and Psychology of Humour

Whatever is funny is subversive...a sort of mental rebellion, a momentary wish that things were otherwise.

(G.Orwell 1961)

One of the aims of this thesis is to provide a psychologically plausible partial explanation of how humorous discourse is pragmatically processed. The pragmatic view I develop here has benefitted from insights in the psychology and the philosophy of humour and is coherent with some recent treatments of humour in these fields. This introduction to the psychology and philosophy of humour is meant to help place my account in this broader perspective.

1. The philosophy of humour

Although humour has not been a major philosophical topic, the nature of laughter, amusement, and humour has occupied thinkers since the ancient Greeks, and it continues to receive attention.

A comparison of the main philosophical views that have been advanced faces several difficulties. First, the words "humour" and "amusement" did not always have their modern senses. Second, unjustified parallels have frequently been drawn between the notions of laughter, amusement and humour. For instance, laughter is a bodily phenomenon, and amusement is a mental state. Clearly, they do not always occur together. It is now well known that laughter is not necessarily caused by amusement and that not all amusement results in laughter. However, the two are not always explicitly distinguished in the literature. Besides, the word "amusement" has a wider sense, used to refer generally to a state achieved by any of a range of satisfying and pleasant ways of having one's attention engaged. Experiencing humour is not the only way of attaining amusement in this sense. The upshot of the frequent blur between these distinctions is that theories that have been presented as accounts of laughter in fact deal with humour and vice versa, and the interrelations of amusement, laughter and humour often remain confused.

Contemporary philosophers generally use the word "humour" in its widest sense, as an umbrella term to cover all categories and genres of the funny and witty, and the word "amusement" in its narrowest sense, as it pertains to humour. I will do the same here, but the terminological inconsistencies need to be kept in mind when assessing different approaches.

In addition to the terminological confusion, different approaches to the study of laughter and humour are not always true competing theories. As will become apparent below, even if different accounts are put forward as comprehensive theories

of humour, it is often the case that they in fact concentrate on very specific aspects of it. Hence, it is not always easy or even possible to make a precise comparison of the predictions that follow from each. This state of affairs is perhaps inescapable, and may simply be a reflection of the subject matter: the complex nature of humour, and the diversity of phenomena usually subsumed under the term "humour". Given that a sense of humour cannot be divorced from general human intelligence, it is conceivable that a full account of humour would amount to an account of human intelligence.

The pervasiveness of humour in human life has nonetheless led philosophers to reflect on the nature of the phenomenon, what it is and what its causes are. Its psychological role and social impact have directed attention also to its relations to aesthetics, ethics, rationality and emotion.

In trying to understand the nature of humour, philosophers have striven to identify its essential underlying features. According to what they characterize as such, humour theories in philosophy are usually classified as falling under one of three broad categories: (a) superiority theories, (b) release theories and (c) incongruity theories. Superiority theories claim that a humorous experience results from feelings of supremacy over other people or over ourselves at a previous time. Release theories, on the other hand, view humour as arising from the discharge of excess psychic energy¹. By contrast, incongruity theories argue that humour is the outcome of a

¹ The appeal to the notion of *psychic energy* in accounts of humour goes back at least to Freud. Freud argued that "condensation" or "economy" was at the root of all joking techniques. Sometimes jokes express a thought succinctly, or, as in punning and *double entendres*, two meanings are expressed through the use of a single linguistic form. The ideas of "psychic energy" and "expenditure" are not unitary in Freud's account. Psychical energy is said to be needed both to create and to maintain inhibitions. When a joke occurs, one of two things

perception or a thought that clashes with what is expected.

With regard to the aesthetic nature of humour, two main traditions have emerged: one holds that amusement is a type of aesthetic interest (e.g. Scruton 1982), while another rejects this view (Martin 1983).

The relation between humour and rationality and the relation between humour and emotion have also been approached from two different stances. One line of thought, going back at least to Plato, suggests that humour indicates a kind of irrationality (Hartley 1810, Santayana 1896; both reprinted in Morreall 1987), whereas another regards humour as an integral part of our rationality (e.g. Scruton 1982, Morreall 1989).

Philosophers do not agree either as to whether amusement, in particular, the kind of amusement underlying humour, is a type of emotion. Plato, for instance, argued that amusement is an emotion, while Bergson (1911) claimed it is not. This debate continues, and contemporary philosophers have provided arguments both in favour of (Sharpe 1975) and against (Morreall 1983) the status of amusement as an emotion.

Ethical arguments have developed as well around the issue of what, if any, are objectionable topics and situations where humour is unacceptable (Mikes 1970²,

happens: either the obstacle and the inhibition are temporarily lifted, or the joke avoids the need to create the inhibition that would otherwise be necessary to restrain ourselves. In both cases the psychological energy normally invested in repression is saved and discharged in laughter.

² George Mikes is, of course, not best known for his philosophical work, but rather for his humorous writings. However, his remarks on the ethics of humour in his book *Humour In Memoriam* ('half philosophy and half anecdote', as the blurb on the cover puts it) are an important contribution that must not go unmentioned.

Boskin 1977-1978, de Sousa 1987).

1.1 The nature of humour and laughter

1.1.1 *Superiority theories*

When people refer to something as being laughable they usually mean that it seems amusing or stupid because it is so obviously unsuccessful, foolish or poor in quality. The oldest theory of humour is in fact very much a theory of laughter, and it stems from this simple observation.

Although nowadays humour is generally regarded as a positive phenomenon, a whole tradition of theorists, originating perhaps with Plato, have developed accounts that focus on a less enthusiastic view of it. Plato believed that the true character of the comic is self-ignorance. Most comic figures, he argued, are depicted as inferior³. Those who are laughable are those who think of themselves as better than they really are. But, he continues, in laughing at them we show our animosity, and because malice is a "pain in the soul", when we laugh, our attention, is directed to vice. Plato therefore insisted that laughter was not to be cultivated, for in loud and strong laughter humans lose rational control of themselves.

In viewing laughter mainly as a form of derision, Aristotle continued this line of thought. In *Rhetoric* (II, 11), wit is regarded as "educated insolence", and although

³ See, for instance, the *Philebus*.

laughter is credited with some potential social corrective value which can be used to get wrongdoers into line, Aristotle considers excess laughter to be incompatible with the ethically desirable man (see *Nicomachean Ethics*).

This dark depiction of laughter as merely the expression of our feelings of superiority over other people was influential on subsequent thought about humour and laughter. In fact, Morreall (1987) attributes the philosophical neglect of humour to the ethically suspect character it acquired as a result of being so negatively represented in the thought of ancient Greece. Because creating and enjoying humour was seen as a rather frivolous, indulging base instinct, the result was little motivation to study it. Hence, it was not until the seventeenth century that Thomas Hobbes gave the superiority view of humour a much stronger and articulated form. Of course, his approach to laughter fits in with his general view of humankind.

For Hobbes, men are in a constant struggle against one another and laughter simply expresses "a sudden glory arising from the conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (*Leviathan*, Ch 6). Like Aristotle, Hobbes is wary of laughter and expresses great reservations about the human disposition to feel good by looking down on others.

The Hobbesian account of laughter became the classic form of the superiority theory, and it has been defended and elaborated upon since then. Often, support for this approach has developed in response to the many objections raised against the

"sudden glory" view of laughter (e.g. Monro 1951⁴), but also, and perhaps much more interestingly, it has been favoured in attempts to provide an evolutionary perspective on humour and laughter, which I discuss briefly in section 3 below.

Superiority is central to Bergson's view of laughter too. Bergson, being so much in opposition to the materialism and mechanism of evolutionary theories at his time, developed his own theory of "creative evolution". In his account of laughter and humour (1911, extracts reprinted in Morreall 1987) Bergson postulates a non-material "vital force" (*élan vital*) as the propelling force of all biological and social evolution. He argues that we know this force not so much by conceptual reflection, but by intuition. It is our intuition that tells us that our lives are not a succession of discrete states, but rather a continuous process of becoming. Static abstractions are only inventions of the intellect. Rational thought, successful as it is in science and daily life, has nonetheless the disadvantage of forcing us to treat our new experiences in rigid ways, as it leads us to deal with what is new as repetitions of familiar concepts. When this happens, ridicule arises. For Bergson, the ridiculous is "something mechanic encrusted on the living". As he puts it,

"The victim, then, of a practical joke, is in a position similar to that of a runner who falls; he is comic for the same reason. The laughable element in both cases consists of a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being." (1987: 121)

⁴ One of Monro's points against superiority views of humour concerns insults. For most adults, a bare-faced insult will not count as a form of wit, but a veiled one, disguised as a compliment, will (e.g. "You are the kind of person Rev. Spooner would have called a 'shining wit'", as opposed to 'you whining shit'). While both forms of insult are based on the presumed superiority of the speaker, we enjoy the wit in itself, which in Monro's view stems from the clever 'distortion'. So, superiority is not sufficient to experience humour. Moreover, one can enjoy such put-downs even if they are made against people towards whom one feels no particular antagonism or contempt, which can be taken as an argument that superiority is not even necessary for humour.

As examples of this rigidity he considers absentmindedness, and certain (non-tragic) vices. In these cases, as opposed to those of a person who stumbles accidentally, the mechanical rigidity occurs out of the person's internal processes.

"Let us try to picture to ourselves a certain inborn lack of elasticity of both senses and intelligence, which brings it to pass that we continue to see what is no longer visible, to hear what is no longer audible, to say what is no longer to the point: in short, to adapt ourselves to a past and therefore imaginary situation when we ought to be shaping our conduct in accordance with the reality which is present. This time the comic will take up its abode in the person himself, it is the person who will supply it with everything" (1987: 121)

As for non-tragic vices, he says.

"the vice capable of making us comic is (...) that which is brought from without, like a ready-made frame into which we are to step. It lends us its own rigidity instead of borrowing from us our flexibility" (1987: 123)

Besides, he argues that the comic cannot exist outside of what is strictly *human*.

Laughter, he claims, removes that encrustation, and it does so through humiliation of those who behave rigidly. In so doing, it promotes well-adapted, free behaviour, and hence laughter is a liberating social force aimed at those who do not operate in a flexible, context-sensitive way.

There have been several lines of response to the superiority theory⁵. The most immediate charge to which the theory is open is that not all humour is derisive. Although, for instance, what Hobbes really discusses is laughter and his analysis is not even confined to humorous laughter, the attack could still be sustained as, clearly, not all laughter is downright derisive. Nonetheless, it must be stressed that arguments along these lines are sometimes based on a too narrow view of what "superiority"

⁵ George Mikes, for instance, says: "Bergson's book is excellent reading -much better than the summaries. It is full of diversions and the diversions are the best part of it: entertaining, witty, brilliant. What he has to say on his main subject, however, is often downright silly" (1970: 52)

means⁶.

At one extreme, some authors have even found laughter to be completely dissociated from derision. For instance, Eastman (1921) proposes that we should "dismiss from the topic of laughter at the outset the topic of scorn", and in the preface to *L'enfant prodigue*, Voltaire remarks that laughter is absolutely incompatible with contempt. But as Morreall (1983) notices, the problem with this kind of position is that it ignores the fact that some laughter and some kinds of humour are indeed motivated by scorn. It is only relatively recently in the history of humankind that moral objections to the enjoyment of others' misfortunes and its public display in laughter have entered the scene⁷. Derision has been put forward as a primitive cause of amusement not only from a social perspective, but also psychologically from a developmental stance. At least two studies suggest that most young children find certain kinds of suffering in others amusing (see Rapp 1951: 34-35). Simple observation shows that it takes time and exposure to diversity before a child develops a more complex sensitivity to the misfortunes of others. So, although superiority theories of humour are now discredited and cannot offer a comprehensive account of the phenomenon, they seem to be more well-motivated than currently appears to us.

⁶ Notice that we seldom, if ever, laugh wholeheartedly and with amusement whenever we feel truly inferior either to others or to ourselves at a previous time.

⁷ Morreall (1983) offers a more extensive description of the ways in which derision and the suffering of others have been a source of amusement throughout history. He considers public torture and executions, records of organized visits by French aristocrats to insane asylums with the sole purpose of getting fun at taunting the inmates, and several reports of social practices based on derisive laughter in Samoan cultures and Greenland Eskimos, where "contests of ridicule were once their only judicial procedure" (p. 9).

Thus, although derisive laughter and derisive humour exist, because feelings of superiority are not in general necessarily involved when they occur, the Hobbesian "sudden glory" cannot constitute the essence of all laughter and humour⁸.

There are many instances of non-humorous laughter that do not co-occur with feelings of superiority, but those do not concern a theory of humour⁹. Consider, however, laughter derived from humour based on nonsense and the absurd, which does not evoke feelings of superiority. Also, much verbal humour that plays on linguistic form is not directed at a butt, and self-evaluation plays little if any role in the experience (e.g. excessive alliteration, riddles, puns). Some have argued, besides, that in laughing at our own blunders the experience is more humorous and enjoyable precisely because it is our very selves who are responsible for the gaffe (e.g. Morreall 1983, Lippitt 1995). Superiority theories have no obvious way of accounting for our ability to laugh at ourselves.

Of course, a superiority theorist could respond that in the cases mentioned a feeling of superiority arises all the same: in absurdist humour, from the awareness of our cleverness in designing the verbal play or the nonsensical humorous instance; and when we laugh at ourselves, from the very realisation of our own lapses, which

⁸ Even if Hobbes presents his view as an essentialist approach, the passage where he refers to the "sudden glory" behind laughter shows that in fact what he is looking at are the *emotions* involved in laughter, which is only one of the aspects involved in a humorous experience: "*Sudden Glory* is the *passion* (my emphasis) which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves" (*Leviathan*, 1981:125)

⁹ Take for instance tickling, laughter at embarrassment and hysteria.

instantaneously makes our current self feel superior to our former self, the one accountable for the blunder.

Yet, a further problem for this type of theory is that it cannot explain why not every feeling of superiority is amusing. Hobbes realizes this and talks of "sudden glory". But if, for instance, news suddenly breaks of serious corruption by a politician, and in our indignation we instantly feel morally superior, the result is likely to be contempt and not amusement. Abused slaves must often have felt sudden bursts of moral superiority over plantation owners, which presumably had little to do with experiencing humour. So, the question remains as to what it is about those instances of feeling superior that do amuse us that makes them different from those which don't. This issue is never addressed by superiority theories.

Consequently, an important limitation of theories developed within this framework is the very little they have to say about the source of laughter and humour. It may well be that all humorous experiences produce feelings of mastery and serve to assert ourselves somehow. Yet we know that a parent who enjoys the linguistic blunders of his child may be knowingly superior to the child in this respect, but that this feeling is hardly the cause of his amusement. And consider what happens when we are told that John advised desperate thirty five year old bed-wetter Peter to go to a psychoanalyst to prevent the complete ruining of his marriage, his nerves, and his extra-marital sex-life. Months later we learn that, upon meeting a radiant Peter, John asked 'So you went to the psychoanalyst', to which Peter replied 'Yes, it was a great help', upon which the conversation continued as follows:

John: You don't wet the bed anymore, then?

Peter: Yes, I do. But now I'm proud of it¹⁰

What we enjoy here is what the exchange manages to convey in itself, the content and the form of the joke in its own right. We do not need to evaluate and judge ourselves, nor to experience superiority towards any of the characters involved or towards ourselves at a previous time in order to be amused. It can be argued that what we find amusing is the fact that Peter has merely advanced from one position of disability to another, albeit one in which he is happier. This is probably true, but still, does it mean that we feel superior to him? Isn't it the case that through Peter we recognise in a condensed way much of the nature and effects of psychoanalytical treatment? In fact, we may even see ourselves as standing in some kind of resemblance to Peter. This may have even more impact in the creation of the humorous effect than any superiority we may experience to the character in the joke.

In their exclusive emphasis upon the feelings of superiority in humour, these approaches give no consideration to the fact that the object of our amusement may be the content of the message, the absurdity, the joke or the wit itself. The nature of the initial stimulus is never considered in this kind of approach.

1.1.2 Release theories

While superiority theories place a strong emphasis on the emotions involved in laughter, release theories address questions of a more physical and biological nature.

¹⁰ This joke is adapted from Mikes (1970)

Most thinking about humour along release lines derives from the simple observation that humans tend to try to free themselves from whatever constrains them. In the eighteenth century, Shaftesbury established an explicit connection between this tendency and the phenomenon of humour in his mention of burlesque, mimicry and buffoonery as ways of venting our emotions (1711, quoted in Morreall 1983). As theories of humour, however, release-based approaches developed mainly in the nineteenth-century. What is common to all versions of release approaches is the view that in laughter, suppressed or excess energy comes to be discharged. It is perhaps not surprising that the preoccupation of nineteenth-century philosophers with incorporating scientific methodology into philosophical thinking should have produced more physiologically oriented accounts of humour and laughter.

The simplest variety of the theory is perhaps that offered by Spencer (1911). Spencer argues that our emotions take the physical form of nervous energy. Upon reaching a certain level, this energy always tends to bring about muscular motion. So, whenever nervous energy builds up within our bodies, it requires muscular movement to be released¹¹. This movement response is not restricted to the emotions involved in laughter. In fear, for instance, incipient movements to escape the situation are activated; in anger, fists get clenched and other muscles get tightened perhaps in preparation for an attack. What is peculiar to laughter is that the movements it provokes do not lead to further action (fleeing, fighting, etc.). According to Spencer,

¹¹ At the time when Spencer wrote on laughter, there was an influential "hydraulic" view about nervous energy on which he clearly drew.

laughter occurs when feelings build up, but are subsequently found to be inappropriate. So, the sole function of the movements in laughter is to release unnecessary nervous energy.

Other philosophers have been influenced by this view of laughter. Dewey (1894), for instance, considers laughter to be the sudden relaxation of strain. Nonetheless, Spencer has rightly been attacked on the grounds that in many laughter situations, particularly in humorous ones, there seems to be no emotional energy involved which should require release, such as for example, the appreciation of non-tendentious cartoons. And in cases where emotions are involved, like in hostile practical joking, although we do build up an aggressive feeling in conceiving and preparing the joke, this is not later rendered inappropriate. Rather on the contrary, it reaches its climax as the joke is completed. Spencer's extremely mechanistic and physiological approach may have some advantages to account for laughter, but explanations of humour and wit most likely require a more mentalistic approach.

Of course, the most well known version of a release theory of humour is Freud's relief theory. Its most interesting parts are very much a psycho-analytic retelling and elaboration of Spencer's points. Freud was notoriously interested in the notion of psychic energy, and he found the way Spencer had put it to use in accounting for the mechanics of laughter particularly appealing. Nonetheless, the incorporation of Spencer's ideas into his psychoanalytic framework was not always natural and successful.

The central idea in Freud's account is that in all laughter situations, pleasure

is derived from the saving of a certain amount of psychic energy. Thus, he distinguishes between three laughter situations: joking or wit, the comic and humour¹². The distinction is based on the type of psychic energy that in each case is summoned for a particular task and is subsequently found not to be needed.

A basic assumption in the theory is that we ordinarily repress hostile and sexual feelings and thoughts, and that this repression requires the investment of some psychic energy (see footnote 1). In *joking*, as we express what is usually inhibited, the energy that would otherwise be used in repression is released through laughter. So, like dreaming, joking is an outlet for forbidden feelings and thoughts.

The energy saved in the *comic* is not the energy of repression, but energy of thought. What we save in these cases, according to Freud, is energy that we have summoned to perform some cognitive processing later revealed to be unnecessary. Laughter is our way of discharging this energy surplus.

We have what Freud referred to as *humour* when the energy saved is energy of emotion. This occurs when we prepare ourselves for feeling fear, pity, sadness, anger or some other negative emotion, but then we realize we need not be concerned. Thus, the energy gathered for the emotion is suddenly dispensable and we discharge it in laughter.

One of the main differences between Freud's account and the less elaborate version of Spencer's release theory concerns the type of energy they assume gets

¹²Note that Freud's use of the term "humour" is narrower than the contemporary use of the word, which encompasses joking and the comic, as well as a variety of genres.

released. For Spencer, the energy we liberate is energy of some built-up feeling. For Freud this is only so in humour. In joking, what we release is the energy that has been summoned to suppress a feeling or a thought, and in the comic what is at stake is energy involved in thinking. Freud did produce a more unified account of humour by assuming the existence of psychic energy in this way, together with the mechanics of its accumulation and discharge, although he stayed far from a general theory of humour. He remained baffled by non-sense humour and humour based on absurdity, which he acknowledged his theory could not encompass.

Nonetheless, Freud's approach has not been altogether abandoned. Since 1980, Marvin Minsky has tried to rescue it (1980, 1996). Humour, Minsky argues, is indeed about prohibited things. If one considers faulty reasoning amongst them and assumes that the mind might develop *cognitive censors* designed to suppress it, the theory does much better than even Freud believed.

Censors in the mind are supposed to be strong unconscious obstacles that we have developed in order to inhibit conscious access to 'forbidden thoughts'. However, censors are unable to detect only superficial meanings and cannot penetrate the surface of disguised forbidden wishes. What a joke does is to elude such censors. In Freud's view, the thrust of jokes is the fact that they overcome the mental barriers that make it difficult for us to entertain taboo thoughts.

Aggression, sexuality, death and the schatologic are often the subject matter of taboos in human societies. Freud's rationale for suggesting the existence of affective censors seems to derive from the observation that the best way for

individuals to learn not to do certain things is to learn not to even think of them. However, as noticed above, Freud's idea of censors does not work as well for humorous nonsense as it may do for humorous aggression and sexuality. Consider for instance (1),

- (1) All animals were invited to a wild party offered by the lion, where everything but wearing condoms was allowed. In the middle of the party, while most animals seemed to be having a wonderful licentious time, the monkey came to the lion with a furious complaint: 'Your Highness, I've just seen the donkey with a condom on' In a rage, the lion went to the donkey to demand an explanation for his breaking the rules. 'Oh, no, Your Highness', the donkey replied, 'I would never even consider disobeying your orders. I was just being social with the snake'

According to the Freudian view, we have censors that inhibit conscious access to taboo thoughts, such as perhaps, unconventional intercourse. What the joke does is to dupe those censors. The energy normally used in deploying the censors becomes superfluous and is discharged with laughter, resulting in pleasure and humour. But Freud was puzzled by the workings of (2) below.

- (2) A gentleman entered a pastry-cook's shop and ordered a cake, but he soon brought it back and asked for a glass of liqueur instead. He drank it and began to leave without having paid. The proprietor detained him: 'You have not paid for the liqueur'. 'But I gave you the cake in exchange for it'. 'You didn't pay for that either' 'But I hadn't eaten it' (From Freud 1905, quoted in Minsky 1980)

An attempt to provide a unified account of the processes underlying the workings of the two (admittedly not good) jokes above leads one to wonder what the thoughts that one entertains in interpreting them could have in common. Minsky has taken the following possible line of exploration. Just as societies agree that certain subjects are

taboo and that therefore, thoughts and talk about them must be kept at bay, the mind discovers through experience that it needs to avoid entertaining thoughts that hamper its workings. What could such thoughts be? Arguably, thoughts and mental states that lead to paradoxes and inconsistencies. Minsky claims that

"Intellect and Affect seem less different once we theorize that the 'cognitive unconscious' considers faulty reasoning to be as 'naughty' as the usual 'Freudian wishes' (1984: 176)

The crux of Minsky's argument is this. Because 'common sense logic' is too unreliable for practical use, it leads to unproductive mental states. These are reached when we entertain thoughts^{such} as the classical paradoxes 'Who shaves the barber who shaves everyone who does shave himself?', 'This statement is false', etc. Therefore, we must learn to avoid the most frequent malfunctions of spontaneous reasoning. Humour, seen in this way, is a cognitive mechanism that helps us learn about common sense reasoning flaws.

Minsky believes that much of what he calls 'common sense logic' is based on learning to make shifts between frames that have terminals in common (Minsky 1984: 183)¹³. For example, if a situation fits a frame like *A implies B, and B implies C*, a simple frame-shift re-represents it as *A implies C*. This previously tried reasoning step may have been found to be true on repeated occasions, but presumably, we need to build censors that stop us from applying this shift improperly. Once such a censor exists, it may be fooled, as with a joke. Here is Minsky's explanation for Freud's cake

¹³ Minsky (1974, 1975) has suggested that "perceptions are ordinarily interpreted by the mind in terms of previously acquired description-structures called *frames*. A frame is a way to represent a stereotyped situation, like being in a certain kind of room, or going to a certain kind of party" (1984: 182). The notion has since played a fundamental role in the field of artificial intelligence.

story,

"I presume that when we 'understand' this sort of story, we represent it in our minds as a series of pairs of overlapping assignments of things to terminals of such frames. And somewhere along the way, in the cake story, there is an improper assignment change. Is it the payment moving from the cake to the drink? Is it a pivot between 'owns' and 'possesses'? Each listener must make his own theory of what is wrong -and devise his own way to avoid this confusion in the future" (1984: 183)

Notice that cognitive censors, as proposed by Minsky, (a) would apply to the manipulation of representational structures of more complexity than semi-propositional representations (i.e., frames), and (b) once discovered, would apply, for a given individual, across contexts in a fixed fashion.

Minsky had an insight about the additional processing effort involved in recovering humorous interpretations that needs to be addressed in more detail. I will argue in Chapters 6-9 that to a large extent, humorous effects arise from a sudden shift in the relative (in)accessibility of relevant assumptions in the current context of interpretation, and from the additional processing that the recovery of these relatively non-salient assumptions imposes on hearers, which, in addition, leads them to the recognition of an implicitly expressed attitude. The additional effort involved in this process involves only a semi-propositional level of representation and depends on the accessibility of the specific assumption at a given time *t*. Cognitive censors, by contrast, would be in charge of channelling general reasoning process invariably. Sperber *et al* (1995) have shown that the accessibility of certain assumptions and the expectations of relevance vary with contexts, and that these factors affect subjects' performance on reasoning tasks. The notion of cognitive censors, therefore, makes wrong predictions about spontaneous reasoning -such as that involved in joke

understanding- and utterance interpretation in general, and is not needed for an account of humorous effects.

However sceptical one remains about the details involved, the central idea behind Freud's theory can't be denied some plausibility. Indeed, it has inspired a great deal of research in the psychology of humour (see for instance Berlyne 1967, 1971), and important theoretical (Minsky 1980, 1996) and practical (Katz 1994, 1996) work in the automatic generation and interpretation of humour in the field of artificial intelligence has also derived from some of Freud's insights.

1.1.3 *Incongruity theories*

Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees (Pascal)

There are many incongruities that may produce anything but a laugh (A. Bain: 1865)

Release theories, as the above discussion shows, are very much devoted to establishing the physiological and psychological reasons that make laughter take the physical form it does, and also to describing its biological function. Superiority theories, on the other hand, focus on the emotions involved in laughter. When humour is discussed within any of these approaches, it is generally unjustifiably assumed either that there is a correlation between humour and laughter, or that humorous laughter is just a particular variety of laughter to which the general theory will apply. Incongruity theories address an aspect little discussed in either release or superiority theories: the stimulus that provokes laughter and humour. This externalist stance of incongruity based approaches

differs from the more internalist perspective taken in the superiority and the release frameworks, and, as will become apparent below, simplifies the task of distinguishing humour from laughter¹⁴.

Superiority theories have a clear emotional orientation. By contrast, incongruity based approaches take a more cognitive perspective on humour. While the first consider amusement to be mainly an affective phenomenon -feelings of superiority-, the latter view it rather as an intellectual reaction to something that does not fit expected patterns (logical inconsistencies, inappropriate situations, surprising outcomes).

Superiority theories sprang from the simple observation that humans mock what they consider inferior, release theories from noticing that they tend to relieve themselves from whatever constrains them. The basic idea underlying incongruity theories is also a simple one. We have come to expect certain patterns, properties and events in what we experience as a fairly orderly world. When something does not fit those patterns, we laugh. So, the beginning of many jokes and comic anecdotes sets us up to follow a particular track of thought. The outcome unexpectedly makes us realize that the path we have followed is the wrong one, and reveals the existence of other so far overlooked possible routes. Intuitively appealing as this observation may be, there is still a considerable leap from this vague statement to a concrete definition

¹⁴ Describing incongruity theories as externalist in this respect should not be equated with their adoption of a behaviourist stance to the study of humour. Indeed, the study of how incongruities are perceived and manipulated makes of this approach a mentalistic one that has had great impact on the psychology of humour as well.

of the notion of incongruity that could underlie humour.

The potentiality of incongruous stimuli to produce laughter was also alluded to by Aristotle, but he did not develop this idea, as it did not fit within his superiority approach. Nonetheless, in the *Rhetoric* he mentions that a speaker can elicit laughter by setting up a certain expectation and then deviating from it. Here we see a meshing of incongruity and superiority, where feelings of superiority may arise as the butt follows the (wrong) stereotypic path. This merely indicates that incongruity, superiority (and presumably also release) factors may converge in a humorous experience.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the theory was worked out in more detail, and incongruity approaches became the most influential of the three main theoretical traditions in contemporary research on humour.

It is perhaps in the tradition of incongruity that we find more versions and variations. The main points of divergence arise over two issues: the definition of the notion of incongruity, and the question of whether the perception of an incongruity is sufficient to experience humour, or only necessary.

Kant, for instance, defined incongruity as the contrast between developing an expectation and having it vanish. He believed that "laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing" (1952). In his theory

of jokes, he locates the essence of humour in the evaporation of expectations¹⁵.

In *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer develops a notion of incongruity that differs from Kant's in that he sees it not as the disappearance of expectations, but as a mismatch between our perception and cognition. Humour arises when there is a clash between a concept and a percept.

Two basic positions can be traced with respect to the role of incongruity in the humorous experience. One claims that incongruity is a common feature of humour, but not a necessary one, or that it is not the direct cause of humour, even if present in the stimulus (see, for example, Santayana 1896). This view has also arisen in the psychology of humour, where, for instance, Landis and Ross (1933, quoted in Keith-Spiegel 1972) have offered a taxonomy of humour in which *the humour of incongruity* is just one among seven categories meant to encompass all humour. The second position assumes that without incongruity, there is no humour (e.g. Schopenhauer 1907, Kierkegaard 1941).

With their emphasis on the object of amusement, incongruity approaches have allowed for more consistent elaboration. Contemporary philosophical views have developed mainly within this tradition (e.g. Clark 1970, Martin 1983, Morreall 1989, Forabosco 1992). Also, it has allowed psychologists to try different ways of operationalising the notion, which has led to a profusion of experimental research.

¹⁵ Kant emphasizes nonetheless the physical and not the cognitive side of a humorous experience. Amusement for him is a sensory well-being resulting especially from the feeling of health that arises in laughter with the bodily motion of our internal organs.

Some of this is discussed in section 2.

One of the two most often discussed problems of incongruity theories is the vagueness which surrounds the notion of incongruity. Just as any two things may be said to resemble one another in some respect, any two may be found incompatible or discrepant in some way, so that the claim that humour arises from the perception of incongruities may be vacuous (see for instance Lippit 1995). Unless incongruity is more precisely defined, virtually any prediction could follow from an incongruity-based theory. A second major problem is whether it is indeed possible to explain humour in terms of incongruity as a structural feature of the stimulus, or of the interaction between the stimulus and the subject. It has often been argued that incongruity based approaches do not consider aspects of content, context, and affect that are crucial for any account of humour. I will take up these two problems in subsequent chapters, where incongruity accounts of humour are considered in more detail.

1.2 Humour and aesthetics, ethics, rationality and emotion.

There is something cowardly in humour

(George Mikes, *Humour in Memoriam*)

*What she thought as the height of courage was the joke cracked
on the steps of the guillotine*

(Deirdre Wilson, *Slave of the Passions*)

1.2.1 Humour and aesthetics

There has been some debate in the literature as to whether amusement is a kind of aesthetic response. Roger Scruton (1982), for instance, has provided the following four reasons why amusement should be treated as a type of aesthetic interest: a) amusement is a mode of reflective attention to an object, b) it does not have the purpose of discovery (it does not concern itself with the acquisition of new beliefs, or the verification of old ones), c) it is not a motive to action (it does not regard its object as the focus of any project or desire), and d) enjoyment is to be explained by the thought of the object itself, and it is not felt for some ulterior reason.

On the other hand, Martin (1983), an incongruity oriented philosopher of humour, has called for the need to qualify this view, arguing that only some amusement is aesthetic. If we follow the criterion that aesthetic enjoyment only occurs when the grounds for the enjoyment are solely related to the way an object appears to our senses rather than with practical considerations of any sort (e.g religious, moral, aggressive, economic, functional, utilitarian, sexual or self-interested in any way), then, he says, not all amusement is aesthetic. There is a kind of amusement that arises as integral to the expression of desires and interests of a rather practical kind, such as to deride, degrade, shock, cheer up, comfort or impress. This, by definition, cannot be considered aesthetic. Because humour may involve ulterior motives of this practical nature, amusement cannot as a rule, he argues, be considered an aesthetic interest. Martin concedes, nonetheless, that when the grounds for the amusement in humour are not sexual or aggressive, then the enjoyment arises from perceived or conceived

incongruities for their own sake. In such cases, he believes, amusement constitutes aesthetic enjoyment¹⁶.

Notice that the discussion here revolves around a general notion of amusement and is not exclusively concerned with amusement as it pertains to humour. While I will not commit myself here to a definite position with regard to the status of amusement as aesthetic enjoyment -which would require a more extensive analysis- it needs to be pointed out that there is an important difference between the *motivations* that lead someone to produce a witty remark or a joke, and the *disposition* or the *practical orientation* (for lack of better terms) that a subject feels towards the object of amusement. I may produce, to try and cheer up a friend of mine, a remark that focuses, say, on the ridiculous nature of some trait of a person that has been giving him trouble. Here there are ulterior motives, as Martin calls them, to my remark, which is, moreover, aggressive. However, the remark in its own does not *produce* any specific practical orientation towards that individual or his ludicrous trait, nor is it intended to. Martin seems to obscure this distinction, which applies also to other types of aesthetic interest.

Let me now turn to the status of humour and comedy as a form of art. George Mikes (1970) has argued that in any case, they can only be a minor art. The reasons, he believes, are as follows. First, from generally contrasting comedy with tragedy, we

¹⁶ Martin does not fully endorse the idea that amusement can be equated with the enjoyment of incongruity. As a straightforward counterexample, he mentions the fact that we can enjoy the incongruity -in the form of situational irony- in *Oedipus Rex* without being amused.

find that

"tragedy goes the whole hog, delves into the depths of the human soul and faces the consequences, while comedy evades, explodes, deflates, absolves tension in punch-lines and - in fact- runs away from reality. As I have said, there is something cowardly in humour"(1970:81)

Second, he goes on, a joke cannot aspire to be a mirror of the human situation in the way art is.

Mikes is probably right that the complexities of the human condition cannot be reduced to either the unidimensionality or the brevity characteristic of jokes; however, it cannot be denied that humour can often illuminate them.

1.2.2 Humour and ethics

Philosophers who have focused their interest in humour on its social nature have tried to develop an ethics of humour. Some have revived the Platonic-Hobbesian idea of an ever present element of spite in humour. Of course, a set of scattered precepts and remarks does not amount to an ethics of humour. Here I will only give a brief overview of some of these, as this issue is not central to this thesis.

For de Souza (1987), the absence of emotion that some have suggested to be characteristic of humour is questionable, and he argues that telling and enjoying sexist and racist jokes, for instance, is based on having certain shared emotional attitudes. Whenever an attitude presupposed by a joke is morally objectionable, then telling the joke or laughing at it is also, he contends, morally objectionable. A similar idea is pursued by Boskin (1977-78), who has shown how humour depends on shared beliefs and attitudes, and has argued that it can therefore be used to perpetuate stereotypes

and social relations to preserve the illusion of racial superiority and the subjugation of certain groups.

Mikes (1970), on the other hand, claims that there are no such things as adequate subjects for jokes, or sacred topics that cannot be a source of humour, but only contexts where it is objectionable to treat them as such (1970: 26-30).

1.2.3 Humour and rationality

Why do we sometimes say 'Don't be silly' to someone who makes a jokey remark, or in response to someone else's prolonged laughter, even when we ourselves may be amused? Plato believed that humour reflects a kind of irrationality, and Hartley (1810) argued that people who are always looking for the humorous aspects of their experience do not favour their rational abilities. As he puts it:

"...persons who give themselves much to mirth, wit, and humor must thereby greatly disqualify their understandings for the search after truth; in as much as by the perpetual hunting after apparent and partial agreements and disagreements, as in words, and indirect accidental circumstances, while the true natures of the things themselves afford real agreements and disagreements, that are very different, and quite opposite, a man must by degrees pervert all his notions of things themselves, and become unable to see them as they really are, and as they appear to considerate sober-minded inquirers" (1987: 43).

Humour was also connected to irrationality by Santayana (1896, reprinted in Morreall 1987), who reacted strongly against the idea in some versions of the incongruity theory that people sometimes enjoy incongruity itself. This he saw as impossible and being against exercising reason. As rational beings, he claimed, we are designed to resist incongruity, absurdity or nonsense. Thus, we are much more inclined to get our mental stimulation and pleasure with no incongruity, such as in wit, rather than with it, as in humour. In his view, wit also depends upon transformation and substitution

of ideas, but, contrary to humour, it involves no incongruity. In his words: "Unexpected justness makes wit, a sudden incongruity makes pleasant foolishness" (1987: 93).

This association of humour with irrationality has been challenged recently. The alternative view, put forward most notably by Morreall (1987, 1989), has convincingly shown not only that humour and irrationality are not close in kind, but that humans are the only species that enjoys incongruity, precisely because they are the only species capable of rational thought. The capacity to experience incongruity as enjoyable was developed by humans alone among all animals, he claims, because humans were the only species capable of transcending the two other responses to incongruity we find in higher animals: negative emotions and puzzlement. Rationality, in the form of disengagement, objectivity and representationality is what made amusement possible. I will go back to Morreall's argument in more detail in section 3, where the relation between humour and evolution is briefly discussed, and in chapter six, where I consider the role of metarepresentational inferences in humour.

1.2.4 Humour and emotion

Traditionally, from the thought of the ancient Greeks to the contemporary philosophical literature, amusement has been considered an emotion (see for instance, Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Beattie, and more recently, Monro 1951, Sully 1902, and Eastman 1921, 1936). Also, a number of contemporary psychological studies are based on this assumption (e.g. Arnold 1960, Mandler, 1975, Cofer, 1972).

Sharpe (1975) has explicitly argued that amusement is one of the emotions, mainly by pointing out seven parallels between amusement and emotion.

In the first place, he says, both amusement and standard emotions are about something, so they have intentional objects. It is impossible to be amused at nothing just as it is odd to be afraid of, or in love with, nothing at all. Secondly, both amusement and emotion admit of degrees. One can be more or less frightened, more or less angered, more or less amused. A third feature of emotion is that it is possible to suppress its behavioral manifestations. If we have a particular bodily condition, we can not suppress its symptoms, but if we are annoyed, we have the possibility of hiding the fact. So it is, in Sharpe's view, the case with amusement. A fourth parallel is that most emotions are the subject of self-deception. One may try to avoid admitting to oneself that one is jealous or envious. Similarly, one may try to disguise to oneself the fact that one is amused at something one feels to be morally wrong. Fifthly, emotions are intrinsically either pleasant or painful. Amusement is necessarily pleasant. Also, it is always possible to distinguish between the object and the cause of an emotion. While I may be jealous of someone, the person himself is hardly the cause of my jealousy. Rather, the cause is likely to be a series of actions involving him. The object of our amusement, Sharpe goes on, cannot be the same as its cause. Finally, Sharpe argues that amusement is similar to our response to aesthetic objects in being a matter of taste, and development of taste progresses towards the more subtle forms. Although not all emotions are subject to cultivation, Sharpe argues that the emotions that are susceptible to cultivation are those which are appropriate

responses to art. Amusement behaves like them in this respect.

Nonetheless, it is one thing to draw parallels between two things, but quite another to conclude that any sharing of properties will make one a variety of the other, however interesting the parallels may be. Sharpe would have to show that these seven characteristics *define* an emotion as such, so that whatever has these properties will be an emotion, and nothing but an emotion will have them. Or, if he believes that emotions can only be defined more weakly, say in terms of family resemblances, then he needs to show that these properties are central to being an emotion.

A discussion of what constitutes the essence of an emotion is as such not fundamental to a work on the pragmatics of humour. However, I am interested in the relation between amusement and emotion because of what it can reveal with regard to the similarities and differences between poetic and humorous interpretations, an issue I will touch on in Chapter 9. In my discussion of the contrast between poetic and humorous interpretations I will follow Morreall (1983) in not viewing amusement (at least the amusement in our response to humour) as a kind of emotion.

Morreall has shown that the parallels that Sharpe draws between amusement and emotions in fact hide crucial dissimilarities. First, although it is true that both amusement and emotion are about something, the same is true of belief and desire. But we would not want to classify belief and desire as emotions on these grounds. Second, both amusement and emotion are about something, but there is a significant difference between our attitude to this object in each case. In emotion, Morreall suggests, we have a particular attitude towards the object of our emotion. As he puts

it, "to love something or to hate it is to have a positive or a negative reaction to that very thing" (1987: 214).

In amusement, however, we need not have either an attitude towards or a belief about the object of our amusement. Indeed, it is often the case that we are devoid of any sort of attitude towards the object of our amusement.

In the third place, although amusement shares with some emotions their being pleasant, they are so in rather different ways. Consider the source of the pleasure in each case. Love is pleasant in that we regard the object of love as pleasant itself, fear is unpleasant in that we consider the object of fear as unpleasant, and so on. Amusement, is pleasant, by contrast, not in that the thing that amuses us is itself pleasant. What is crucial, he believes, is that we can be amused by objects which we do not find either pleasant or unpleasant in their own right.

Yet a further difference concerns the way in which emotions and amusement orient us to the world. Whereas an emotion involves our practical concern for the object of our emotion, what is characteristic of amusement is that it involves a non-practical attitude toward the situation that amuses us. This indicates that amusement belongs rather to our cognitive system than to our emotional system. In fact, it may be that the practical nature of emotions and the non-practical nature of amusement not only renders them drastically different as types of experience, but also makes them mutually exclusive. Emotions that co-exist with amusement must, in any case, be weak (Morreall 1987: 221). The incompatibility between the two is further confirmed by the fact that humour is often used to block emotions. There is abundant research on the

therapeutic uses of humour that implicitly or explicitly rests on this assumption. This leads us to the second section of this chapter, which deals with the psychology of humour.

2. The psychology of humour

Research in the psychology of humour has ranged from the development of general theories (e.g. Berlyne 1972, Suls 1972, 1983; Schultz 1976, McGhee 1976, 1979; Wyer and Collins 1992), through the study of individual responses to humour (e.g. Herzog and Hager 1995), to its therapeutic applications (e.g. Fry and Salameh 1993, Gelkopf and Sigal 1995).

2.1 Humour and arousal

2.1.1 Theoretical considerations

In the early sixties and seventies Berlyne (1960, 1967, 1972) produced influential work attempting to describe how momentary fluctuations in arousal, that is, excitement or activation, may lead to pleasure. His account of humour (1972) is placed within his more general account of aesthetic appraisal, curiosity, exploratory behaviour, and play. All these psychological phenomena, he argues, are associated with pleasure, and are also bound together by the sources of pleasure on which they draw.

Berlyne proposed that there are three types of arousal fluctuation that lead to general feelings of pleasure: those where high arousal is reduced, those where there

is a moderate rise and drop in arousal (*arousal jag*) and those where there is a moderate increase in arousal (*arousal boost*). Higher arousal levels are presumed to motivate an aversion reaction; hence, the model predicts an inverted-U relation between arousal level and pleasure. Humour, in particular, is seen as deriving from both the arousal jag and the sudden decrease from high levels of arousal (arousal boost-jags), but not from pure arousal boost (1972: 58-59).

Berlyne claims that regardless of the pleasure that can be derived from elements of *content* (what he calls *semantic* and *ecological variables*), part of the pleasure is always derived from *structure* (*collative variables*), by which he means the comparison and interrelation of stimulus elements, thoughts, and items of information. Ecological variables that are sources of arousal include sexual, aggressive, or anxiety-inducing subject matter, as well as drive conditions like hunger, anger, fear of injury and sexual appetite. Examples of collative variables are novelty, surprisingness, rate of change, redundancy, ambiguity, complexity and incongruity.

The arousal-based approach is compatible with all main philosophical strands of humour: an arousal fluctuation corresponds with the cathartic approach of release theories, some of the ecological variables are compatible with the tradition that sees humour as aggression and also as the release of suppressed feelings and thoughts, while the inclusion of incongruity amongst the collative variables places this view in accord with incongruity theories of humour. Also, ecological components combine with collative factors in what Freud called *tendentious jokes*, those with 'purposes', and collative variables stand alone in what Freud termed *harmless jokes*, where the joke

is an end in itself and serves no particular aim¹⁷. Berlyne sees this phenomenon as parallel to what takes place in art, where semantic and ecological factors are crucial to most representational art, and collative variables are more central to nonrepresentational art. However, as Berlyne notes:

"It is noteworthy (...) that while humor depends heavily, and at times exclusively, on the structure of a joke, the relations that constitute the structure are almost always those obtaining between recognizable perceived objects or verbal meanings. A structure bereft of content may suffice for art and mathematics, but rarely for humour" (1972: 48)¹⁸.

By contrast with Berlyne, who does not consider that pure arousal boosts can lead to humour, Rothbart (1973) has suggested that arousal increases of any size can be accompanied by pleasurable effect when the subject judges that the situation is a safe or non-threatening one, and can also lead to humour.

2.1.2 *Empirical findings*

Empirical research on humour increased notably after the appearance of Berlyne's work. Zigler et al (1967) found that for children aged 8 to 13 moderately difficult cartoons are most appreciated, probably because they afford pleasure through the arousal jag mechanism involved in the sequence of initial challenge followed by resolution. Easy jokes offer no prospect of arousal jag, while difficult jokes produce

¹⁷ Freud distinguishes jokes for their 'purposes' (*Tendenz*). Tendentious jokes are usually *hostile* (serving the purpose of aggressiveness) or *obscene* (serving the purpose of exposure). Non-tendentious jokes lack these purposes.

¹⁸ Naturally, structure bereft of content is almost impossible to find in language, where even humour that relies mostly on mere word play has a content.

bafflement, excluding the possibility of prompt elucidation¹⁹.

Ertel (1968, cited in Deckers 1993) attempted to operationalise incongruity, one of Berlyne's collative variables, in several ways. First, he varied the extent to which a sequence of words in German deviated from a proper grammatical sequence. The amount of deviation was taken as a measure of incongruity. He found that ratings of funniness varied as an inverted-U function of the degree of incongruity. A second method consisted in presenting subjects with lists of nouns and adjectives and asking them to select adjective-noun pairs that would be "normal", "witty", "funny" and "absurd". Different subjects were later asked to rate the pairs for the degree of connection -an assumed measure of incongruity. The most witty and funny adjective-noun pairs tended to be more incongruous than those judged normal, but less than those judged absurd. Ertel is solely concerned with collative variables. However, it is conceivable that, apart from being at the height of Berlyne's predicted inverted-U curve in terms of the influence of structure, subjects were also able to derive *some* meaning from the witty and funny combinations, but not from the absurd ones. Hence, collative variables cannot be concluded to be the single source of humour in these experiments. The results could therefore be much more in line with Berlyne's approach than Ertel's own interpretations of them.

There has been a series of experiments that somehow skirts this problem and

¹⁹ These findings are in line with the idea, which will become apparent in the forthcoming relevance-theoretic treatment of humour, that verbal humour calls for additional processing effort demands, which must, however, be kept within a certain range.

does test mainly the structural properties of the stimulus by avoiding the use of verbal stimuli. These studies were initially conducted by Nerhardt in the seventies (e.g 1970) and have become known as the weight-lifting paradigm, which has been further developed by Deckers (1974, 1975, 1983, 1993). Subjects are asked to lift a sequence of weights falling within a narrow range. At one point a much heavier or lighter weight is presented. Subjects laughed with an intensity in direct proportion to the discrepancy between the final weight and the weights they have been exposed to so far. In Nerhardt's experiments the relation between laughter and incongruity was not curvilinear but monotonic, that is, there was not an optimal point of incongruity after which the laughter response decreased. However, as noted above, because laughter cannot be equated to the experience of humour it is not clear how revealing these results are with respect to the experience of humour as solely determined by the perception of incongruity.

Godkewitsch (1974) also attempted to operationalise incongruity while taking into account aspects of meaning. Following Osgood et al (1957), he distinguished three dimensions (activity, evaluative, and potency), which he took as defining of a semantic space for nouns and adjectives. Adjectives and nouns can thus be given a specific location in the so-defined semantic space. Adjective-noun pairs (ANPs) were formed in which an adjective could be distant from the noun to which it was paired in one, two, or three of Osgood's semantic space dimensions. This distance was used as an independent variable in a series of experiments where verbal and nonverbal correlates of experienced humour were found to vary systematically with the semantic

distance thus defined between elements of ANPs. The results were taken as support for the idea that collative variables can be sufficient for a humorous response:

"Following up on Berlyne's (...) position that 'structure bereft of content...' does not suffice for humor, the present experiments have shown that, at least for adjective-noun pairs varying in semantic distance between their members, a structural attribute can indeed suffice to evoke some verbal and nonverbal correlates of the humor experience" (1974: 302).

Yet we know that meaning is not 'structure bereft of content'. Faced with the association of adjectives and nouns which vary in semantic distance à la Osgood, it is most likely that subjects cannot help constructing temporary *ad hoc* concepts to make sense of the pair. It is impossible to decide whether humour correlates derive from the alleged structural attribute in itself or from more complex cognitive operations involving the manipulation of concepts, which by definition have a content, or from a combination of both.

2.2 Humour and cognitive processing

2.2.1 *Theoretical considerations*

More recently, psychological studies on humour have attempted to look at the cognitive processing involved in attaining a humorous experience. In a way, these studies derive also from the tradition inaugurated by Berlyne, but are probably influenced by the strength of the incongruity-based approaches in philosophy as well. Besides, there has been a tendency to subsume Berlyne's collative properties, with the exclusion of redundancy and complexity factors, under the heading of 'incongruity'. A subsequent debate has arisen as to whether incongruity alone is necessary for

humour, or whether humour requires a stage where some resolution of the perceived incongruity takes place.

Rothbart (1976, 1977), Rothbart and Pien (1977), and Nerhardt (1970, 1975, 1976, 1977) have claimed that resolution is not necessary, as "incongruity perceived in a safe (...) context is sufficient for humour to be experienced" (Rothbart 1977: 91).

Suls (1972) and Schultz (1976), on the other hand, have argued for an incongruity-resolution model. Suls, in particular, has suggested a two-stage model of humorous processing:

"In the first stage, the perceiver finds his expectations about the text disconfirmed by the ending of the joke or, in the case of a cartoon, his expectations about the picture disconfirmed by the caption...In the second stage, the perceiver engages in a form of problem solving to find a cognitive rule which makes the punchline follow from the main part of the joke and reconciles the incongruous parts" (1972: 82).

When Suls speaks of a cognitive rule he means either a fact of experience or a logical proposition.

Schultz (1976) also suggested an incongruity-resolution model, where incongruity is defined as 'a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in jokes' and resolution is 'a second, more subtle aspect of jokes which renders incongruity meaningful or appropriate by resolving or explaining it' (1976: 13).

From the point of view of a psychological theory of humour, the two positions are hard to assess. The notions of *incongruity* and *resolution* are usually defined loosely, to the extent that it is possible to see virtually any prediction as falling out from either of the two views. When Rothbart talks of an incongruity perceived in a

safe context, one can imagine that the perception of safety perhaps can only arise if the incongruity has somehow been at least partially understood, and therefore, resolved. But what seems to motivate the incongruity-resolution approach, at least partly, is the need to capture instances of humour that go beyond the peekaboo, the banana peel slip, and children's amusement at calling things by the wrong names. More sophisticated humour clearly demands more complex cognitive manipulation. On the other hand, the postulation of a resolution phase makes of the humour experience a kind of problem-solving activity, so that a psychological theory of humour based on the notion of incongruity-resolution needs to be explicit about what distinguishes a humorous experience from other kinds of creative problem-solving, such as the generation of new knowledge.

More recently, Wyer and Collins have proposed 'a theory of humour elicitation' (1992). Drawing on Apter's theory of psychological reversals (1982)²⁰, and on research on information processing (Graesser 1981, Schank and Abelson 1977, Sperber and Wilson 1986), as well as on theories of social cognition (Higgins 1981, Wyer and Srull 1986), Wyer and Collins suggest eight postulates to account for the process of humour elicitation in informal social interaction. Their first five postulates concern the understanding of information conveyed in a social context in general and

²⁰ Apter has suggested that humour involves a process of revising perceptions of people and objects in light of new information. This alone, however, is not sufficient to elicit humour, he argues. Therefore, he claims that three other factors come into play: (a) the reinterpretation of the situation that results from exposure to the new information must not replace the interpretation that had originally appeared to be correct, (b) the perception of reality that is established by the new reality must in some sense be diminished in importance or value relative to the apparent reality that was first assumed, and (c) the goal of the cognitive activity in which the subject is engaged when humour is elicited should not interfere too much with (a-b) above.

are not specifically proposed to deal with a humorous response. The last three are proposed as applying specifically to the conditions in which humour is elicited as a result of the comprehension process. Because this theory seems to be the most elaborate attempt to explain the processes of comprehension and elaboration that underlie the perception that something is funny in recent research in the psychology of humour I will describe it in some detail.

Wyer and Collins' eight postulates refer to what they call aspects of memory, encoding, formation of expectations, incongruity resolution, pragmatic meaning, humour elicitation, comprehension difficulty, and cognitive elaboration. They are reproduced below.

Postulate 1 (memory): The concepts and schemata that compose a particular domain of world knowledge (including representations of persons, events and episodes) are stored in memory at a particular location. This location is assigned by a label that denotes the domain of knowledge involved (1992: 670).

Postulate 2 (encoding): A subset of the features that compose an initial stimulus event is interpreted in terms of concepts and schemata that permit the event to be understood and its implications to be constructed. When two or more alternative sets of concepts are applicable, the set that comes to mind most quickly and easily is the one that is applied.

1. If subjects have a specific goal in mind at the time they consider the stimulus event, the concepts and schemata they use to interpret its features are likely to be drawn from a domain of knowledge that is relevant to this goal (Higgins and Rholes

1978)

2. If subjects' goals are simply to comprehend the stimulus event, the concepts and schemata they use to interpret it are likely to be drawn from a domain of knowledge that they have used most frequently or recently in the past (Higgins et al 1985, Srull and Wyer 1979) (1992: 671)

Postulate 3 (formation of expectations): Once elements of a stimulus event have been interpreted in terms of concepts and schemata that are drawn from a given domain of knowledge, other concepts and schemata from this same domain are used to (a) form general expectations concerning the range of concepts and knowledge that are applicable to an understanding of future events involving these elements and (b) interpret these events once they occur (1992: 671).

Postulate 4 (incongruity resolution): A stimulus event is considered to be incongruent when it cannot be interpreted in terms of concepts drawn from the same domain of knowledge that was applied to previous events involving the same referent. When these incongruities occur, subjects attempt to identify concepts and schemata in a different knowledge domain that are applicable to both the given event and others. If these concepts can be found, the events are reinterpreted in terms of them (1992: 672).

Postulate 5 (pragmatic meaning): If the implications of receivers' initial interpretations of a communication appear to violate normative principles that govern the exchange of information in the situation in which the communication occurs, recipients will attempt to reinterpret the communication in a way that is more consistent with these principles (1992: 673).

Postulate 6 (humour elicitation): Humour is elicited only if the inferred features of one or more referents of a reinterpreted stimulus event are diminished in value or importance relative to the features that were inferred on the basis of an alternative interpretation of the event (1992: 673).

Postulate 7 (comprehension difficulty): The amount of humour that is potentially elicited as a result of reinterpreting a stimulus event is a nonmonotonic (inverted-U) function of the time and effort that is required to identify and apply the concepts necessary to make this interpretation (1992: 673).

Postulate 8 (cognitive elaboration): The amount of humour that is elicited as a result of reinterpreting a stimulus event is a monotonic function of the amount of cognitive elaboration of the event and its implications that occurs subsequent to its reinterpretation. This elaboration is directed towards the attainment of a particular processing objective that exists at the time.

1. If subjects' processing objective is simply to comprehend and enjoy experiencing the event, cognitive elaboration of the event will typically concern its humour-eliciting aspects, and therefore will increase the humour elicited.

2. If subjects' processing objective is more restricted, the event is elaborated in terms of its implications for this more specific objective. In this case, cognitive elaboration could either increase, decrease, or have no effect on the amount of humour elicited, depending on whether the humour-eliciting components of the reinterpretation are relevant to the attainment of this objective (1992: 676).

Wyer and Collins' proposal is appealing in that it aims at accounting not only

for jokes, but for all instances of verbal humour arising spontaneously in social interaction. It is therefore presented as able to capture a variety of cases, from canned jokes to witticisms, quips and amusing remarks in conversation. As illustrations of how their model works, Wyer and Collins offer the following.

- (3) Knock, knock.
"Who's there?"
"Butcher"
"Butcher who?"
"Butcher arms around me honey, hold me tight"

They say,

"An understanding of this joke requires a shift in the interpretation of *butcher*. Specifically, the semantic meaning of the word is diminished in importance by virtue of its interpretation on the basis of phonetic characteristics alone (sic). To this extent, it meets the conditions for humor implied by Postulate 6 (...) It is perhaps worth noting that this type of humor, on the average, not only is extremely easy to understand but also elicits little cognitive elaboration. Consequently, as Postulates 7 and 8 imply and our example testifies, the amount of humor elicited by this type of joke is usually small" (1992: 681).

I will not undertake a ~~very~~ detailed discussion of this approach here. I will refer to this model in subsequent chapters, where an alternative account of humour based on general considerations of verbal communication and discourse understanding is proposed, but I want to mention a few points here.

First, although the notion of script (cf. schema and frame) is useful in accounting for why we standardly make certain inferences and also for *how* information is quickly retrieved from a knowledge base, it offers little insight into *what kind* of information individuals will represent to themselves in interpreting language and performing pragmatic inferences. Also, script-represented knowledge allows no specification of the relative salience of specific elements of such

information within a given script, and their pertinence at a given time. I will argue that a model that makes no use of schematic representation but instead assumes that knowledge is stored in (semi)-propositional forms is to be preferred, given that what is often at stake in humour is the specific propositional content that represents our knowledge of the world. Conceptual associative links and relative accessibility at a given time should be enough to account for how this (semi)-propositional knowledge is accessed and retrieved from memory. As I will try to show, the changing manifestness (in the sense of Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995), of specific assumptions, as well as the implicit expression of dissociative attitudes, are crucial in creating a humorous effect. There is no way of capturing this fact in a model that assumes that knowledge is stored mainly in scripts.

With regard to postulate 4, I will try to show that the processing of incongruities that yields a humorous experience requires our ability to manipulate metarepresentations, and in the more sophisticated cases, to attribute to others beliefs and intentions that differ from our own. In this respect, humour is very much like fiction and lying in that it involves representing states of affairs as other than they are, as well as simultaneously manipulating faithful representations of such states. These cognitive demands rely on the fundamental human capacity known as the possession of a theory of mind in the sense of Leslie (1987, 1988), which very young children and autistic people lack. An adequate theory of humour cannot by-pass this crucial aspect of the ability to interpret and produce humorous discourse and verbal wit.

Postulate 5 can be eliminated if an account of utterance interpretation based

on relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995) is adopted. Postulate 6 is also problematic in that some remarks in conversation that people find amusing do not call for reinterpretation, and a number of cases of humour do not require diminishment at all. That reinterpretation does not necessarily take place can be illustrated with the following remark made by a member of the Liberal Democrats interviewed at their 1996 party conference:

- (4) "Sharing seats in the local council with members of the Labour Party and being attacked by them from the far right is a new experience"

To judge by the laughter of the audience, the remark was amusing. But it is amusing precisely for its literal meaning, its implications, and the set of assumptions that it brings to mind, the recovery of which requires no re-processing or reinterpretation.

Caricatures show that humour does not necessarily involve diminishment, as claimed in Postulate 6, but for further illustration that diminishment is not necessary for humour, take the following quip:

- (5) John: Why is every single woman
Peter: not single? ²¹

That humour does not require a reinterpretation that "paint(s) a more mundane (or in some cases, less desirable) picture of a person or event than the original interpretation implied" (1992: 673) is also shown, for instance, in literature, by Jonathan Swift's much discussed 'A Modest Proposal', where it is suggested that the children of poor

²¹ The quip was mentioned by Douglas Hofstadter in his address to the Symposium on Automatic Generation and Interpretation of Verbal Humour (Sept 1996, University of Twente, Holland) to contrast the quality of machine generated humour and naturally produced examples like this one.

people in Ireland be used as food to alleviate hardship in the country.

2.2.2 *Empirical findings*

To my knowledge, there are few studies that set out to test empirically specific hypotheses about the cognitive processing of humour. In chapter eight I discuss in detail the work of Hillson and Martin (1994), who have explored the role of incongruity and resolution in the interpretation of humorous metaphors.

In sum, with the exception of the models discussed above, there seems to be little elaboration in the way of theories and explanations in the psychology of humour, but a wealth of empirical data has emerged from research on this area. Considerable attention has been given to areas such as the motivational bases of humour (e.g. La Fave et al 1976, Zillman and Cantor 1976), the development of humour appreciation in children (McGhee 1979, Rothbart 1977), and the individual differences and correlations between sense of humour and personality (Mindess et al 1985, Ruch and Deckers 1993), but not much has been done to account for the processes of comprehension and elaboration that underlie the perception that something is funny.

The psychology of humour also faces empirical challenges. Even if there is considerable agreement now that a combination of incongruity, release and superiority-mastery factors all play a role in experiencing humour, incongruity has received

special attention for empirical purposes²². However, the operationalisation and measurement of incongruity remains a major problem for the psychology of humour. Yet a further obstacle is finding correlates of humour that can be taken as a direct index of it. It may not be even possible to solve this, as there may simply not be an isomorphism between behavioural observations and the humorous experience. Psychologists rely therefore on a combination of subjects' ratings of humour and observations of their behaviour when exposed to humorous stimuli.

As described above, a variety of stimuli have been used to create incongruities for the study of humour. Notions such as semantic distance continue to be used in empirical studies of humour appreciation. Recently, Hillson and Martin (1994) have applied the domains-interaction approach, originally developed by Tourangeau and Sternberg (1981, 1982) in the study of metaphor, to model the incongruity and resolution components of humour comprehension and appreciation. I will discuss their work in chapter 9, where I explore the contrast between poetic and humorous metaphors.

3. The evolution of humour

Studies on the evolution of humour back aspects of both superiority and incongruity

²² Release and mastery can be seen as by-products of the adequate manipulation of incongruities, or, as inherent to the specific reaction to the perception of incongruity that Morreall (1989) defines as amusement (see below), which is probably the motivation behind the strong theoretical and empirical concentration on incongruity (as opposed to superiority or release).

theories. Support for the superiority oriented approach has come from the analysis of the physical behaviour of laughing. Many theorists have advanced arguments in support of the idea that laughter evolved from aggressive gestures and still maintains that character. For instance, features like the baring of the teeth typical of laughter are taken to result from its origin as a threat to an enemy (Ludovici 1933), and the sound of laughter has been connected to the possibility that all laughter could derive from a primitive roar of triumph after combat (Rapp 1951).

Ludovici (1933) has put forward an evolutionary version of Hobbes's "sudden glory" where he explores the idea that laughter most likely developed from the expression of a feeling of "superior adaptation" either to a specific situation, or to the environment in general by means of asserting one's supremacy. Originally, he says, laughter was a way of communicating physical prowess to the enemy. As humans developed, there emerged more ways in which one person could be superior to another than just physical strength or agility. Superior adaptation in laughter, the argument goes, came to focus on cleverness, intelligence, possessions, and so on and gradually became more sophisticated.

Rapp (1951), drawing on Haysworth (1928), has suggested that a victorious combatant would laugh -and possibly be joined by his standing-by kin- as a vocal indication to other members of the group that they could relax with safety.

The discussion of the evolutionary aspects of humour from an incongruity based perspective has a more cognitive slant. In section 1 I mentioned the work of Morreall with regard to the relation between humour and rationality. Here I want to

expand a little more on the evolutionary details of his account.

Morreall assumes that the basic phenomenon about humour that needs to be explained is amusement, and that amusement can be explained in terms of the notion of incongruity. In fact, it must in his framework, given that he defines amusement as "the enjoyment of incongruity". By examining the role of incongruity in the experience of animals and humans, he characterises the possible reactions to the perception of the incongruous. He contrasts amusement as a response to incongruity with two other possible responses, which are also shown by all higher animals: negative emotions and puzzlement. He then develops an account of how our species alone was able to transcend these two more basic responses and developed the ability to simply enjoy incongruity.

For animals capable of learning from their experience, encountering novelty and incongruity is crucial. Organisms with a learning capacity are able to compare current stimuli with past stimuli so that patterns are recognized, and associations are accompanied by expectations. This in turn makes it possible for them to become familiar with their surroundings and thus get to know, for instance, which situations are safe and which are unsafe. Learning occurs when some experience is not familiar, that is, when it is either new or discrepant from previously acquired patterns.

What is important about incongruity is not simply our potential to recognize it, but also our ability to react to it. In higher animals there is a built-in readiness for new and unusual experiences which shows itself in curiosity and exploratory behaviour. An animal that had no curiosity could not become familiar with its

surroundings and would thus be at a disadvantage for survival. However, boundless curiosity would place any organism at constant risk, hence limiting its chances of survival. So, the reaction that balances curiosity when encountering incongruity is fear.

According to Morreall (1989), fear of and rage at incongruity in lower animals are the evolutionary origins of a number of more complex negative reactions that we may experience when we face incongruity, such as anger, jealousy, regret and shame. What is common to all of them is their intentionality, and the fact that the experiencing organism is moved towards eliminating the incongruity, thus experiencing a practical concern about it.

Curiosity, on the other hand, probably originated in the orienting reflex found in lower animals, and is the precursor of all varieties of puzzlement, another possible reaction that the perception of incongruity can trigger in humans and other higher animals. In these cases, what we perceive as discrepant affects not so much our emotional system, but our cognition, and we feel the need to explain what is incongruous.

The surprise factor we find as a common feature of humour is probably a further indicator of its evolutionary origins, as it is common as well to puzzlement and negative reactions. When faced with a strange situation, an animal stops in surprise.

As Morreall puts it,

"surprise serves as a way of clearing the cognitive channels for new input -the eyes and ears are opened wide and directed to the strange stimulus' (1989:8)

Extreme strangeness is likely to produce fear in the animal; moderate strangeness,

curiosity.

Both negative emotion and puzzlement involve an uneasiness with things as they stand and our motivation to change them. In negative emotions what we want to be different is the incongruous situation itself, while in puzzlement we want to alter our understanding of it. This practical motivation arises in all cases from a perceived sense of loss of control.

Morreall's point is that there is a third possible reaction towards the perception of incongruity which lacks the three parallel features of puzzlement and negative emotions mentioned above: disagreeability, loss of control and practical orientation to modify either the incongruous situation or our understanding of it. This third possible reaction is amusement.

In amusement the incongruous situation is not disagreeable and does not disturb us, everything is acceptable and enjoyable as it is, the surprise we experience at the incongruous perception does not threaten our feeling of control, and we are not motivated to change anything about it. Not only is amusement different from negative emotions and puzzlement, but they tend to block one another. Given that both fear and curiosity arguably have survival value, the question is how could amusement possibly have evolved as a reaction to what we perceive as incongruous in a species interested in surviving.

Morreall's answer is as follows. Finding strange situations funny rather than frightening or puzzling also had survival value. The survival value of amusement was closely tied to the general survival value of rationality in our species. He distinguishes

three characteristic features of rational thought: *disengagement*, which Morreall refers to as the ‘freedom from practical concern found in some human thinking’ (1989: 11), and which allows us to think about the non-practical aspects of what we experience, *representationality*, which he describes as our ability to manipulate mentally not only current perceptions, but also memories, creations of imagination and other mental representations, and *objectivity*, the ability to think about the world from perspectives other than our own. His argument is that amusement involves these interrelated aspects of rational thought and that therefore, in cultivating amusement early human beings were also cultivating rationality. I will draw on Morreall’s observations in the following chapters, and will try to link them to my claim that having a sense of humour is heavily dependent on having a theory of mind. This claim is in agreement with previous findings and observations about the failure of autistic subjects to understand non-literal language (Happé 1993, Smith and Tsimpli 1995) and to engage in humorous exchanges (Smith and Tsimpli 1995).

Chapter Two

Linguistics and Humour: Code-Oriented Approaches

Why should we not assume that participants can, when they deem it appropriate, accept and even strive for inconsistency, incongruity and interpretative duality?

(Michael Mulkay: 1988)

We ordinarily expect that discourse will be univocal

(Michael Hancher: 1980)

Although not all accounts of verbal humour make their assumptions explicit, they all entail or presuppose some view of language and communication. In this chapter I discuss some of the existing literature on the linguistics of humour, giving particular attention to a frequent claim that humorous discourse and humorous interpretations are deviant in one way or another. Here and in subsequent chapters I will provide arguments against this position. I will argue that a humorous interpretation is a special case of the application of the general interpretation strategies used in spontaneous comprehension, and that the fact that humorous interpretations are possible derives from a combination of the operation of these principles and the possession of a theory

of mind (Leslie 1987). As a consequence, I will suggest that, although it is possible to provide illuminating descriptions of the ways in which accidents within the linguistic code can be played upon to generate a humorous effect, the appropriate framework to study verbal humour is pragmatics, and not linguistics. My approach is also against current claims which maintain that the basic principles of what has been called 'the humorous mode' are different and even opposite to those at work within 'serious discourse' (e.g. Raskin 1985, Mulkey 1988), and that humorous discourse is a deviation from ordinary discourse (e.g. Dolitsky 1992; Giora 1991, 1995). I will try to show that psychologically-based pragmatic principles that operate for communication in general can also explain how humorous discourse is understood.

1. The semiotic and the structuralist traditions

Linguists who have looked at humour have often called for a distinction between humour based on features external to language, such as cultural assumptions, references to sex, politics, visual stimuli, slapstick and so on, and humour that relies mainly on the manipulation of linguistic forms. Naturally, as a general trend, linguists have focused on the latter. Their studies tend to concentrate on the structural aspects of language, viewed as a code, that may be used to produce a humorous effect. Typically, they describe how phonological, morphological, and syntactic categories are manipulated to produce ambiguities that get exploited in different contextual formats,

such as, for instance, question and answer to generate riddles (e.g. (5) below). From this, an interest has arisen in the study of different "genres of linguistic humour" (see Pepicello and Weisberg 1983). Because riddles, jokes, and puns hinge on language-based manipulations of this sort, they have been the most natural candidates for study in approaches oriented this way.

A representative example of studies along these lines is Hockett (1977), where a distinction is drawn between *prosaic* and *poetic* jokes. Prosaic jokes do not involve linguistic manipulation *per se*, but rather play upon cultural situations, institutions and interactions, and may be translatable. Poetic jokes, by contrast, play upon what Hockett called "accidents in the design of English", and hence, are normally untranslatable. Hockett classified these under two headings: puns and non-puns. So called 'perfect puns' involve homophony, as in (1), while 'imperfect puns' play on near homophony, as in (2)

- (1) Cohen and Son, Tailor and Attorney. Let Us Press Your Suit
- (2) What's the difference between a fisherman and a dunce? One baits hooks, the other hates books (Hockett 1977)

In the category of non-puns, Hockett includes certain cases that rely on stress and contiguity, such as (3) and (4).

- (3) What do you do with a stiff neck?/ What do you do with a stiff? Neck?"
- (4) What's that rolling down the road ahead?"/What is that rolling down the road?/A head? (Hockett 1977)

Hockett thus provided a taxonomy of linguistic jokes, and thereby contributed a descriptive rather than an explanatory account of verbal humour.

Strictly linguistic analyses are also interested in child riddles such as the following:

(5) Q: Why did the cookie cry?

A: Because its mother had been a wafer so long

Characteristically, they ignore most issues that arise from the child's ability *to interpret* the sequence and to appreciate the humour in it, presumably regarding those problems as questions for psychology. Instead, analyses along these lines would focus on the phonological similarity of the sequences /əway+fər/ and /ə+weyfər/, thus concentrating mainly on aspects of the code involved in communication.

From such a purely linguistic stance, the concentration on riddles and puns is not surprising. Indeed, it is the manipulation of specific aspects of the grammar of a language that the effect hinges on. However, even puns and riddles cannot be adequately explained merely by reference to the linguistic code involved in their production, and a description of how it is exploited. The sequence in (5) above works humorously not only because of its linguistic structure, but because when it is interpreted some specific pragmatic effect arises. If this were not the case, we would expect children to be equally amused by having explicitly pointed out to them these coincidences in the code we use to communicate. So, we would expect no difference in the reaction of a child to (5) and to a comment such as 'Have you noticed that the words 'a wafer' and 'away for' sound the same if you say them one after the other?'

But no one would say this to a child in the hope of getting him much amused¹. In other words, verbal humour, even of the type Hockett calls "poetic", is a consequence of communication, not of language. The Cohen and Son example above, for instance, would not work as an intended pun if the information that Cohen and Son are a tailor and an attorney were not made available by their advert. As a further example, consider (6):

(6) Can you spot who is wearing the towel? (Merino-Ferradá, 1993)

The intended pun is not easily detected in the absence of the graphic context in which it occurs: a picture of three girls sideways, two of them with nothing on and the third wearing a pink bath towel around her body. The logo of the trademark LIL-LETS is also present. Without this, the ambiguity of the word 'towel' would most likely go unnoticed. Something similar occurs with (7).

(7) Lose Weight. Get Slender. (Merino-Ferradá, 1993)

Clearly, (7) works as a pun only if one knows that it occurs in a CARNATION SLENDER advert, and knows that Slender is a proper name of a low fat dairy product.

So, although puns are the primary form of humour discussed by linguists, their effects need to be explained not by linguistic theory, but by a theory of

¹Children often tell one another to repeat a word or a nonsensical sequence repeatedly, so that they end up producing a sequence with a new meaning, which results from an alternative segmentation of the sounds produced. Often, taboo words are involved (e.g., in Spanish 'bronca' (row) and 'cabrón' (bastard)). The effect is ruined if the child is told by his peers what the point is. This shows that the two meanings have to be recovered by the child and not simply shown to him. In these cases, of course, the fact that he's been *led to* produce a taboo word plays a role in creating the effect.

communication. Pragmatic inference plays a role at quite early stages of processing, when the hearer decides what proposition a punning utterance expresses. The fact that punning is not only about clever manipulation of the accidents in the linguistic code has been acknowledged in recent treatments of puns that attempt to explain the process of interpretation involved in understanding them (Tanaka 1992, Merino-Ferradá 1993). These approaches will be considered in more detail in chapter five.

That verbal communication involves both the use of a code and the performing of inferences governed by principles that lie outside the language code is generally accepted, though there is less agreement as to the relative importance of each of these aspects in communication.

In general, what binds code-oriented approaches and distinguishes them from more inferentially-oriented views is their shared assumption that verbal communication itself operates much like grammar, in a code-like fashion. Overall, semiotic theories have either not made a principled distinction between the workings of language and the workings of verbal communication, or have assumed that the code-model can be straightforwardly extended from language to verbal communication.

I will use the term code-model approach to communication to refer broadly to theories that consider communication to be primarily a process whereby the communicator directly encodes thoughts into linguistic forms, which are subsequently decoded back into thoughts by the addressee. Under this general notion I group together all those frameworks where inference is either not acknowledged as having a role in communication, or is treated only as a subsidiary component and not

explained in detail².

The distinction is not always clear cut, or is not considered to be of significance, as the following quotation from Dolitsky (1992) reveals.

"If natural language is to be considered purely as an explicit code that transmits a message from one individual to another, then all communication would occur through explicit use of that code; what is not coded explicitly would not be transmitted" (1992: 34)

This makes one think that Dolitsky is arguing for some non code-like process that must be at work in communication. However, she goes on to claim that

"However, because it is clear that speakers cannot say everything at the same time (and luckily for listeners, they do not even try!), alongside the explicitly coded elements of the speech chain are *implicitly coded* elements which are conveyed through the utterances and the speaking situation taken together as a whole" (1992: 34, my emphasis)³

The premise that the code-nature of language can be extended to verbal

² It has been suggested that the code versus inference opposition in classifying approaches to communication addresses a straw man, at least since Eco's work in the seventies (Attardo 1996, personal communication). Furlong (1995) notes that some notion of inference has been acknowledged by semiotics, for instance, in Eco's notion of "inferential walks" (Eco 1976) and Culler's notion of "literary competence" (1981), which have explicit recourse to inference in an attempt to compensate for,

the limitations of the code model. She observes, nonetheless, that the role of inference is not fully explained by these authors. As will become apparent below, the same can be said of the approach to verbal humour that Attardo and Raskin themselves take, which is also the dominant view in humour studies. They do not distinguish systematically between a sentence and an utterance. Besides, Raskin's "combinatorial rules" are in charge of performing inferences of varied sorts whose operation is never explained in a principled way, and which are meant to make up for the deficiencies of the effectively code-based process he proposes (see next chapter). Notice, as a further illustration, a recent posting to the electronic list LINGUIST, where Shaumyan states: "Language is a system of social conventions for representing reality. This system of social conventions is called a semiotic system. Semiotic systems are independent of psychological processes that accompany their use" (Shaumyan 1987, 1996). It seems that the distinction is still worth drawing, although perhaps not in a categorical fashion, but rather as a matter of degree, depending on the relative importance given to code and inference.

³ When Grice put forward his theories of non-meaning and conversational implicature -which will be briefly discussed later- he made the most important attempt to date to incorporate into a theory of communication the role of inferences in the recognition of intentions, an essential aspect of utterance interpretation. Grice's main concern was with accounting for how implicit communication is derived. More recently, it has been shown that pragmatic inference plays a role even in deriving aspects of explicit content, including what Grice called "what is said" (see, for instance, Carston 1988). As Dolitsky appeals to the Gricean framework in her approach to verbal humour, it might seem that "implicitly coded" is just another (albeit confused) way of talking about the inferential element in communication. I will return to this issue in chapter four where her analysis is discussed.

communication underlies a diversity of methodologies. In particular, Greimas's systematic application of the structuralist method to the study of the *content plane* of language (1966) is entirely based on this assumption. It also influences more recent approaches to the analysis of discourse, which attempt to make explicit discourse grammars that will account for the *well-formedness* of texts (e.g. Halliday and Hasan 1976, Giora 1985, 1991, 1995, 1996).

Some of these general approaches to communication have been specifically applied to the study of verbal humour. So a variety of studies have developed as applications of the views of Greimas (e.g., Morin 1966, Charaudeau 1972, Niculescu 1972, Hausmann 1974, Guiraud 1976, Manetti 1976, Bardosi 1976), and much work on verbal humour in the French and the German traditions has taken a definite structuralist stance (see Attardo 1994 for detailed discussion and references). To illustrate the general spirit of this framework, I now turn to discuss Greimas's model and some of its applications to the study of verbal humour.

1.1 Semantic isotopies

Greimas's work falls squarely in the structuralist tradition that conceived of language as a multi-level system in which items (a) are defined by the relations they maintain with one another and the oppositions in which they enter, and (b) have the ability to combine to form higher-level items. He was a strong exponent of the movement that attempted to reduce language to a systematic order of homologous forms and

relationships, drawing heavily on Martinet's conception of the *double articulation* of language.

This notion argues for two distinct planes of linguistic analysis. On the one hand, there are *significant units*, each of which has meaning. These form the *first level of articulation*. On the other, there are *distinctive units*, which are part of the form and combine to give rise to the significant units, but have no meaning. They constitute the *second level of articulation*.

The Prague School was relatively successful in showing this doubling in phonology. In transferring it to semantics, Greimas aimed at identifying the smallest units of meaning by proceeding in much the same way as structuralist phonologists did. His approach thus rests on the postulation of distinctive units of signification, which he called *semes*. These are taken to be abstract entities that can only be observed in their realization within linguistic units -lexical, inflectional and derivational morphemes. He claims that the seme

"has no existence on its own and can be imagined and described only in relation to something that it is not, in as much as it is only part of a structure of signification" (1966: 118).

In parallel with the idea that bundles of distinctive features combine to form phonemes, minimal functional (i.e. realised) sound units in the expression plane, Greimas's semes combine to form *lexemes*, minimal functional signifying units in the content plane. These units are usually words, but also inflections and suffixes. Greimas carries on with his analogy to suggest the existence of a second level of articulation which he calls the *immanent semantic universe*, conceived as the meaning plane's

counterpart to phonology in the expression plane. The immanent semantic universe is constituted by the 'categories of signification' resulting from the combinations and contrasts of semes⁴.

This general double-articulation approach to meaning ends up being very similar to standard decompositional views of word meaning - which take the meaning of a word to be the meaning of a complex, analysable concept that defines it. This position has been shown to be unsustainable, notably by Fodor (1975) and Fodor, Fodor and Garrett (1975). Here^{though} I want to concentrate ~~though~~ on how it was transferred by Greimas to the study of discourse meaning.

As we have seen, the two fundamental assumptions that guide Greimas's approach to meaning are, first, his idea that the semantic component of language can be analysed autonomously following the same principles used in structuralist phonology (e.g., by discovering relations of opposition and combination through the application of the principle of commutation⁵), and, second, his view that interpretation options derive fully from structures of meaning present in the text. Let us turn to this second aspect.

⁴ What Greimas calls 'the elementary unit of signification' can be illustrated with the following example. The word *cat* is recognised, he claimed, not because of any inherent quality of the sound /kæt/, but because it exists within a system of differences with other signifying terms in English, such as *cut*, *caught*, *cot*, *sat*. Also, it is recognised as the 'same' as *cat* pronounced with a long vowel. On the other hand, a word like 'girl' is a bundle of semes: /human/, /femininity/, /young/, etc. (Schleifer 1987: 9).

⁵ The principle of commutation is a discovery procedure in structuralist linguistics designed to establish minimal linguistic units for a given level of analysis. It consists in exchanging one presumed linguistic unit for another in order to find oppositions that are responsible for systematic changes in linguistic meaning, and which, as a consequence, can indeed be characterized as minimal linguistic units.

Greimas viewed alternative interpretations as deriving fully from structures of meaning objectively present in the text. So, he argued that

"the substance of the content must not be then considered as an extralinguistic reality -psychic or physical- but as the linguistic manifestation of the content, situated at another level than the form" (1966: 27).

In trying to show that the global meaning of a text emerges from the articulation of 'distinctive units' of signification, Greimas claimed that

"entire texts are located at a more homogeneous semantic level (...) (and) the global signified of a signifying ensemble (...) can be interpreted as a structural reality of linguistic manifestation" (1966: 59)

To account for the identity of a lexeme across different contexts, Greimas postulates that a lexeme has at least one seme that does not change in the various contexts. These semes are called *nuclear semes*, and constitute the *semic nucleus*. Variations in the meaning of a lexeme are to be explained by differences in the context in which it appears. So, he argues,

"context must present the semic variables which alone can explain the changes in the *meaning effects* which can be registered" (1966: 45)

Notice that although the different meanings of a lexeme are seen as resulting from the context in which it occurs, the notion of context is also conceived in a code-like fashion, as a container of the *semic variables* that on their own are able to account for the variation. These "contextual semes" are called *classemes*, and they are, by definition, the minimal units of the semantic level found across at least two lexemes. Any of the actualisations of a lexeme in a context is a *sememe*. It is worth stressing that although the need to consider context to account for differences in meaning and/or interpretation is acknowledged, context here is viewed as a given pre-fixed set of

meaning units below the (semi)-propositional level, and inference plays no role in deriving specific interpretations. Rather, interpretations are seen as emerging automatically from the co-presence of certain semes and classemes.

But the central concept in Greimas's framework is that of *isotopy*. It is isotopies that are supposed to account for the sense of wholeness of meaning beyond the sentence in a text. The first use of the notion of isotopy in Greimas is to refer to the iteration of classemes (1966). However, he also talks of the iteration of semes in terms of isotopy (1970) and the name is used more generally to describe the iteration of linguistic elements (1972). By isotopy, Greimas writes,

"we mean a redundant set of semantic categories which make a uniform reading of the narrative possible" (1971: 84)⁶

Attempts to provide the concept of isotopy with more detail and systematicity have followed. For instance, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1976) has proposed a taxonomy of isotopies that includes repetition of elements belonging to a wide variety of categories: semantic (repetition of semes and/or classemes), phonetic (repetition of phonemes, such as in alliteration, rhyme, paronomasia, etc.), prosodic (repetition of suprasegmental traits), stylistic (repetition of socio-economical connotation and register), discursive (énonciative) (repetition of the same discourse parameters, e.g. deictic anchoring), rhetorical (repetition of the same rhetorical figures), presuppositional (permanence of the same presuppositions along a sequence of sentences), syntactic (number, gender, person, tense, etc.), narrative (repetition of

⁶ Presumably, semes, lexemes, and classemes and sememes all constitute distinct semantic categories for Greimas.

narrative schemata).

However, what this proliferation of isotopic categories shows is that the notion of isotopy is used as an umbrella term covering a diversity of phenomena (cf. Eco 1984). Although apparently there has been at least one proposal to formalize the notion of semantic isotopy (e.g. Group μ 1977, quoted in Attardo 1994) and so to distinguish it clearly from other types of isotopy, the notion remains very much as a conflation of disparate phenomena, such as contextual disambiguation, subcategorization and selection restrictions, anaphoric antecedent attribution, and morphological agreement under a single term.

There have also been efforts to capture more precisely the intuition that there is a common core to all the phenomena grouped under the notion of isotopy. They all seem to converge on the view that isotopies are concerned with the 'aboutness' of a text. Traditionally, aboutness in this sense has been discussed under what some take to be two crucial pragmatic notions: topic and coherence. Thus, Eco talks of an isotopy as a 'constancy in going in a direction that a text exhibits when submitted to rules of interpretive coherence' (1984: 201), and Attardo notices that 'all the phenomena that can be incorporated under the notion of isotopy end up being part of the process that establishes the "topic" of a text' (1994: 80). While Greimas seems to insist on the realization of the isotopies in the surface of the text, notions like coherence and topic have long been recognized to operate at a different level, necessitating inference and knowledge of the world (e.g. van Dijk 1972, 1977; Reinhart 1981). The concept of isotopy in Greimas is meant as a semantic one,

whereas the notion of coherence is a pragmatic one. This is but one indication that crucial distinctions are ignored both in the original view, and in the attempts to refine it. Clearly, the study of discourse meaning cannot proceed along these lines sketched by Greimas and his school. In spite of the evident difficulties and inconsistencies in this framework, it has repeatedly been used to approach the study of verbal humour.

1.1.2 *The isotopy model and verbal humour*

The notion of isotopy was very influential in French treatments of verbal humour during the sixties and seventies. The inspiration for this arising perhaps from Greimas's own use of a joke as his first example of the isotopy of a discourse, reproduced in (6) below. One speaker is commenting upon a 'fashionable soirée, brilliant, very chic, with very select guests,' etc.:

- (6) "A beautiful evening, isn't it? Magnificent meal...and also lovely attire (*toilettes*), right?" "Well, says the other one, "I do not know...I haven't had to go to the lavatory (*toilette*)""(1983:79).

Greimas argues that within this example are two different isotopies -two different 'frames' of global meaning-: a social gathering and the furnishing of a house.

The social gathering isotopy, he claims, emerges from the recurring of the seme /sociality/ in words such as *soirée*, *chic*, *guests*. An element in the narrative, the lexeme *toilette*, causes the narrative's 'unit to explode, by brusquely opposing a second isotopy to the first' (1983: 80). As 'lovely attire', it contains the seme (+/sociality/) and so it contributes to the establishment of the social gathering isotopy.

As 'lavatory', the argument goes, it is (-/sociality/). The two isotopies are thus opposed and the meaningful whole of the discourse is altered.

One of the problems with this explanation is that the occurrence of *soirée*, *chic*, and *guests* may induce an indefinite number of potential isotopies, not only that of the social gathering (why not *prosperity*, *abundance*, or any other). Depending on how one analyses the meanings of these words, one could find endless possibilities of seme repetition. How do we know that the crucial isotopy is unequivocally defined? How can a humorist make sure that hearers will concentrate on one particular isotopy as opposed to any other that could emerge from the repetition of a number of semes in the text? What are the crucial semes? Greimas believes that isotopies and their relations are to be found *in* the text and not in the minds of participants in a verbal exchange, so he is not worried about this question. But what is the feature *in a text* that guarantees that isotopies are well-defined? This, his theory should be able to answer. Of course, it all hinges on having an accurate description of the lexemes in terms of the semes that constitute them. Only then can one safely trace repetitions of semes, and the type of 'seme-clashing' that Greimas seems to suggest that underlies humour. However, as mentioned above, this type of semantics is most likely impossible.

Greimas is also concerned with the structural organisation of the text as such. He points out that jokes must have two essential parts, each of which performs a specific function: the *narration*, which sets the first isotopy, and the *dialogue*, which breaks it. The crucial element in jokes that makes the collision of isotopies possible

is what he calls the *connecting term* ("toilette" in his example), which at the same time disguises the opposition. Identity or mere similarity of the phonological representation can perform the function of the connecting term, as in puns and word play (Greimas 1971).

Not surprisingly, analyses of verbal humour in this tradition have looked at the structure of jokes as texts. So, Morin (1966) modifies Greimas two-part structure by breaking down Greimas' dialogue, and proposes three functional narrative structures: normalisation (setting the first isotopy), interlocking (building on the first isotopy) and disjunction (breaking the isotopy). These are conceived as empty textual spaces that can be filled by any semantic content.

Work has also been done that focuses on Greimas' connecting term. For instance, Charaudeau (1972, quoted in Attardo 1994) argues that the connecting term, which camouflages the opposition of isotopies, and the disjunctive, which reveals it, do not necessarily overlap, as Greimas assumed. Bárdosi (1976, quoted in Attardo, *ibidem*) applies this to the analysis of Hungarian jokes.

Attardo also mentions the work of Haussman (1974, *ibidem*), who has applied Greimas' model to the study of puns, distinguishing three types of coherence: *linguistic, objective*, (established through knowledge of the world), and *conventional*, (arising from frozen expressions and idioms). Haussman sees the concept of isotopy as identical with linguistic coherence, which is, in his view, broken in puns. In this sense, humorous discourse is also characterised by Haussman as deviant, given that coherence is generally seen as the feature that makes standard, non-humorous texts

hang together.

If Attardo's rendering of this work is accurate, it is clear that Hausman is not really applying Greimas's views in his analysis of humour. Recall that the ultimate purpose of Greimas was to show that all meaning was *in* the text. The fact that Hausman already talks about 'knowledge of the world' is a further indication of the impossibility of studying verbal humour within the field of linguistics only.

Much work influenced by Greimas was restricted to the analysis of jokes and concentrated on their linear structural organisation. Studies in this framework agree on recognising the occurrence of a disjunctive, which causes a passage from the sense reconstructed thus far in the joke to a second, opposed sense as a crucial feature in the structure of joke texts. Quantitative analyses of large samples of jokes have shown that disjunctives occur always at the end of the joke, in the position of the rheme of the last sentence of a text⁷. Whatever material occurs after it can be deleted with no effect upon the joke. This has been taken as an indication of its 'non-rhematicity'. The non-rhematicity of material occurring after the disjunctive is usually claimed to be specific to the structure of a joke (Attardo 1994: 101)⁸.

Studies of humour have tended to stick to the idea of opposition put forward

⁷ The notions *theme* and *rheme* are formal categories used by discourse analysts to distinguish between given and new information respectively. For extended discussion of thematisation processes see Halliday (1967) and Brown and Yule (1983).

⁸ Attardo offers the following example to illustrate this

'Do you believe in clubs for young people?', 'Only when kindness fails, my friend', which can also end with 'Only when kindness fails, replied Fields' The disjunctive here, he argues, is 'when kindness fails' Whatever follows can be deleted with no effect upon the joke (1994:99)

by Greimas, but have gradually abandoned the attempt to see verbal humour as deriving solely from the linguistically encoded aspects of meaning in texts. The idea that opposition is central to the generation of a humorous effect, however, is not peculiar to Greimas. A great number of approaches can be seen as converging on some idea of 'bisociation' which was defined by Koestler (1964) as

"...the perceiving of a situation or idea...in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference ... The event ... in which the two intersect, is made to vibrate simultaneously on two different wavelengths, as it were. While this unusual situation lasts, (the event) is not merely linked to one associative context, but bisociated with two" (1964: 35)

So, some notion of bisociation seems to be a constant in humour analyses. In the semiotic tradition, Milner (1972) assumes that

"within a single situation, and a single linguistic context, two universes collide, and it is this collision that makes many forms of humor possible" (1972: 16).

He goes on to define a pun as a "paradigmatic reversal of two items" and considers five levels at which this reversal may occur: phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, and situational.

Semioticians have often viewed humour as a process of alienation of a sign that occurs when it is shifted from its standard context. When this occurs, the argument goes, a sign no longer refers to its "natural referent" but to another "paradoxical referent" and thereby acquires a "negative value". Consequently, humour is defined as "a kind of language ... characterised by the negative, or paradoxical, value assumed by the sign" (Dorfles 1968: 104, quoted in Attardo 1988)

This brief discussion shows that semiotic approaches consider verbal humour to be more a property of the relation between signs and their context than of processes

of interpretation. Also, they are usually committed to the view that humorous discourse is marked in opposition to serious discourse.

Manetti (1976), who draws on Dorflès' alienation hypothesis, proposes six alienation mechanisms (metonymy, metaphor, changes in the subject of enunciation, decontextualisation, parallels and deformation), and also develops the idea that humorous discourse is deviant through an analysis of punchlines in terms of information theory. His argument is that punchlines are markedly rich in information⁹. To further support the claim that humorous texts are deviation from a norm, Manetti capitalises on Greimas' double isotopy proposal. Serious discourse is considered to be univocal and generally unambiguous, responding to a single isotopy. Humorous discourse, by contrast, systematically opposes two isotopies. Manetti also attempts to isolate the kinds of isotopic contrasts that result in humour and to provide a classification.

By their very nature, code-based approaches do not regard the study of the process that leads to a humorous interpretation as something that linguistic pragmatics should endeavour to discover. Yet, the fact that humour is a primarily psychological phenomenon raises the question of what it is about a text or, more precisely, about how hearers interpret it, that triggers this psychological experience. Structuralists and semioticians presumably take for granted some causal correlation between the existence of humorous text types and our reaction to them, or do not consider the

⁹ This line has been pursued outside the semiotic tradition as well. See for instance Giora (1991), which is considered in detail in chapter four.

study of this connection to be a problem for theories of communication, hence they restrict their contribution to the study of verbal humour to the characterisation of the structural properties of humorous texts. This applies not only to the stronger versions of code-based approaches, such as those just discussed, but also to more inferentially-oriented attempts to analyse verbal humour. Attardo, who has developed a Gricean, hence inferential, analysis of humour (1988), says:

"A theory of the processing of the text of jokes must distinguish two moments in the disambiguation of a joke text (for the sake of simplicity, "joke" will be used hereafter instead of "joke text"): in the first part of the process, a first isotopy/sense (S_1) is established, until a recipient encounters an element that causes the passage from the first sense to a second sense (S_2) antagonistic to the first one (...) The passage from S_1 to S_2 must be "unexpected", on the one hand, and "immediate" (i.e., should not involve "exceptional" mental expenditure), on the other" (1994: 95)

However, Attardo does not consider this 'theory of the processing of texts of jokes' as a concern of linguistics, as his immediate footnote makes clear:

"Although these notions are rather vague, they are widely accepted in humour theory, and their definition is a problem for psychology, not linguistics" (1994: 95)

Psychology, however, has not accepted the challenge and little work -if any- has been done to produce solid accounts of how humorous texts are processed. Also, from much of what Attardo's book *Linguistic Theories of Humor* reviews as linguistic approaches, one must assume that what he has in mind when he speaks of "linguistics" is some form of 'text linguistics'. By contrast, in this work I will argue for an approach to humorous interpretations not confined to either psychology or linguistics, but framed within a theory of cognitive pragmatics. Consequently, I will depart from any attempt to deal with humour from a strictly linguistic point of view and will emphasize aspects of the process of interpretation over the study of the structure of humorous texts.

Chapter Three

Script-based approaches: The dismissal of the semantics-pragmatics distinction

Fun is a good thing, but only when it spoils nothing better

(George Santayana: 1896)

In chapter two I discussed some approaches to verbal humour whose main assumptions set them close to the structuralist and/or the semiotic traditions. There is a second strand of work on verbal humour, which I will consider in this chapter, that explicitly regards itself as belonging to the framework of generative linguistics. The impact it has had on humour studies in general is in no minor way a consequence of the fact that it was originally offered as a fully-fledged theory of humour: the Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH) (Raskin 1985), resulting from the application of an independently developed semantic theory: Script-Semantics (Raskin 1981, 1985). The SSTH has subsequently been revised by Attardo and Raskin (Attardo and Raskin 1991). This development was clearly in contrast with most prior treatments of verbal humour, which were either restricted to specific aspects of verbal humour, such as the linear organization of the joke, or the position of the disjunctive, or consisted mainly of taxonomies and anecdotal references with little explanatory power.

1. General considerations

Before discussing their approach in detail, I want to argue that Raskin and Attardo may mislead their readers in their statement of their affiliations. One cannot but wonder why they should insist on being part of a current of thought whose fundamental assumptions get contradicted by the most fundamental premises of their framework. Witness the following quote by Attardo, co-author of the development of the SSTH christened as the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) mentioned above (Attardo and Raskin 1991):

"The SSTH shares its ontological foundation with transformational generative grammar: the SSTH is meant to account for the native speaker's humor competence (see Chomsky 1965: 3) (sic). Because a speaker can tell if a sentence belongs to the set of grammatical sentences, argues Raskin, the speaker can tell if a text is funny or not. Obviously, neither Chomsky, who limited his notion of competence to grammaticality, nor Katz and Fodor, who expanded it to include some semantic phenomena, had humorous phenomena in mind when they canonized the idea of a speaker's competence" (Attardo 1994: 196)

Leaving aside for the moment the issue of Raskin and Attardo's idiosyncratic use of the notion of competence, to which I will return below, the claim that "because a speaker can tell if a sentence belongs to the set of grammatical sentences (...) the speaker can tell if a text is funny or not" is downright false. First, it does not fit our intuitions in that we are often able to judge the grammaticality of all the sentences in a joke or a passage without being able to even begin to grasp its humorous character. Also, we are all familiar with the experience of missing the point of a remark that makes other participants in a conversation giggle or laugh, while having no difficulty

in accepting the grammaticality of the sentence used to convey it. But, of course, mere appeal to our intuitions in arguing against a particular position will not do. Explanatory accounts are often removed from our initial intuitions about the workings of specific phenomena. But Smith and Tsimpli (1995) have provided evidence that the ability to make adequate judgements of grammaticality does not correlate with an individual's ability to tell if a text is funny or not. In their study of Christopher, an autistic polyglot savant, they found that although Christopher is fully able to make judgements of grammaticality, when confronted with ironic statements in his native language, he tends to interpret them literally, and is in general baffled by jokes (see Smith and Tsimpli 1995: 74-79). So, for instance, his initial reaction to (1) was to translate it into Greek.

- (1) A Russian minister visits a car factory. The manager goes out of his way to show him around and at the end of the tour offers the minister a free car.
 'Oh no,' says the minister, I can't accept it'
 'In that case I'll sell it to you for five roubles.'
 The minister hands him a ten rouble bill:
 'In that case, I'll have two'

After his insistence on translation, the conversation in (2) developed (Smith and Tsimpli 1995: 76).

- (2) NS Why didn't he accept the car?
 C Because it was only five roubles.
 NS But then he said he'd want to buy two. So why do you think he said that?
 C Because five roubles times two is ten roubles.
 NS And why do you think that story is there?
 C Pass

- IT Is this a joke?
 C Yes.
 IT Why?
 C Dhen ksero [I don't know]

As a further example of Christopher's difficulties with jokes, Smith and Tsimpli consider Christopher's reaction to (3), shown in the conversation that followed, reproduced here as (4).

- (3) Castro visits Moscow and is taken on a tour by Brezhnev. First they go for a drink and Castro praises the beer.
 'Yes, it was provided by our good friends from Czechoslovakia'
 Next they go for a ride in a car and Castro admires the car.
 'Yes, these cars are provided by our good friends from Czechoslovakia.'
 They drive to an exhibition of beautiful cut glass, which Castro greatly admires.
 'Yes, this glass comes from our good friends in Czechoslovakia.'
 'They must be very good friends,' says Castro.
 'Yes, they must,' says Brezhnev.
- (4) NS Why do you think he says that?
 C Because they ARE very good friends.
 NS Why are they very good friends?
 C Because they live next door to Brezhnev.
 NS So why does that make them good friends?
 C Because they like each other.
 NS Is this a serious story or a joke?
 C It's a serious story.

Although Christopher's linguistic competence in his native language is as "rich and sophisticated as that of any native speaker" (Smith and Tsimpli 1995: 79), his case demonstrates that engaging in verbal humour imposes cognitive demands that go

beyond our linguistic abilities. Raskin's claim is untenable in the face of these findings. Smith and Tsimpli associate Christopher's difficulties in understanding verbal humour with his impaired ability to represent states of affairs as other than they are, and show how he systematically fails to perform adequately in other pragmatic tasks that require this capacity. Smith and Tsimpli are not concerned with accounting for how humour works, but are merely making a point about Christopher's cognitive abilities. I will return to these observations in later chapters, but here I will attempt to spell out briefly why these metarepresentational abilities are needed to understand the joke in (3).

What seems to be at stake in (3) is merely the ambiguity between the epistemic and the deontic meanings of *must*, so that one might be tempted to conclude that, after all, getting the joke is all a question of recognising a lexical ambiguity. But a moment's reflection will show that this is just part of the process involved. In fact, Christopher needs to realise that 'Castro believes that possibly the Czechs are very good friends', and that Brezhnev believes (or has made as if he believes) that Castro believes (or has made as if he believes) that the Czechs need to be very good friends'. That this is the case is further supported by the fact that Brezhnev begins his utterance with 'Yes'. This shows that Brezhnev is not correcting Castro's epistemic interpretation and replacing it with the deontic one. He is overtly expressing agreement with Castro, and the question is what thought Brezhnev has attributed to Castro and agreed with. To get the joke, we need to attribute to Brezhnev the false belief that 'Castro believes that the Czechs need to be very good friends' That Christopher has

failed to do this is shown by the conversation in (4).

As for the assertion that there should be such a thing as a "humour competence", Attardo, of course, anticipates criticism and writes:

"Is this extension of the concept of competence legitimate and valid? Linguistically speaking, there can be no doubt that the extension is legitimate: considering a text humorous is *merely* being aware of its perlocutionary goal and/or effect (my emphasis); once the illocutionary and perlocutionary (Austin 1962) aspects of utterances are acknowledged as legitimate objects of study for linguistics (or some of its branches), it follows that the perception of the humorousness of a text must be a legitimate linguistic concern" (1994: 196)

There are several elements of confusion in this passage. Although I prefer to delay detailed discussion of these aspects until Raskin's and Raskin and Attardo's models are presented, I want to make a few remarks at this stage. First, the legitimacy of studying what constitutes the perception of the humorousness of a text is not the same as the legitimacy of calling this ability a humorous competence in the Chomskyan sense of the notion. The issue is not a terminological nor a territorial one, but one with theoretical implications. As is well known, when Chomsky drew the famous distinction between language *competence* and language *performance*, he meant to capture the difference between the internal cognitive system that enables a native speaker of a language to understand and produce any of an infinite possible number of new sentences, and the behaviour he displays when putting such knowledge to use. As a system of knowledge, linguistic competence is seen as consisting of a mentally represented and domain specific set of principles, that is, of principles that apply to linguistic data only, and not, say, to visual or musical stimuli. So, in a generative framework, knowledge of, for instance, principle A of the binding theory, which states that an anaphor must be bound in its governing category, would be part of our

language competence. As such, it is assumed to be mentally represented, inaccessible via conscious introspection, and applied in interpreting the pronoun in sentences such as *Helen knew that Jennifer was pleased with herself*, where ‘herself’ has to be understood as referring to Jennifer. The binding theory, however, is not a set of general purpose cognitive principles. Hence, it would play no role in interpreting, say, a two dimensional array of light patterns on the retina as a big yellow house on a road, nor would it be of any use in deciding whether two musical notes you have just heard are different.

The real trouble with Raskin’s extension of the notion of competence is that it suggests the existence of a set of principles that human beings acquire and possess, which are, just like linguistic principles, mentally represented, inaccessible through conscious introspection, and applied automatically and unconsciously to humorous stimuli only. It would be this domain-specific knowledge that would enable human beings to produce and understand an infinite number of new humorous texts and discourses. *Crucially*, this system of knowledge would be humour-specific. If this is what Raskin believes, then I will try to show that he is wrong, and that our ‘humour competence’ derives from the application of general-purpose cognitive principles and abilities. The discussion of the joke in (3) is meant to suggest why this is indeed the case.

But assuming the existence of a humour competence in the sense of Chomsky has yet another undesirable consequence. Our linguistic competence indeed allows us to recognize as members of the set of possible sentences in a language sentences that

we have never encountered before. Moreover, it is also responsible for our capacity to produce, with no extreme conscious effort, an equally open ended set of new grammatical sentences. So, one would expect a humorous competence to enable individuals to produce an indefinite number of new humorous texts virtually effortlessly and automatically. Just as we are surrounded by people producing original sentences every day, we should expect everyone around to be cracking new jokes almost instinctively, or at least, to be able to do so. The world such a theory predicts is much more fun, but is not the one we live in.

If Raskin and Attardo don't want to endorse all these consequences, then why not choose a different framework or at least a less loaded terminology? The choice of these particular technical notions, however, does not seem accidental. In his defense against anticipated attacks, Attardo goes on with the parallels:

"One may doubt, however, that the extension is legitimate on more practical grounds: one may expect a certain uniformity in the speaker's judgements about the grammaticality of a sentence (notwithstanding some discomfiting results, see McCawley (1976: 235)), whereas it is a common experience to disagree, often markedly, on appreciation of the funniness of a joke. This objection does not withstand closer scrutiny. It should be noted that the SSTH models the competence, and not the performance, of the speaker (or the 'humorist'); hence, if the hearer is sad or has just dropped a heavy object on his/her foot, he/she may fail to laugh or otherwise show any sign of appreciation of the humorous stimulus. It would be a mistake, however, to take this as a sign that the hearer cannot reliably pass judgements on the humorous nature of a text, exactly as it would be mistaken to assume that the native speaker cannot pass grammaticality judgements on his/her disconnected speech patterns after ingesting copious amount of alcohol. The SSTH models the humorous competence of an idealized speaker/hearer who is unaffected by racial or gender biases (...) All in all, this necessary idealization is equivalent to the introduction of the idea of 'potential humor' (...) This idealization is similar to the one adopted by most of generative linguistics, which assumes an idealized homogenous speaker-hearer community (Chomsky 1965: 3-4)" (1994: 196-197)

The problem with Raskin and Attardo's extension of the notion is not that it assumes a tendency to uniformity in the judgements of funniness that subjects will make. In

this, they are probably right. Most likely, variations in people's sense of humour will not be a major obstacle for possible generalisations when studying verbal humour. It is the postulation of a system of knowledge that applies only to humorous stimuli that seems unacceptable. Indeed, the very concept of a well-defined class of humorous stimuli is odd.

Human beings are able to make judgements on a variety of aspects of their private and public lives. They can decide whether a particular object or text is a piece of art, and whether a particular action is morally or ethically objectionable¹. They can also make judgements about the adequacy of the decisions they and others make. Surely, an explanatory account of these facts need not involve the postulation of a 'decision-making competence' in the Chomskyan sense. Notice, for instance, that philosophers and psychologists have not in general pursued the idea that there could be domain-specific principles governing the way we make decisions. The notion of a decision-making competence distinct from a decision-making performance to account for the fact that people frequently take the wrong course of action but are able to make judgements about it has never been put forward seriously. Clearly, this is because decision-making is recognised as the outcome of thought processes where a variety of cognitive domains and abilities interact. It is not ruled by a specific set of cognitive principles that constitute a distinct system of knowledge. Surely, what motivated Chomsky to draw this distinction in the domain of language was not solely

¹ And although there are matters of taste and variations in these matters, what is surprising, if anything, is not the extent to which these judgements vary across individuals in a society, but their tendency to converge.

the (crucial) observation that speakers are able to make judgements of grammaticality of sentences they never encountered before, but rather the apparent autonomy of the system in the overall mental architecture.

Chomsky identified knowledge of language (competence) as a distinct cognitive domain, a specific system of knowledge. As such, it makes sense then to try to determine its nature, and to attempt to provide theories that account for its structure.

As he states it

"To the extent that such a theory can be formulated, it is possible to ask on what basis the system is acquired...(and what) its biologically given principles (are)...Similarly, study of performance presupposes an understanding of the nature of the cognitive system that is put to use. Given some level of theoretical understanding of some cognitive system, we may hope to study in a productive way how the cognitive system is used, and how it enters into interaction with other cognitive systems" Chomsky (1977: 49)

But the success of the distinction is not only due to the methodological consequences it has, but also to its being well-motivated. When it comes to humour, the distinction between competence and performance simply collapses. As I shall shortly show, it runs into complications that do not arise from the distinction as it refers to knowledge versus use of language. This is merely because judgements of humour inescapably involve the interaction of several domains of knowledge in a way that linguistic judgements of grammaticality don't.

The judgement that a particular sentence is grammatical means that one accepts it as a member of the set of possible sentences in a language. This judgement derives

exclusively from our knowledge of grammar². But what does it mean to make a judgement that a given text is humorous? Presumably, it means to accept it as a member of the set of possible humorous texts. Now notice that there are two possible sources of this judgement. One indeed is, as Attardo and Raskin suggest, by recognising some specific structure in it. This is trivially true in cases such as 'Have you heard the one about T', where T stands for any particular text. The hearer may or may not find T funny, but he has been given an overt explicit indication that T is to be interpreted as a joke. In the non-trivial cases, hearers would identify the structure of a text as conforming to a specific set of explicit constraints that a theory of humour competence should establish. A second source from which the judgement of the humorousness of a text may derive is simply for the subject to have undergone a specific psychological experience when processing it³. This need have very little to do with the structure of the text itself. Straightforward cases that illustrate this possibility are ironic statements that one recognises as such, but that could also be used non-ironically, and that one finds funny in specific circumstances, or remarks that one finds somehow amusing in particular contexts simply because they evoke certain types of past or possible experiences, memories or associations.

To be sure, if I hear 'Have you heard the one about...?' and then I am unable

² One may argue that in making judgements of grammaticality there is interaction of several cognitive systems in that in order to process a sentence the visual or the auditory systems are involved. This is true but irrelevant to the point, because the *judgement of grammaticality* does not involve these systems in any way. A sentence will be judged as (un)grammatical irrespective of whether it is phonologically or graphically presented.

³For my purposes here the experience can be vaguely defined as 'amusement'

to make sense of whatever follows between this utterance and the onset of laughter in the rest of the audience, I still should be able to recognize that piece of discourse as humorous. Notice that in this respect my judgement would not vary if I find the same piece of discourse rib-splittingly funny. So, this approach predicts the possibility of there being someone able to make accurate judgements of funniness, and hence to exercise his humour *competence*, without ever experiencing humour. This does not appear to be a desirable prediction for any theory of verbal humour⁴. It seems, though, to follow from Raskin's and Attardo's claims. The prediction is also in line with Attardo's equation of judgements of funniness and awareness of perlocutionary effect.

One can be aware of the perlocutionary effect of an utterance on a given audience, or one can be aware of the perlocutionary effect of an utterance on oneself⁵. Attardo is unclear as to which it is that matters. Presumably, he doesn't consider the distinction important. In fact, the lack of this distinction is what would enable his sad hearer, and the one who has just dropped a heavy object on his foot and who will "as a consequence fail to laugh or otherwise show any sign of appreciation of the

⁴ In cases like this, the humour competence would not engage with the essence of humour, which is experiential.

⁵ This is also trivially true. An intimidating boss/plantation owner/Mafia boss may produce an utterance such as 'Let's not forget who is boss' with the illocutionary force of a directive. The perlocutionary effect on a truly intimidated audience may be that of a threat, but on a member of an audience aware of, say, the weaknesses of the speaker, and feeling contempt for him, the perlocutionary effect will not be the same. This last member of the audience can simultaneously be aware of the perlocutionary effect of the utterance on the rest of the audience and on him. A hearer can also be aware of the intended and the actual perlocutionary effect of an utterance, which need not coincide.

humorous stimulus", to still "reliably pass judgements on the humorous nature of a text" (1994: 197, mentioned above).

But let us assume that Attardo is right and that considering a text humorous is merely being aware of its perlocutionary goal and/or effect. Then this makes his defense inconsistent. The perlocutionary force of an utterance has long been recognised by linguists, pragmatists and philosophers as an aspect of language use, and not of language competence in the sense of Chomsky. A perlocutionary act is not linguistically encoded, and is not conventionally achieved by uttering a particular utterance, but is specific to the circumstances of issuance, and includes all effects that any given utterance in a particular situation may cause. These effects may be intended or unintended, and are often indeterminate. They can't, by definition, be a constitutive part of a linguistic competence in the Chomskyan sense⁶. If Attardo is right, then we need to study how the perlocutionary effects of an utterance come about⁷, not what constitutes the knowledge that makes up our 'humour competence'. In any case, Raskin's theory offers none. It seems to postulate the existence of a particular knowledge system, for which he provides no account.

In subsequent chapters I will try to make a case for the position that, although the (perhaps species-specific) ability of human beings to engage in sophisticated forms of humour is remarkable, they do not possess a humour-specific competence. Instead,

⁶ In any case, the ability to recognise perlocutionary goals would belong to a distinct competence system which interacts with linguistic competence, and is clearly different from it. There are good reasons to assume that this system corresponds to the possession of a theory of mind (module).

⁷ Most likely, an unfeasible task.

humour arises as a by-product of our ability for representational and factual thought, and, as suggested by Smith and Tsimpli's observations, this ability does not constitute a separate domain, but is closely linked to pragmatic abilities that require higher order meta-representational thought, such as handling non-literal uses of language, or interpreting metalinguistic negation. I will discuss the connections in more detail throughout this thesis⁸.

Once these misconceptions are cleared, the question remains as to what type of theory is proposed by Raskin (1985) and Attardo and Raskin (1999), and what their approach has to contribute to the study of verbal humour. Before presenting it in more detail, let me describe the 'semantic' theory on which it is based.

2. Script oriented semantics

Developments in the study of meaning have long acknowledged the need to distinguish between information encoded by the language (semantic information) and information that is derived some other way (pragmatic information). Although there has been considerable disagreement as to where to draw the line between the former and the latter, and some suggest that there might not be a clear cut borderline (see Levinson 1983 for extensive discussion of this issue), it is generally agreed that a

⁸ For accounts of meta-linguistic negation see Carston (1994) and Carston and Noh (1995). For a study on the effects of impaired meta-representational capacities on the handling of metaphor and irony see Happé (1993).

distinction between a sentence and an utterance (a particular instantiation) of that sentence is crucial. Raskin, however, does not seem to find such a distinction useful.

Script-oriented semantics was developed as Raskin's reaction against what he calls the anti-contextuality of most current semantic theories. Raskin explicitly wants to provide a semantic theory that will "*account for the meaning of every sentence in every context it occurs*" (1985: 66, his own emphasis).

For this purpose, he suggests a two-component theory, consisting of a lexicon and a set of combinatorial rules. The lexicon "contains lexical information which approximates the speaker's knowledge of the meanings of the words", while the set of combinatorial rules "combines the meanings of the words into the semantic interpretation of the whole sentence to which the words belong" and "approximates the ability of the speaker to derive the meaning of the sentence out of the meanings of the words which make up the sentence"⁹ (1985: 76).

Raskin's approach contains an effort to unify the idea of meaning as being psychologically represented in the mind of speakers with the view that meaning is use. After a brief discussion of the controversy between the view that word meaning can be defined in terms of an invariant set of semantic primitives or features, and the position that the meaning of a word *is* its use in the language, Raskin concludes that there is in fact no contradiction between considering meaning as an inherent property of the word and considering meaning as use. So, he argues that "the meaning of every

⁹ These building blocks for a theory might seem quite standard. As will become apparent shortly, neither the lexicon nor the combinatorial rules are construed as they are in generative grammar.

word can be successfully and non-circularly defined as a set of elementary units of meaning each of which is the ability of the word to be used in a different phrase of the language" (1985: 79).

This leads him to suggest a lexicon based on the notion of script, defined as "a large chunk of information surrounding the word or evoked by it" ¹⁰.

Every script is a graph with lexical nodes and semantic links between them. Scripts are interconnected so that together all the scripts of a given language make up a single continuous graph (1985: 81). Notice here that we don't know what the initial lexical nodes contain, so one should assume either that they are some sort of primitives (of course, not defined), or that they in turn are also scripts, which either leads to an infinite regress, or produces a great deal of script-overlapping. This may perhaps have no major consequences for the theory, but the problem is never addressed. Also, the nature of the semantic links is not defined, but from the subsequent discussion it appears that they include everything from sense relations (e.g. hyponymy, antonymy, synonymy, etc.), through associations based on world-

¹⁰The notion of script in Raskin's theory is declared to be similar to that traditionally used in psychology, artificial intelligence and other fields (e.g. Bartlett 1972, Bateson 1972, Goffman 1974, Schank and Abelson 1977, Minsky 1975, Chafe 1977, Tannen 1979). Raskin realizes that the concept of script has not been systematically defined either with regard to what constitutes the content of a script, or to the general format of scripts. But he sees in the use of scripts in what he calls semantics an important contribution in that it leads to a heuristic procedure for script discovery. The procedure can be "outlined in terms of comparing the semantic interpretation of a sentence obtainable on the basis of an 'ordinary' lexicon and the semantic/pragmatic meaning actually perceived by the speaker."

(...) The discrepancy between the two interpretations is to be filled with an appropriate script or set of scripts which is discovered in this way" (1985: 98). Notice however the vagueness with which this heuristic is described, and also its circularity. Although Raskin does not consider words such as

discourse and logical connectors, he would appear to advocate a polysemous semantics, by introducing, for instance, in the script of AND all the possible interpretations that arise in different contexts (causality, temporal sequence, simultaneity, etc.) For arguments against this see Carston (1992)

knowledge, relations of a different type (e.g. part-whole, function-structure), grammatical categories (subject, object), to other kinds of syntactic information. Raskin realises the complexity of the information involved, and suggests two alternative ways to accommodate it, but does not advocate either explicitly. One consists in the postulation of "a standard set of semantic relations" and the other in the postulation of "abstract, non-lexical nodes corresponding each to one type or subtype of link and having all the pertinent lexical nodes connected with these non-lexical nodes" (1985: 84)

A lexical entry in this model is defined as "a domain within this graph around the word in question as the central node of the domain" (1985: 81). A lexical entry seems to be conceived as a rather elastic conceptual address, with boundaries around the central node changing in different contexts, and closer adjacent nodes being activated more strongly than more distant ones.

Scripts may contain material contained in other scripts, but in a fully-fledged script-based semantic theory, Raskin argues, "the scripts are constructed from the elementary level up in order to avoid the typical lexicographic circularity" (1985: 85). No indication is given, however, as to what criterion could select the most elementary scripts. The theory then seems to face the well known problem of finding semantic (or conceptual) primitives, and offers no solution¹¹.

The way knowledge is represented in the scripts is also flexible. Some

¹¹ Recall that this is precisely one of the problems faced by Greimas's semantics.

characteristics appear as features, others as phrases, others in propositional form.

Raskin offers the following simplified versions as illustrations of the format of scripts:

(5) DOCTOR

Subject [+Human] [+Adult]

Activity:> Study medicine

= Receive patients: patient comes or doctor visits

doctor listen to complaints

doctor examines patient

= Cure disease: doctor diagnoses disease

doctor prescribes treatment

= (Take patient's money)

Place: > Medical School

= Hospital or doctor's office

Time: > Many years

= Every day

= Immediately

Condition: Physical contact

LOVER

Subject: [+Human] [+Adult] [+Sex: x]

Activity: Make love

Object: [+Human] [+Adult] [+Sex: -x]

Place: Secluded

Time: > Once

= Regularly

Condition: If subject or object married, spouse(s) should not know

('>' stands for 'past', '=' for 'present')

(from Raskin 1985: 95)

In processing an utterance, every word of the sentence is supposed to evoke a script or a group of scripts. These scripts are organised by the combinatorial rules into one

or more compatible combinations. Raskin illustrates this process with the case reproduced in (6).

(6) The paralysed bachelor hit the colourful ball

The following scripts are supposed to be assigned to the words in the sentence¹²:

(7) paralysed:	1. DISEASE
	2. MORAL
bachelor:	1. MARRIAGE
	2. ACADEME
	3. KNIGHT
	4. SEAL
hit:	1. COLLISION
	2. DISCOVERY
colourful:	1. COLOUR
	2. EVALUATION
ball:	1. ARTIFACT
	2. ASSEMBLY

The combinatorial rules can now in principle combine the twelve scripts in sixty four ways, but they will reduce them to the twenty five potentially compatible combinations described in (8)¹³.

(8) 1111, 11112, 11212, 11222,
 12111, 12112, 12212, 12222,
 13111, 13112, 12212, 13222,

¹² Raskin attributes three scripts to the word *the* (DEFINITE, UNIQUE, and GENERIC), but for the sake of simplicity, he omits the role played by them here.

¹³ Raskin offers no clear indication as to how the rules eliminate undesirable combinations, and indeed, this process seems to be rather arbitrary, as I show below.

14111,
 21111, 21112, 21212,
 22222,
 23111, 23112, 23212, 23222

Combination 11212, 1411 and 23222 are paraphrased respectively by Raskin as in (9)

- (9) (i) A never-married man who couldn't move (some of) his limbs discovered (found himself at) a large dancing party abundant with bright colours.
- (ii) A fur seal which couldn't move (some of) its limbs pushed (with its nose?) a spheric object painted in bright colours.
- (iii) A young knight who served under the standard of another knight and who found that he was unable to act (a pacifist?) discovered (found himself) a large and picturesque dancing party.

Even in this simple example, a number of problems are swept under the carpet. For instance, how do the combinatorial rules know that combinations 14221 or 14222 paraphrased, following Raskin's lines, in (10), are not possible¹⁴?

- (10) (i) A fur seal which couldn't move (some of) its limbs discovered a large and bright spheric object.
- (ii) A fur seal which couldn't move (some of) its limbs discovered (in sight? in a nearby cruise ship?) a large and picturesque dancing party.

¹⁴ In the absence of any indication as to the precise form or function of the combinatorial rules, one has to assume that they operate basically on the basis of conjunction and have some capacity to detect inconsistencies.

In other words, combinatorial rules are not explicitly defined principles, but seem to function on the basis of discarding what is not entirely plausible according to our knowledge of ordinary events in the world. Yet, a system working on this basis has no principled reason to discard the possibility that the exploratory behaviour of some handicapped fish-eating mammal should lead it to discover some attractive spheric object, or even a picturesque dance if it is in sight. What we need then is an account of how systems and/or people derive such conclusions. Raskin's 'semantic theory' does not take us far in this, because, quite aside from whether this is within the scope of semantics, the rules he proposes simply do not operate on any principled basis.

Also, although he does not comment on it, his own paraphrases show, on the one hand, that there is no limit to what goes in each script, and on the other, that we need some way of specifying the process through which we complete what is not linguistically encoded, and not contained in a script, such as, for instance, his own bracketed 'with its nose?', 'some of', and 'found himself' in (9) above.

There is a more crucial issue with regard to the structural relations of the words within a sentence. Raskin's example in (6) skews this problem because the surface linear organisation of the string does not pose problems for the meanings derived by his combinatorial rules, but one wonders how the combinatorial rules would work in examples such as those in (11), frequently discussed in the literature to illustrate the intricacies of semantic competence and its connections with syntactic relations beyond linear contiguity (see for instance Chomsky 1986: 8-13, or Larson and Segal 1995: 11-16).

- (11) a. John ate an apple
 b. John ate
 c. John is too stubborn to talk to Bill
 d. John is too stubborn to talk to
 e. Paul is too strong to catch a cold
 f. Paul is too strong to catch

Admittedly, Raskin deals with syntactic information in terms of the non-semantic links or non-lexical nodes he proposes to include in the scripts that constitute the lexicon (see above). At the initial state of semantic processing, all scripts of the words in a sentence are evoked, but the combinatorial rules filter out those which are syntactically inappropriate. However, this means that literally *everything* goes in the lexicon: syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic information and principles (such as those that guide us to understand, for instance, that the seal hit the ball with its nose in the examples above). It also means that the combinatorial rules are sensitive not only to semantic information, but also to syntax and knowledge of the world. The problem is not so much that the combinatorial rules should be sensitive to all these aspects, but that the principles that guide their operation are not made explicit by the theory -at least not in its present form. With this laxity, every imaginable prediction can in principle be seen as deriving from the script-based semantic theory, and it is not clear what kind of evidence would falsify it¹⁵.

Once the combinatorial rules have filtered out the syntactically inappropriate

¹⁵ Raskin would still need a pragmatic theory to account for the selection on a particular occasion of one of the possibilities in (8), and the workings of this theory would be bound to overlap massively with his semantic theory. Because he doesn't much care about a distinction between semantics and pragmatics, he would not take this to be a real problem. Nonetheless, the lack of explicit principles to guide the operation of the machinery he puts forward is striking.

scripts, a second stage of processing takes place. Raskin assumes the existence of two main different modes of communication and it is at this point that the combinatorial rules have to determine in which of them a sentence is uttered. By default, the rules introduce the *bona-fide communication mode* as the initial value. This mode is defined as the 'ordinary' information-conveying mode, where no acting, lying or joking take place.

One of the characteristics of this mode of communication (which entails a different processing strategy as well) is that the combinatorial rules are directed not to come up with all the potential ambiguities, but to disambiguate a potentially n-way ambiguous string to exactly one most probable interpretation. To achieve this, all the sets of scripts drawn are divided into two groups. The first one contains exactly one unmarked script (for instance, the most frequent one); and all the rest go in the second group. These scripts are regarded as marked, and a hierarchy of markedness is allowed to organize the sub-group. The combinatorial rules always push forward the unmarked script for each word. Raskin is not explicit about this either, but this picture entails that the combinatorial rules are also sensitive to considerations of accessibility of information. In cases where the unmarked script is not appropriate¹⁶, the combinatorial rules temporarily change the marking of the scripts for the word, and set another script as the unmarked one.

After this is done for all the words in the sentence, the combinatorial rules

¹⁶ Though, again, no indication is given as to how this is determined.

check whether the use of the unmarked scripts requires any specific conditions, and if so, they also check that such conditions are satisfied.

Last, on the basis of the features of the selected scripts, the combinatorial rules generate several types of inferences, including presuppositions, and probable assumptions about state of affairs. Also, they generate pertinent questions in relation to the information just processed which they attempt to answer in the processing of upcoming discourse. Notice that there are no explicit constraints on the type of questions that arise here.

Clearly, the power of the combinatorial rules is immense, though the principles that guide their operation remain obscure. This can't perhaps be any other way, given how the whole framework has been set up by Raskin, but it is well close to disaster for any account with explanatory aspirations. Notice that the combinatorial rules are in charge of operations of so many different kinds, that it seems unlikely that anything other than general-purpose cognitive principles should regulate their operation¹⁷.

After the interpretation has been retrieved, the combinatorial rules are also responsible for reorganising the information in the following way. They list every lexical node which is contained within the selected scripts for the sentence¹⁸. This

¹⁷ Raskin's approach is thus a clear illustration of those approaches that consider the role of inference without attempting to explain it.

¹⁸ It is worth noting that Raskin has not given a criterion that delimits where a script begins and where it ends, and although the set of all scripts is taken to be a complete connected graph, one assumes that the set of lexical nodes contained in the evoked scripts is a proper subset of all the lexical nodes.

sub-set of the lexical nodes is put in a special storage marked ASSOCIATIONS. The combinatorial rules also store the semantic (in Raskin's terms) interpretation they have derived under another storage marked WORLD INFORMATION. This storage already contains previously acquired information about the world or preceding discourse, which the rules compare with the information newly acquired through the interpretation of the utterance. The purpose of this is to use world information to eliminate the ambiguities that still remain. Raskin sees syntactic ambiguity cases of the type '*flying planes can be dangerous*', as typical instances requiring this later stage, so that if the WORLD INFORMATION storage contains some indication to the effect that planes are the subject of discourse, the combinatorial rules will disambiguate it as *It happens that flying planes are dangerous*, whereas if it contains information indicating that "the discourse is on flying as an activity", then the combinatorial rules will disambiguate it as *It happens that flying planes is dangerous* (1985: 91)¹⁹.

¹⁹ In fact, Raskin suggests the reverse, that is, that if the discourse is on planes, the combinatorial rules will disambiguate the sentence as *it happens that flying planes is dangerous*. This looks like a typographical error, but I want to insist on the variety of tasks that are undertaken by the combinatorial rules. In this case, even parsing procedures are left to them. Since the publication of Raskin's work, there has been some debate as to how these structures, which have an adjectival and a verbal reading, are processed. Marslen-Wilson and Tyler (1987) suggest that contextual factors can penetrate the language processing module and guide the selection of a single interpretation, while Carston (1989) has reinterpreted their results to argue for a modular account of parsing, where the adjectival analysis would be chosen first (following Frazier's Minimal Attachment Strategy (1987)), delivered to the higher level of discourse representation and rectified if necessary according to pragmatic constraints, such as plausibility and relevance. The point of Raskin, however, seems to be that his theory still maintains a distinction between linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world that is not represented in the lexicon and that is used by the combinatorial rules to disambiguate cases that remain ambiguous after the script-marking and selection procedure. In fact, this is the only evidence in his account -at times confusing in this respect- which supports Raskin's claim that "the theory does not incorporate our entire knowledge of the world and does not claim that it is possible to do so....The theory recognizes the existence of the boundary between our knowledge of the world and, being a linguistic theory, does not account for what is on the other side of the

What happens if the WORLD INFORMATION storage contains information that contradicts the interpretation? Then, Raskin argues, the combinatorial rules have three options (1985: 91):

- a. To declare the sentence anomalous and list a conflict with one of the statements in WORLD INFORMATION as the reason.
- b. To change the mode of communication to 'non-bona-fide'
- c. To determine the scripts shared by the interpretation and the conflicting statement in WORLD INFORMATION and check whether the conflict can be resolved by switching to another script of the same word.

I am interested in option (b), as it is opposed to the view I will endorse and argue for in subsequent chapters.

According to Raskin, changing to another mode of communication involves engaging in an altogether different process of interpretation. While in the bona-fide mode of communication "the combinatorial rules are instructed to disambiguate each sentence to just one meaning by using the unmarked scripts", the instructions in the non-bona-fide mode of communication are "to obtain all the compatible combinations of scripts and thus the potential meanings of the sentence" (1985: 91). So, in the non-bona-fide mode of communication, the combinatorial rules change their standard operation and assume additional tasks. They are instructed not to discard syntactically or semantically deviant sentences. Instead, they are allowed to introduce minor

boundary. However, it pushes the boundary much further out than any other available formal semantic theory" (1985:62).

changes in the scripts responsible for the deviance. The semantic interpretations are then calculated conditional on these changes. This mode of communication produces, according to Raskin, metaphors, language innovations, implicatures, and humour, amongst other phenomena²⁰.

One question that is not addressed explicitly in this respect is what happens to the script changes introduced by the combinatorial rules when operating in the non-bona-fide mode of communication. Raskin does not state whether the changes remain, or, by contrast, operate only temporarily and are erased from the script on return to the bona-fide mode. Whatever position is adopted has consequences for the predictions the theory makes. If the changes remain, given enough time fewer and fewer cases will force the rules to adopt the non-bona-fide mode of communication, given that the scope of the scripts will be wider, and the system will encounter fewer contradictions. The explicit principle that regulates which information is part of a given script, reproduced in (12), is itself ambiguous in this respect.

- (12) "The inclusion of an element of semantic information in a script is considered justified if there exists a sentence such that it contradicts this element of the script and is deviant for this reason alone" (1985: 95)

One is led to infer from this though that the alterations are taken to operate locally and temporarily, that the modified scripts do not retain their changes, and that the

²⁰My treatment of humour argues that we do not need to postulate a non-bona-fide mode of communication and explain the principles that rule it. I am going to argue that fiction, lies, and humour are indeed associated, but not in the way Raskin suggests. They all are special cases of *interpretive use* of language, in the sense of Sperber and Wilson (1986), and require metarepresentational abilities. Once this is acknowledged, the same principles that guide "ordinary" discourse account for what Raskin classifies as belonging to the non-bona-fide mode.

system *somehow* returns to the *bona-fide* mode.

To sum up, script-oriented semantics appears as an intuitive and still very sketchy account of how knowledge of all sorts may be stored and retrieved from memory, but how it should work as a theory of meaning remains unclear.

I now turn to discuss how this model is used in the study of verbal humour.

3. The script-based semantic theory of humour

The main claim of the theory is that there are necessary and sufficient constraints on the structure of a text for it to qualify as a joke. These constraints are formulated as in (13) below, and are proposed as the "necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to be funny" (1985: 99).

- (13) A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the conditions are satisfied:
- (i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts.
 - (ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite in a special sense defined below.

As an example of how this applies, Raskin uses the scripts for DOCTOR and LOVER in (5) above and the joke in (14) below:

- (14) "Is the doctor at home?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. "No," the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply. "Come right in."

The argument is that the words *doctor*, *patient*, and *bronchial* evoke the script

DOCTOR, while the fact that "a young and pretty woman invites a man other than her husband to come into her house while the husband is away" (1985: 105) accounts for the evocation of the script LOVER.

Perhaps a minor point here is that, apparently, scripts can be evoked in different ways. One route is simply via accessing some of their associated lexical entries, while in some cases, as suggested above, evoking a script seems to require the construction of a structured semantic representation, a propositional form as indicated in the example²¹. One wonders whether this could have some significant effect on the perception of funniness, as it may well be that scripts that are facilitated just by accessing some of the lexical entries via word recognition are more easily available than scripts that demand the construction of a structured semantic representation, thus imposing additional effort on the hearer who has to recognize them to identify the overlapping and opposition, and hence the funniness of the text. Raskin does not talk about this, but he mentions that the more firmly one script has been established before the second is recognized, the better the quality of the joke (1985: 146). In his analysis though, this fact is seen as responsible for the surprise factor common to most forms of humour, but the issue of the relative accessibility of the scripts involved is not considered²².

²¹ In fact, there is a way of analysing the example in (20) such that the script for LOVER can be said to be evoked by the words *young, pretty, wife, whisper, come, right* and *in*. Raskin does not explain why the scripts are opposed, but perhaps the word *whisper* is important in the overlap.

²² In the framework of relevance theory that I adopt in my analysis, considerations of processing effort determine the assessment of relevance of an ostensive stimulus, and as one of the factors affecting processing effort is the relative accessibility of the concepts and assumptions required to process a new piece of information,

As mentioned above, the main hypothesis of the SSTH is that there are necessary and sufficient conditions in a text that characterize it as a joke. Because of this, the SSTH is very much a theory of text structure, and it belongs to a series of studies that assume that being humorous is a property of texts and not of processes of interpretation. Besides, because the theory also assumes that a text can be well-formed (e.g, as a joke) in just the same way that a sentence is, it looks like a code-oriented theory. This, however, is not strictly so. Indeed, as the preceding brief discussion of the operation of combinatorial rules suggests, Raskin attributes to them an enormous amount of inferential power and activity. To further illustrate this, I reproduce a summary of his more detailed analysis of (14) below (see *op.cit.*: 117-127 for detailed discussion).

Raskin provides a description of the scripts evoked by each word along the lines of example (7) above, explaining how re-marking occurs, and inappropriate scripts are filtered out. Once ambiguities are resolved, the entire first sentence is interpreted roughly as the paraphrase in (15)

- (15) Somebody who was previously treated for an illness wants to know whether the unique proprietor of a family residence is physically present in the residence.

At this stage, Raskin argues, "the combinatorial rules are ready to come up with the presuppositions, inferences and questions concerning the entire first sentence" (1985: 122). Some of what Raskin calls the presuppositions are listed in (16) and the

this issue becomes of importance.

inferences are illustrated in (17)

- | | | |
|------|-------|--|
| (16) | (i) | The patient is human |
| | (ii) | The doctor is human |
| | (iii) | There is a hearer |
| | (iv) | The patient is at the door of the doctor's residence |
| | (v) | The patient does not know the answer to the question |
| | | |
| (17) | (i) | The patient is male |
| | (ii) | The patient whispers because of a problem with his bronchi or lungs |
| | (iii) | The patient wants to see the doctor (about the problem with his lungs) |
| | (iv) | The patient wants the doctor to correct the problem |

Also, the combinatorial rules produce the question in (18)

- (18) Who is the hearer?

Next, (16-18) go to the storage labelled WORLD INFORMATION, where the four Gricean conversational maxims of Manner, Relevance, Quality and Quantity, which instruct co-operative conversationalists to speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly, are also stored²³. As the second sentence is processed, clause by clause, the

²³ Grice (1975) suggested that there is a set of assumptions that guide conversation. These are supposed to arise from basic rational considerations and jointly constitute a general *cooperative principle*, which instructs conversationalists to "make (their) contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk,

exchange in which (they) are engaged". In short, the maxims specify what speakers have to do to converse in an efficient, rational and co-operative way. The content of the four maxims, and their associated submaxims is as follows:

The maxim of Quality

Try to make your contribution one that is true, specifically

- (i) do not say what you believe to be false
- (ii) do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

The maxim of Quantity

- (i) make your contribution as informative as required for the current purposes of the exchange
- (ii) do not make your contribution more informative than is

required

The maxim of Relevance

make your contribution relevant

The Maxim of Manner

combinatorial rules continually relate the results to the interpretation of the first sentence. Again, a number of inferences are performed by the combinatorial rules, amongst which are those in (19), triggered by the presence of the items *no* and *come in*.

- (19) a. If the patient does come into the doctor's home he will not see the doctor
 b. If the patient does come into the doctor's home he will not achieve his purpose
 c. The patient does not need to come into the doctor's home²⁴

The combinatorial rules produce the question (20)

- (20) Why does the doctor's wife want the patient to come in?

The crucial step, according to Raskin, comes when "the only answer the combinatorial rules will be able to come up with on the basis of further inferencing is" (21) (1985: 124):

- (21) The doctor's wife does not understand that (19a)

be perspicuous, and specifically:

- (i) avoid obscurity
 (ii) avoid ambiguity
 (iii) be brief
 (iv) be orderly

²⁴ Raskin's analysis does not explicitly attribute a distinct role to the assumptions in (16-17) as compared to that of the assumptions in (19) and (21). This is implausible. Assumptions that a hearer simply takes for granted are, intuitively at least, different from those that require more elaborated inferential work to be acknowledged. In my analysis I will argue that their different status is functionally significant in the processing of humorous discourse. Notice also that there is no specification of a principled way in which these presuppositions emerge, nor of any constraints on the derivation of inferences. The combinatorial rules are simply assumed to behave rationally, so they are in charge not only of matching, filtering and selecting scripts, but they also produce inferences. In fact, some of the inferences suggested by Raskin do not have a natural derivation in his system. Why should, for instance, (17i) be derived? Presumably, there is no information in the evoked scripts that should lead to the inference that the patient is male.

The system concludes that the wife's interpretation is different from that obtained by the combinatorial rules and will start the search for an alternative analysis.

Here is where the system switches to an alternative strategy of operation corresponding to the non *bona-fide* mode of communication. Although Raskin says before that this mode includes several variants (e.g. fiction writing, lying, joke-telling, etc.), he is not explicit as to how the system knows it should straightforwardly adopt the joke-telling variant here²⁵.

In this mode, as mentioned above, the combinatorial rules are instructed to operate differently. In particular, they have access to the conditions on well-formedness of jokes described in (13), so they will look for a competing script analysis of the entire text or part of it, and will search actively for a potentially opposed script²⁶.

I have as yet not explained what it means for two scripts to be opposed. Raskin suggests that the opposition in jokes is always reducible to the "real" vs "unreal", and that there are three main subtypes within the real-unreal opposition that are of interest to the analysis of jokes.

The first subtype of opposition is between *actual* and *non-actual*, the former category referring to the situation in which the characters of the joke are, and the latter

²⁵ The analysis I will provide in the following chapters considers this problem, and accounts for how hearers recognize misunderstandings from lies, arguments and jokey remarks, without postulating that there are different modes of overt intentional communication, involving different interpretation procedures.

²⁶ For an explicit -although vague- algorithm for the operation of the combinatorial rules in this mode see Raskin (op.cit.: 125)

to a situation not compatible with the setting of the joke. The second category is the *normal-abnormal*, which Raskin equates with the expected versus the unexpected state of affairs. The third subtype of script opposition captures the difference between what is plausible and what is not under the heading *possible-impossible*. Finer distinctions involving "aspects of human life", such as life-death, sex-non-sex, money-non-money are said to be involved in the structure of joke-texts, and to fall within one of these three broader categories (Raskin 1985: 111).

So, following the guidelines described, the system would produce the following analysis of (14), and hence will recognize it as a joke (1985: 127).

- (22) Script 1: MEDICAL (DOCTOR)
 Script 2: ADULTERY (LOVER)
 Type of oppositeness: Actual/Non-actual, Sex/Non-sex
 Result: Joke

Let me now comment briefly on Raskin's suggestion that there is a non-bona-fide mode of communication regulated by special principles. He argues that there is a parallel to Grice's co-operative principle and maxims operating in the non-bona-fide-communication mode of joke telling, as follows:

- (23) a. Maxim of Quantity: Give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke
 b. Maxim of Quality: Say only what is compatible with the world of the joke
 c. Maxim of Relation: Say only what is relevant to the joke
 d. Maxim of Manner: Tell the joke efficiently (1985: 103)

The maxims in (23) are recognized as the basis on which the non-bona-fide mode of

communication operates. Raskin mentions that just as

"Grice's maxims do not explain the mechanisms which are involved in following them (...) the maxims in ((23)), while shedding some light in the semantics of humour, do not really provide an explicit account of the semantic mechanisms of humour" (op.cit. 103-104)

What Raskin maintains is that these explicit semantic mechanisms that underlie the interpretation and production of humour are based on the script-based lexicon and the combinatorial rules. However, suggesting the existence of (23) raises a further question, not addressed by Raskin.

A crucial part of Gricean pragmatic approaches is that conversationalists exploit the maxims to generate special kinds of inference. So, when speakers are seen as flouting one or some of the maxims, hearers will generate *implicatures*, inferences assumed to be intended by the speaker in order to preserve the assumption that she is still adhering to the co-operative principle. The point Grice made was not that speakers always conform to his conversational maxims at the superficial level, but that at some deeper level they are always considered. The interest of the maxims for the study of verbal communication is that their exploitation generates inferences beyond the semantic content of the sentences uttered. But what would happen if, engaged in the non-bona-fide mode of communication, a speaker is seen as flouting one of the maxims in (23)? Is this at all possible? Will inferences be generated? What would their role be? Are the maxims in (23) seen as something by which joke-tellers always abide? Raskin offers no answer.

A further point arises with regard to the switch into the non-bona-fide mode

of communication. Raskin believes that once a hearer recognises that the speaker is violating the co-operative principle, the next immediate hypothesis he makes is that the speaker is engaged in humour, and this guess, he assumes, is determined by our culture. He writes:

"It is also interesting to note that if the hearer establishes beyond reasonable doubt that the speaker violates the cooperative principle for bona-fide communication, the hearer's next immediate hypothesis, *in our culture*, is that the speaker is engaged in humour" (1985: 104, emphasis mine)²⁷

In the relevance theoretic framework that I adopt, the status of the cooperative principle and the conversational maxims is reassessed, a point to which I will return later. But more specifically, I will try to show that the recognition of humorous discourse is not dependent on the violation of the cooperative principle, nor on the adherence to the non-bona-fide maxims of conversation. Also, I will argue that the conclusion that a speaker is engaged in humour, as opposed to lying, or arguing, follows not from culturally determined default strategies, but from the differential order of certain metarepresentations that a hearer needs to use in interpretation, for which there cannot be a culturally determined pre-set value. Hence, although a strong cultural tendency to engage in humour may favour the selection of the adequate type of metarepresentations for the recognition of a 'humorous mode', the ultimate determining factor in this process is a cognitive and not a social one.

²⁷ Notice, by the way, the inconsistent way in which Raskin initially subsumes implicature, metaphor, irony, humour and so forth under the label *non-bona-fide*, and then talks about principles of the *non-bona-fide* mode of communication that, if anything, would seem to apply only to joke telling.

The idea that the interpretation of humorous discourse deviates from the processes that govern serious discourse is not exclusive to Raskin, and in fact, it seems to be fairly accepted in the literature. So, Mulkay (1988), for instance, argues that disagreement, contradiction, ambiguity and paradox occur regularly in discourse. However, he notes, these occurrences are not taken by speakers to reveal a multiplicity of contradictory worlds, and they do not lead them to conclude that the world is radically subjective. Instead, interactants take for granted that discrepancies do not originate in the world itself, but must arise from human failure to observe or report it accurately. So, he goes on, when contradictions arise in the serious mode of discourse individuals have a series of "interpretative techniques" at their disposal for explaining how such failures may have taken place²⁸. These techniques are assumed to be (a) culturally provided, and (b) absent from the humorous mode. He writes:

"(the humorous) mode operates according to fundamentally different assumptions, employs distinctly different discursive forms and generates radically different interpretative outcomes from the serious mode" (1988: 26)

The first part of Mulkay's argument is right, but his conclusion, summarised in the previous quote, does not follow. It is, of course, an observable fact that individuals do not attribute the source of the varied contradictions they encounter to the inconsistency of the world, but rather impute them to some human failure in interpreting the environment. It is also true that speakers have recourse to a number of means to account for the paradoxes they find. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the

²⁸ For detailed discussion of the kind of procedures Mulkay has in mind see Pollner (1974)

strategies to deal with paradoxical observations should be culturally dependent, as Mulkey believes. It would be surprising if they were. Arguably, such strategies derive from universal cognitive principles shared by members of the species. That the operation of these principles may yield different explanations of paradoxes in different cultures is evident, but this does not mean that the cognitive principles underlying such varied accounts are themselves specific to particular groups. These, I believe, universal principles operate crucially in the ability of human beings to generate and experience humour as well, but, contrary to Mulkey's conclusion, are not specific to humour either²⁹. As my approach to humour is developed in the next chapters, I will provide arguments in support of this view. These arguments will revolve around the notions of descriptive and interpretive use of linguistic expressions, and metarepresentational thought, which will be properly defined then. Although I will not pursue these matters in this chapter, it is worth insisting here that there is no need to postulate a different mode of operation of the principles that guide utterance interpretation to explain how humorous effects are produced and understood.

Mulkey is even more radical than Raskin in his view that serious discourse is processed following different principles from those used in humorous discourse. He takes the contrast to apply even more widely, for instance, to the storage of information under scripts, and he is convinced that "the scripts associated with certain

²⁹ Recall, for instance, Moreall's point that humour is tied to the capacity for objective, detached, representational thought; and the observations of Smith and Tsimpli that difficulties to handle humour in, for instance, autistic subjects, occur in parallel to difficulties in lying and processing non-literal language.

words in the course of serious discourse are different from the scripts for the same words when they appear in jokes" (1988: 42).

Raskin's SSTH has become very influential in the study of verbal humour and has inspired a wide range of papers and research (see for instance, Zhao 1988, who has applied the model to explore the information-conveying aspects of jokes, Chlopicky 1987 and Holcomb 1992, who analyse humorous short stories and narrative, Morrisey 1989, on the analysis of humorous metaphors, among many others).

Among the script-theorists a concern arose about two issues that the theory did not seem able to handle. First, the theory was originally conceived to apply to jokes, and its application to other types of humour was not straightforward. Second, the theory makes an implicit claim that, essentially, all jokes have the same underlying structure: they are all based on oppositions between scripts, and all oppositions can be reduced to either the three first level pairs of opposed scripts (REAL/UNREAL=ACTUAL/NON-ACTUAL, POSSIBLE/IMPOSSIBLE, NORMAL/ABNORMAL) or the five second level pairs (GOOD/BAD, LIFE/DEATH, OBSCENE/NON-OBSCENE, MONEY/NON-MONEY, HIGH/LOW STATURE) (see Attardo 1994: 220). Attardo, however, showed concern that the theory should be able to account for the fact that in contrasting pairs of jokes such as (24) and (25), people in general feel that (24) is more similar to (25) than, say, (26), although (24) and (26) share the same script-opposition and activate the same DUMB script (Attardo 1994: 220).

- (24) How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five, one to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he's standing on.

- (25) The number of Pollacks needed to screw in a light bulb? Five- one holds the bulb and four turn the table.
- (26) How many Poles does it take to wash a car? Two. One to hold the sponge and one to move the car back and forth.

Because the SSTH cannot explain this in detail, Attardo (1988) proposed to broaden the theory so as to include a number of additional parameters called *knowledge resources* along which jokes can vary. The full version of the revised theory was later published by Attardo and Raskin, presented as a "general theory of verbal humour, focusing on jokes as its most representative subset" (1991: 293). Empirical verification of its claims is reported in Ruch et al (1993).

4. The general theory of verbal humour

The GTVH assumes that, in addition to script opposition, five other knowledge resources (KRs) must be drawn upon when generating a joke. Each KR is a list or set of lists from which choices need to be made for use in the joke. Raskin and Attardo regard these knowledge resources as falling under one of two categories: *content* or *tool* oriented. In addition, a hierarchical relation among the knowledge resources is postulated, script opposition being the most abstract level at which joke variation can occur.

Content oriented KRs are *script opposition* (SO), *target* (TA) and *situation*

(SI), while *logical mechanism* (LM), *narrative strategy* (NS) and *language* (LA) are conceived of as tools used to express the content.

Language is the parameter that captures the actual verbalization of the joke, resulting in its text. It includes all the choices at the phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels of language structure that the speaker can make, and is responsible for capturing variations that result from paraphrase. *Narrative strategy* considers the genre or microgenre of the joke, that is, whether it is set up as an expository text, as a riddle, as a question and answer sequence, etc. The parameter *target* addresses the butt of the joke, and is the only one which is optional, while the *situation* parameter of a joke comprises everything involved in its "aboutness". What seems to be the most interesting parameter is the *logical mechanism*. Ruch, Attardo and Raskin (1993) write that "the logical mechanism accounts for the way in which the two senses (scripts) of the joke are brought together" (1993: 125) These possible ways include principles like the figure-ground reversal borrowed from gestalt psychology, straightforward juxtapositions, complex errors in reasoning such as wrong or false analogies, garden path phenomena, etc.

Taking the above components, plus the script opposition parameter, a joke can be thought of as a sextuple, specifying the instantiation of each KR as a parameter in the following way:

(27) JOKE: {LA, SI, NS, TA, SO, LM}

Because the theory is concerned with joke variation, Attardo and Raskin are interested in establishing some kind of hierarchical organization among the KRs. The basic

principle on which the hierarchy is based is *determination*, taken as the extent to which the choices made for one parameter will limit or reduce the options available for the instantiation of any other. The following is predicted to be the hierarchical organisation that determines the perception of similarity between different pairs of jokes:

$$(28) \quad SO \rightarrow LM \rightarrow SI \rightarrow TA \rightarrow NS \rightarrow LA,$$

where SO is regarded as the less determined parameter and LA as the most determined. It is assumed that determination correlates directly with joke similarity, given that the less determined a KR is, the more it permits the introduction of diverging elements that will provoke a perception of dissimilarity. So, the new theory is basically a model of joke representation consisting of six levels and a taxonomy of joke variance.

The empirical research motivated by the theory concentrates on measuring people's perceptions of joke similarity among variants of an "anchor" joke. The question of how perceptions of funniness are affected by the manipulation of the different parameters is not addressed, presumably because the theory does not want to explain what makes a joke funny, but simply what makes a text qualify as a joke.

Ruch, Attardo and Raskin (1993) presented subjects with three sets of jokes, each consisting of a basic (anchor) joke and comparison jokes, in which variations in one and only one of the six parameters occurred. Subjects were asked to rate the degree of similarity between the anchor joke and the six comparison jokes.

A significant difference between all consecutive KR was found, as postulated

by the GTVH, except that SI and LM were not in the right order. A variation in the LM makes a comparison less different from the anchor than a variation in the SI.

Ruch *et al* (1993) offer several explanations for their findings. These vary from the inadequacy of the experimental design, through the possibility that the hierarchy should be redrawn, to the nature of the logical mechanism. So, one of their suggestions is that the "the logical mechanism is the least explored of all KRs and there could have been several factors at play which may have influenced the subject's perception" (1993: 133). Another is the more radical idea that "it might be that in fact, the LM is an artifact of the theory and should be removed altogether" (1993: 133).

The evolution of the SSTH has thus brought it much closer to text linguistics than it was before. The results of Ruch *et al* (1993) are, after all, not surprising. Clearly, the parameter LM suggested by Attardo and Raskin (1991) differs in nature from the others. It is the LM that presumably would capture any humour-specific inferential pattern -if indeed this should exist. But the way it has been incorporated in their new model is problematic for at least two reasons. First, it seems reasonable to suppose that the LM will be more related to perceptions of funniness than of joke similarity, at least, because intuitively it does not seem dissociable from the "surprise factor". If this is right, it means that changes in this parameter may induce an alteration in the perception of funniness itself, which might affect the judgements of joke variation as well, but in different ways from the remaining KRs. Second, it is not clear that the way Attardo and Raskin have defined the parameter selects a homogeneous set of phenomena. For instance, figure-ground reversals are perceptual

rather than inferential processes³⁰, straightforward juxtapositions do not seem naturally distinguishable from script oppositions as such (at least not in the way script-theory conceives them), while errors in reasoning, such as wrong or false analogies, are usually part of a process of pragmatic garden-path phenomena, which Attardo and Raskin do not distinguish explicitly from syntactic garden-path cases. The latter arise in parsing, hence in earlier stages of processing, perhaps from the operation of default principles such as the minimal attachment and late closure principles (cf. e.g. Frazier 1987a, 1987b)³¹. It is not clear that the conflation of all these aspects under a single parameter of joke variation should be a promising move in any case, but a truly inferentially-oriented approach would be interested in precisely these aspects as they apply to humour. The fact that Attardo and Raskin are so willing to eliminate the LM from their theory is disappointing, but coheres with their objective, (in my view, hardly central to an account of how humour works), of accounting for what determines people's judgements of variation across joke texts.

In the next chapter I will look at approaches more definitely and clearly committed to an inferential view of communication and verbal humour.

³⁰ A similar point has been made by Forabosco (1992)

³¹ Frazier and her colleagues have suggested that in processing sentences an initial syntactic analysis is assigned on the basis of structural information only. Throughout the process, the perceiver incorporates each word of the input into a constituent structure, postulating only the minimal number of nodes required by the grammar at each step in the process.

following the strategies of *minimal attachment*, which instructs the perceiver not to postulate any potentially unnecessary nodes, and *late closure*, which indicates that, if grammatically permissible, new items should be attached into the clause or phrase currently being processed.

Chapter Four

Pragmatics and Humour: Inference-Oriented Approaches

In New York the acoustics are good for laughter, for life is all external, all action, no thought, no meditation, no dreaming, no reflection, only the exuberance of action. No memory of the past, no looking back, no doubts, no questions.

(Anaïs Nin: 1934)

The idea that humorous discourse is deviant from standard discourse is not exclusive to those approaches that are rather oriented towards the code-aspect of communication. The most common claim in inferential treatments of humour in the tradition of Gricean pragmatics (Grice 1975, 1989) is that humorous effects arise as a consequence of the violation of conversational maxims. Within the theory of speech acts (Austin 1962, Searle 1969) it is often argued that they result from the exploitation of illocutionary ambiguities and the violation of Searle's felicity conditions. These two approaches will be briefly discussed below, but it is worth noting that the overall picture in the inferentially oriented pragmatic literature on humour is also very much in line with the view that humour is a result of the perception of incongruities.

1. Gricean pragmatics

As mentioned before, Grice was concerned with accounting for the fact that utterances convey much more than they literally encode. If this is possible, the only explanation is that hearers must engage in some inferential work whose principles lie outside the organisation of language. These inferences thus have a different nature from that of semantic and logical entailments. Grice was particularly concerned with how hearers are able to derive the assumptions that speakers convey implicitly. It has been since recognized that it is not only the retrieval of what is implicitly communicated that involves pragmatic inference, but also aspects of the explicit content of utterances (see for instance, Carston 1988, 1996). In general, the objective of pragmatic theory is to account for how this type of pragmatic inference takes place.

The concept of *conversational implicature* was developed to refer to the implicitly communicated assumptions that are derived pragmatically (as opposed to the logical entailments, implications, and consequences of an utterance, which are derived solely on the basis of logical and semantic content). The notion of pragmatic inference allows for substantial simplifications in the content of semantic descriptions, and shows how what is linguistically encoded is merely a skeletal meaning representation that underdetermines what is communicated. It is, as already noticed, through inferential work that hearers build upon these blueprints more fully determined content forms. The upshot is that natural language expressions often have

relatively simple, stable and unitary senses that get enriched by context dependent pragmatically derived meanings¹.

Grice's central assumption is that there exists a set of general principles that guide conversation. These principles are seen as arising from considerations of rationality and are conceived as guidelines that underlie the *co-operative* use of language in conversation (see Chapter Three, footnote 16), and indeed, many other types of co-operative activity. They are not, however, rules to which people strictly adhere, but rather principles towards which they orient. One of the fundamental ideas in Grice's framework is that whenever talk recognisably does not proceed according to their stipulations, hearers assume that, at a deeper level, the co-operative principle is still being observed. It is in the effort to preserve this assumption that implicatures arise.

Thus, pragmatic inferences can be generated in at least two ways: from the observation of the maxims or from their flouting. In the first case, a speaker may be seen to be observing the maxims, but the hearer will still need to derive inferentially some of the assumptions the speaker intends to convey. This is the case in (1):

(1) Peter: I'm very thirsty.

Mary: I've just made some orange juice, it's in the kitchen.

Here Mary's utterance may be seen to implicate that Peter is allowed to help himself

¹ Recall that Raskin's script-oriented semantics has chosen to follow the opposite alternative in producing more complex semantic representations both in structure and in content, thereby losing any principled semantics/pragmatics distinction.

to the orange juice, that the kitchen is Mary's kitchen and not that of her grandmother whom she visited in the afternoon and who lives 300 miles away, and so on².

It may be that simultaneous adherence to all the maxims is sometimes impossible. So, Grice argued that a second case in which implicatures arise is when a maxim is violated, but its violation is to be explained by assuming a clash with another maxim (1988: 32). Well known examples involve cases where adhering to the maxim of quantity brings about a violation of the maxim of quality. In other words, where being more informative would lead a speaker to say something for which he lacks adequate evidence, such as in (2)

(2) Peter: Where's Susan?

Mary: She's not in.

Unless Mary is being overtly uncooperative (i.e. communicatively so) and for some reason wants to withhold the information of Susan's whereabouts, the implicature is that she doesn't know where exactly Susan is.

An example of an inference that arises from the observation of the maxim of Quantity is (3)

(3) Peter: How long have you lived here?

Mary: Six years

Although it is logically true that if Mary has lived here for twenty years, then she has

² In discussing a similar example, Grice notices that unless the speaker thinks, or thinks it possible, that the information will enable the hearer to act to fulfil his objective, the speaker could be seen as infringing the maxim 'be relevant' (1989: 32). I take this as an indication that Grice regarded 'relevance' to be crucial, but I will return to this below.

also lived here for six years, unless a specific context cancels the inference, it will be assumed that Mary has lived here, if not for six years exactly, indeed for some similarly long period and certainly not for, say, seven years. This is because by saying six years, a lower boundary is logically established which makes the sentence mean that the speaker has lived there for at least six years. Because the maxim of quantity states that if the speaker had been in a position to be more informative, she would have done so, an upper limit is implicated so that the utterance conveys that the speaker has not lived there for more than six years. Hence, the inference arises that the speaker has lived there for (exactly) six years, give or take a few months, if she speaks loosely.

Inferences can also be generated when the speaker appears to violate deliberately one or more of the maxims. Grice called these usages floutings or exploitations. Take (4):

(4) If I'm there, I'm there

The logical form of the utterance makes it a tautology, hence in (4) the maxim of quantity is apparently breached. Grice maintains that at the level of what is said, such remarks are noninformative. However, an utterance of (4) in a context where participants are making arrangements to go together to a party, by someone who is not sure whether he can make it, will not be taken as an uninformative statement, but rather as a suggestion that, although he might turn up, they should not wait for him. So, Grice concludes, utterances like this are informative at the level of what is implicated (1989: 33).

As a last illustration, (5) exemplifies cases where some implicature is derived from the exploitation of the maxim of manner. Grice argues that in failing to be succinct a speaker will indicate some "striking difference between Miss X's performance and those to which the word 'singing' is usually applied" (1989: 37)

- (5) Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of "Home sweet home" (Grice 1988: 37)

The most obvious assumption, Grice argues, is that Miss X's performance was weak, and so the speaker will be taken to implicate just that.

1.1 Gricean pragmatics and humorous effects

Several authors have suggested that humour can arise from the violation of Gricean maxims of conversation (e.g. Leech 1983, Yamaguchi 1988). Perhaps this was motivated by the observation that cases like (5) are often regarded as amusing remarks, and by the fact that Grice himself considered irony (which may be humorous) as a case of implicature.

Grice viewed not only irony, but also metaphor, meiosis and hyperbole as cases of violation of the first maxim of quality (do not say what you believe to be false). In circumstances where it is obvious to the speaker and his audience that the speaker does not believe what he says, the inference arises that he must be trying to communicate a related proposition, different from the one he has expressed. Grice claims that in cases of irony "the most obviously related proposition is the

contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward" (1989: 34), and this is derived through implicature.³ Though irony is not always humorous, it is always a case of verbal wit.

Attardo argues that the following cases show how a humorous effect may arise from the violation of each of the maxims (1994: 272):

- (6)
- a. *Quantity*
A: Excuse me, do you know what time it is?
B: Yes
 - b. *Relation*
"How many surrealists does it take to screw in a light bulb?"
"Fish"
 - c. *Manner*
"Do you believe in clubs for young people?"
"Only when kindness fails"
 - d. *Quality*
"Why did the Vice President fly to Panama?"
"Because the fighting is over"

Attardo argues that what sets these cases apart is that they do not exploit the maxims but rather violate them, and claims that no derivation of implicatures will restore the assumption that the CP is being adhered to. What is violated then is the co-operative principle itself, so that, in Grice's terms, the speaker will be seen as "opting out". In Attardo's view, this poses the following problem: how is it possible then that speakers do successfully engage in communicative practices that involve humorous exchanges? (1994: 275). The problem emerges, he goes on, because while the texts in (6) are examples of non-cooperative behaviour, they still make sense, and are understood and recognised as jokes.

³ Different accounts of irony have been put forward since, and I will return to this in subsequent chapters.

Notice that this view immediately leads to an inescapable difficulty. Consider the case of (6b) again. While it may be funny if uttered in certain circumstances, it can also be simply rude, or uncooperative, though, I assume, in a rather different way from the lack of cooperativeness that leads a hearer to switch to the non-bona-fide mode of communication that Raskin and Attardo take humour to be. How would a hearer know whether to interpret it as a sign that the speaker *wants* to be rude, or as a humorous remark? Predicting that these two alternative interpretations can be difficult to discriminate is not undesirable for a theory of verbal humour. Attempts at humour often fail in precisely this way, and hearers take offence. But once we are set in this mode -if we ever are-, the frameworks offered by Raskin, Attardo *et al* do not offer any finer grained distinctions. Still, it seems plausible to go further in accounting for this failure than simply collapsing all such cases together under the postulated non-bona-fide mode of communication. I will return to this point later.

Attardo and Raskin's explanation for the above mentioned "paradox" is roughly as follows. Recall that Raskin (1985) has proposed not only the existence of a different communication mode, but also a different Cooperative Principle in charge of guiding exchanges in this mode. The different CPs do not clash because a hierarchy of CPs is also established (Raskin 1992, Attardo 1994). At the lowest level, the CP is assumed to hold, while the humour-CP can accommodate the original CP, but also allows for violations of the CP "as long as they are eventually redeemed by an ulterior humorous intent" (Attardo 1994: 287). So, in the non-bona-fide mode of communication, it is not the case that a maxim appears to be violated so as to follow

another maxim, rather, it is violated to follow a different CP. Apparently, 'humorous intent' is a default inference, and perceptions of rudeness arise only when this fails⁴.

Yamaguchi (1988) has tried to argue that although conversational maxims are at times uncooperatively violated, it does not follow that another cooperative principle needs to be postulated for joke-telling and understanding. Her claim is that maxim violation arises in what she calls the garden-path jokes, and perhaps only in those cases⁵. The sole purpose of the violation is to make the joke potentially ambiguous, and in fact, she argues, two types of case can be distinguished (both are called cases of 'deceptive' violation). There is one type of case where it is not the speaker who is responsible for the violation, but one of the characters in the joke. The narrator is merely 'reporting' on what the characters say. So, she presents the 'Character-Did-It Hypothesis' (1988: 327) to account for these cases:

- (7) a. One of the characters in a joke is free to violate the maxims of conversation in order to produce the essential ambiguity of the joke
 b. The narrator must avoid violation of the maxims, When for some reason the maxims are to be violated in the narrator's own report of the event, either the narrator needs to pass on the responsibility for the violation to one of the characters, or at least to minimize the narrator's own responsibility for the violation in one way or another.

Cases where the violation of the maxims appears to be the responsibility of the narrator can be accommodated by a set of strategies briefly discussed below.

⁴What helps a hearer recognise that in such cases of intended rudeness humour cannot be or was not intended is not spelled out.

⁵ A garden-path joke is "a joke in which the context is potentially ambiguous in that it has potentially a first and a second reading, the former being replaced by the latter at the end of the joke" (1988: 325)

As an example of the first type of maxim violation, that performed by the character in the joke, consider (8)

- (8) The boss finally agreed to give Ken the afternoon off because he said his girlfriend was going to have a baby.
Next morning the boss said, 'Was it a boy or a girl'
'Too soon to tell', replied Ken. 'We won't know for another nine months'.

The idea is that the maxim of quantity is violated, "quietly and unostentatiously", as Grice would have put it (1989: 30), but that the narrator cannot be held responsible for this, because of the question the boss asks the next morning⁶. The hearer hence assumes that the character Ken is responsible for the violation. Yamaguchi goes on to argue that since the narrator is only reporting the violation, he is, therefore, only 'mentioning' (as opposed to 'using') the uncooperative expression.

Yamaguchi acknowledges that there are certain cases that make the 'character-did-it' hypothesis more difficult to maintain, as it is clearly the narrator who breaches a maxim. These cases include jokes such as (9) below, where the quantity maxim is violated:

- (9) A pair of suburban couples who had known each other for quite some time talked it over and decided to do a little conjugal swapping. The trade was made the following evening, and the newly arranged couples retired to their respective houses. After about an hour of bedroom bliss, one of the wives propped herself up on her elbow, looked at her new partner and said:
'Well. I wonder how the boys are getting along'

⁶If the character had not violated this maxim, say, by saying 'We're trying to have a baby as soon as possible', and it was the narrator who had reported the fact inaccurately, the boss' question could not be explained

Still, Yamaguchi maintains, we do not need extra modes of communication and additional principles. She argues that this is an instance of *evasion* rather than a case of maxim violation. The difference is that the point where the contribution becomes as informative as required is delayed, but not altogether absent. Apart from evasion, she discusses two more strategies to minimize the narrator's responsibility for the violation: *viewpoint projection*, where the narrator simply takes the point of view of the character in his narration, as in (10),

- (10) She was wearing a very tight skirt, and when she tried to board the Fifth Avenue bus she found she couldn't lift her leg. She reached back and unzipped her zipper. It didn't seem to do any good, so she reached back and unzipped it again. Suddenly, the man behind her lifted her up and put her on the top step.
 'How dare you?', she demanded.
 'Well, lady', he said, 'by the time you unzipped my fly for the second time I thought we were good friends'

and *backgrounding*, where "the expression that counts as a violation on the part of the narrator gets, as it were, pushed away into the background and no longer holds the reader's attention" (1988: 334), as in (11).

- (11) Upon entering a room in a Washington hotel, a lady recognized a prominent congressman pacing up and down and asked him what he was doing there.
 'I'm going to deliver a speech'
 'Do you usually get so nervous before making a speech?'
 'Nervous,' replied the politician, 'no, indeed, I never get nervous!'
 'Wee, then', asked the woman, 'what are you doing in the ladies' room?'

The conclusion of her analysis is that jokes sometimes involve the violation of a maxim, but either this violation is usually attributable to the characters in the joke and

not to the joke-teller, or it is minimized by the three strategies discussed above. In cases where there appears to be a violation, this is only temporary, and the presumption of cooperativeness is restored shortly.

Yamaguchi, I think, is right in pointing out that there is no need to postulate all the apparatus that Raskin and his colleagues have put forward. Indeed, if I understand her analysis correctly, although she does not draw the following conclusion herself, I would take her analysis a step further. It looks as if the postulation of the non-bona-fide mode maxims (see (23) in Chapter Two) in fact would *preclude* the possibility of interpreting the jokes discussed in Yamaguchi's paper. The reason is simple: Grice's conversational maxims account for the implicatures hearers derive. If we switch to a different mode, where the rather prescriptive rules in (23, Ch.2) operate, there is no way of accounting for the fact that the crucial inferences -on which the jokes hinge- are indeed made in the first place (e.g. that Ken's girlfriend was giving birth that afternoon, that the couples swapped partners in a conventional fashion, that what the girl unzipped was her zipper, that the room in question was not the ladies' and so on). Perhaps Raskin means a two-stage processing, whereby the maxims in (23, Ch. 2) only enter the scene to account for the fact that the joke-teller was, after all, not being uncooperative. Still, do we subsequently need to check that the joke-teller has adhered to them to reach the conclusion that he was joking? Clearly not, given that, as Yamaguchi argues, the violation is only temporary, and the consequent granting of the so far withheld information shows that it was retained with the sole intention of generating an ambiguity on which the joke rests. This is enough

on its own to restore the presumption of cooperativeness. In fact, when speakers are truly non-cooperative, such as in cases of lying or hiding important information, almost by definition speakers will not provide immediate evidence that the CP has been violated, or correct their breaching of the maxims, as is the case in jokes.

A second area in which Yamaguchi's conclusions unfortunately stop well before what her own analysis reveals is the little attention she gives to her strategies of evasion, viewpoint projection and backgrounding. I will go back to this in later chapters, but here I would like to suggest, without developing my claim in full, that these strategies account for much more than Yamaguchi herself has acknowledged. Yamaguchi appeals to these strategies as a last resort that enables her to minimize the narrator's responsibility in the alleged maxim violation. Hence, they do some kind of stitch and patch work to provide support for her character-did-it hypothesis. In fact, I will argue that the use of 'strategies' like this is, on its own, at least part of what is crucial for the generation of the humorous effect. Indeed, without them it seems impossible to distinguish between humorous cases of maxim violation and instances of maxim violation where no humour arises. Still the question remains as to how we are able to spot the fact that the speaker is using such strategies, as opposed to being incompetent or downright uncooperative. In the framework of relevance theory which I adopt in my analysis in later chapters, there is no appeal to any maxims, and violations of the cognitive principle that guides understanding cannot arise. Notably, in such a framework, devices that resemble Yamaguchi's strategies appear naturally in the analysis of how humorous interpretations are derived, giving additional support

to the claim that no special interpretation mechanisms are needed to understand verbal humour.

To sum up, I agree with Yamaguchi's attempt to show that there is no need to postulate the existence of either a non-bona-fide mode of communication or a special interpretation processes to account for humour. However, I will go further in suggesting, first, that the postulation of the apparatus to handle non-bona-fide communication is indeed contradictory in that in fact its operation would prevent the interpretation it sets out to generate, and second, in proposing that a better account of humorous effects can be achieved if recourse to the conversational maxims is altogether abandoned.

2. Speech act theory

Speech act theory was launched by Austin (1962)⁷ as a reaction to the assumption that a sentence that cannot be verified as true or false is meaningless, which was prevalent in the logical positivism tradition. Strongly associated with this idea is also the view that the main use of language is to describe states of affairs by using statements, and that truth conditions are central to language understanding.

Austin pointed out that even declaratives are not always used with the intention of making a true or false statement (hence of *saying* something), but rather of *doing*

⁷Austin's 1955 Harvard University lectures were published posthumously as *How to do Things with Words* in 1962. This is generally considered the seminal work that gave rise to speech act theory.

something. In uttering sentences, Austin sees speakers as agents performing actions at three different levels⁸ Rather than being true or false, speech acts can be *felicitous* or *infelicitous*, and so an attempt to define the set of 'felicity conditions' for the successful performance of the various speech acts followed (Austin 1962, Searle 1969).

As in the case of the conversational maxims, some authors have noted that certain forms of violation of the felicity conditions on the issuance of a speech act may lead to humorous effects. As an illustration of this, I now turn to discuss briefly the work of Hancher (1980)

2.1 Speech act theory and humorous effects

The discussion above is meant merely to outline the most salient aspects of speech act theory that are applied to the study of humour. Two of them are particularly important in this respect. First, recall that a speech act operates at three different levels: the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary. Second, there are felicity conditions constitutive of a speech act in the absence of which the speech act is not successful.

⁸The *locutionary act*, which refers to the utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference, the *illocutionary act*, which is the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional force associated with it, and the *perlocutionary act*, which refers to the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effects being special to the circumstance of the utterance (Levinson 1983: 236)

While Gricean maxims are constraints towards which participants in conversation orient, they are not necessary rules of verbal exchanges. They merely regulate them to a certain degree. The felicity conditions, by contrast, are mandatory, constitutive conditions without which a speech act cannot possibly succeed. Whereas the exploitation of Gricean maxims gives rise to implicatures, the absence of the felicity conditions makes a speech act go wrong. But not always. Some have argued for another possibility: that the result can be humorous. In fact, two main possible sources of humorous effects have been discussed within the framework of speech act theory: the exploitation of ambiguities at the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary level, and the violation of the felicity conditions of a given act. Hancher (1980) has considered how ambiguity at both the locutionary and the illocutionary level can give rise to humorous effects. He has also discussed how humour can emerge from the violation of the felicity conditions of specific acts⁹. I now turn to review his analysis in this tradition as an illustration.

2.1.1 *Locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary ambiguity*

Hancher provides an example of an old *Punch* cartoon, where the locutionary ambiguity gives rise to an illocutionary ambiguity. An officer running in his pyjamas

⁹ Hancher also examines how humorous effects can originate in the violation of conversational maxims, but I won't look at this aspect here as Yamaguchi's paper should be enough to illustrate how this approach operates. It is worth noticing however that, contrary to Yamaguchi, Hancher does not try to minimize the responsibility of the narrator in the violation of the maxims.

from a smoking barracks, shouting "Fire! Fire!", encounters a barrage of artillery. The officer's utterance is elliptical and hence can be completed as 'Fire has broken out' or as 'Open fire'. In the first case, the illocutionary act is that of a warning, while in the second it is a command (Hancher 1980: 21).

Confusion, indeterminacy and ambiguity can arise at the level of the illocution, even in the absence of ambiguity at the locutionary level. As an illustration, Hancher mentions a joke where a character takes a complaint to be a boast:

- (12) A woman calls her housemaid: "Susan, just look here! I can write my name in the dust on the top of this table !" The maid replies "Lor, Mum, so you can! Now I never had no edercation myself" (1980: 21)

A humorous effect can be achieved also by confusion at the illocutionary level. To illustrate this, Hancher quotes a passage from Ring Lardner's *The Young Immigrants* (1920: 78, quoted in Hancher 1980: 21), where the narrator, a four year old, mistakes the force of his father's reply:

- (13) Are you lost daddy I asked tenderly. Shut up he explained.

It is more difficult to find examples that play on the perlocutionary level of an utterance alone. This is not surprising. Austin argued that the locutionary and illocutionary levels are detachable and autonomous¹⁰, but he acknowledged that the distinction between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary levels is more problematic.

Both levels refer to what is achieved through the issuance of an utterance, but whereas

¹⁰ On the basis of this, Austin argued that the study of meaning could proceed independently, but supplemented by a theory of illocutionary acts. Efforts in this direction have been undertaken by Searle and Vanderveken (1985) and developed further by Vanderveken (1990, 1991), who attempts to construct a formal theory of illocutionary acts that could be accommodated within a formal system of semantics such as Montague Grammar (see Bird 1994 for discussion).

the illocutionary act is what is directly achieved by the conventional force associated with the issuance of a certain kind of utterance in accordance with a conventional procedure, a perlocutionary act is not conventionally achieved. A perlocutionary act is specific to the circumstances of issuance, and includes all effects, intended and unintended, often vague and indeterminate, that some particular utterance in a particular situation may cause. Although Austin suggested an operational test consisting in paraphrasing the hypothetical illocutionary force of an utterance as an explicit performative (whatever consequences of an act are not paraphrasable in this way, should be regarded as perlocutionary), in many cases the two levels remain confused. The problem is that if the perlocutionary effects are to be identified with the consequences of what has been said, it will not always be possible to determine whether these consequences result from what is conventional or not, in part, because many illocutionary acts have inbuilt consequences, whose conventionality may be a matter of degree. For instance, the force of an offer calls strongly for a ratification, but not necessarily. In any case, whenever humorous effects can be seen as operating at the perlocutionary level, they are very likely to derive from the illocutionary forces of the speech acts involved as well. Hancher does not discuss perlocutionary effects in this respect, but I will use a couple of his examples to illustrate this point.

In the 'Fire' cartoon described above, the reaction of the soldiers is one of compliance with what they take to be an order. Is that reaction part of the illocutionary or of the perlocutionary force of the utterance? That the hearer is expected to comply when an order is issued is often treated in the literature on speech

acts as being an in-built consequent action specified in the illocutionary force of ordering. So, consider for instance a view that treats speech acts as operations on context, that is, as functions from contexts into contexts, where a context is understood as a set of propositions describing the beliefs, knowledge, commitments and so on of the participants in a verbal exchange (see e.g. Levinson 1983: 276, Stalnaker 1978, Gazdar 1981). In this framework, an order is defined along the following lines:

- (14) An *order* that p is a function from a context in which H is not required by S to bring about the state of affairs described by p , into one in which H is so required (Levinson 1983: 277, my emphasis)

Much of the point of the joke is a deviation in our expectations of the effect that the utterance will have on the soldiers. Fighting a fire cannot really be said to result from convention, but from instinct and rationality, hence, it should be a perlocutionary effect of an utterance. If warnings can be described along the lines in (14), it is much less clear how the consequent reaction on the part of the hearer will be incorporated in such a description. An analysis of the joke in terms of perlocutionary effects will lose much of the precision of appeals to ambiguity at the locutionary and the illocutionary levels. In some cases, like (14), the confusion can be transported to the illocutionary level, and hence described within the framework of speech act theory. Intuitively though, there might be other cases ^{where} humour does derive from a clash between the intended and the unintended perlocutionary effects, specific to the circumstances of issuance. Consider for instance the following passage about the declaration of war on Germany in 1939 by Spike Milligan . A family is listening to Lord Chamberlain's address on the radio,

- (15) 'As from eleven o'clock we are at war with Germany.' (I loved the *we*)
 'War?', said Mother. 'It must have been something we said,' said
 Father.

I won't attempt to discuss *why* this is funny. I mention this example because it seems to be of the kind where a speech-act oriented analysis would appeal to ambiguity at the perlocutionary level to account for the source of the humorous effect. Notice that one expects to hear 'It must have been something (I/we) said' from a speaker who feels responsible or guilty for some state of affairs brought about by his previous utterances. This belongs to the perlocutionary level. The thought that something one says in a household may trigger war with Germany is absurd and triggers a host of assumptions that somehow link up with the overall humorous result. However, the speech-act analysis does not seem equipped to provide a much finer analysis.

Of course, speech act theory was not devised to account for how humorous utterances are interpreted, nor have the studies on verbal humour within this framework ever claimed that speech act theory can explain all forms of humour, or that it can do it exhaustively. They only attempt to show how certain violations can lead to humorous effects. The point remains though that speech act approaches to verbal humour are rather descriptive and do not make clear predictions as to which types of locutionary and illocutionary ambiguity, or which violations of the felicity conditions of a speech act are able to generate humorous effects. The resulting picture is however, that humorous discourse that arises from the violation of the felicity conditions that constitute an act is by definition defective discourse.

2.1.2 Violations of the felicity conditions of a speech act

Searle notes that it is possible to produce jokey remarks that play on the propositional content condition, for instance, by attributing a propositional content to acts that in fact have none, such as greetings (1969: 67). Hancher gives several examples along these lines, and I reproduce one below to illustrate.

- (16) 'Good morning. And almost everything you hear from now on will be equally speculative', said by the moderator at the opening of a Symposium about America in the next twenty-five years¹¹.

Searle's preparatory conditions capture Austin's requirement that there should be an accepted conventional verbal procedure having a certain effect. Hancher argues that "even in comedy people rarely try to invoke illocutionary-act procedures that don't exist", but there are cases that do just this. A *Punch* cartoon has a woman wielding a spade next to a small hole in the ground and saying 'I now declare this hole open' (*Punch* 1977, quoted in Hancher 1980).

The preparatory conditions also take account of Austin's second rule, which requires the appropriateness of persons and circumstances to invoke particular procedures. In particular, the first preparatory condition on assertions that Searle puts forward is that the speaker should be in a position to know something about its

¹¹ Notice that the example can also be taken to play on an illocutionary level ambiguity between an elliptical assertion of the proposition 'This is (going to be) a good morning' and a greeting. Because the greeting presumably had an original propositional content along the lines of 'I wish that you may have a good morning', presumably lost gradually through conventionalisation, it is also possible to view this example as one of ambiguity at the locutionary level. The presence of the adjective *speculative* in the context of a symposium about the future of a country reinforces the effect of playing on these ambiguities.

truth¹². This is violated in a Charlie Brown cartoon where Lucy confronts Schroeder at his piano:

- (17) 'Schroeder, why don't you give up this classical music thing? Don't you know there are over eighty million piano students in this country? And less than *one* percent of them ever make a real living out of it' When challenged, 'Where did you get those figures?', she answers 'I just made them up' (Schulz 1964, quoted in Hancher 1980: 23)

Of course, much of the effect derives from the fact that Lucy *reveals* the violation to this preparatory condition on assertions much more than on the fact that it is violated in the first place. Hancher does not comment on this, as, I believe, he, rightly, abandons all attempts at exhaustive analysis of the humorous effects, given that anything and everything may be involved in their derivation. It is worth noting, however, that speech act analyses of this kind do not provide adequate machinery to distinguish between violations of this preparatory condition on assertions that lead to lies, or pretense, but not to humour, and cases where humour does arise¹³. I will try to argue that relevance theory can bring the analysis at least one step further, and can also make more clear predictions. But before turning to the relevance theoretic oriented studies, I will review briefly two other pragmatic studies of verbal humour.

¹² Notice the resemblance to Grice's Quality maxim. The joke is also explainable in terms of deceptive violation of the second maxim of truthfulness.

¹³ As discussed in the Yamaguchi section, the violation must be very quickly revealed; otherwise, it would be deceit or pretense. But as I suggested briefly in the third chapter, and as the discussion in later chapters will show, what is really at stake in interpreting humorous effects is the ability to attribute false beliefs to others and to entertain complex higher order metarepresentations.

3. Humour and transgression

The tradition that associates the creation and interpretation of humorous effects with incongruities arising from rule breaking is still very influential. Dolitsky (1992) works within a speech act framework, drawing also on Raskin's script-theory, to support her view that humour is about rule transgression at different levels. The only restriction on the rules amenable to violation to generate humorous effects, she argues, is that they must be unstated, implicit or unsaid:

"humor's credo is that rules are made to be broken, and while the rules it breaks can be cultural as well as linguistic, they are always unstated" (1992: 34).

Dolitsky's paper revolves around two central ideas: the rule breaking carnivalesque character of humour, and the importance of the unsaid in this 'carnival' of rule breaking. Both claims are intuitively appealing. After all, there is some playfulness in most humour, and we know that explicitness often ruins the game¹⁴.

This pre-theoretical picture is developed through the pragmatic notions of speech act and presupposition, and also, as mentioned above, by some recourse to Raskin's script-based theory. A brief description of her work will lead me to explain why I think it is important.

Dolitsky's general idea is that there are different kinds of humour in which different kinds of rules are broken. In sharp contrast with Raskin, she makes a clear distinction between linguistic and pragmatic humour. She defines the latter as the kind

¹⁴The idea of the carnivalesque in humour is also present in Eco (1986) and Bakhtin (1987)

of humour that originates "in the relation between the word and the world", as opposed to linguistic humour, which plays on ambiguity and "semantic deviation" (1992: 37). In both cases, the humorist is viewed as a rule transgressor, who can additionally violate societal rules, for instance, by communicating through metaphor and implication what is part of taboo subjects. So, she says,

"In both linguistically and pragmatically based jokes, the humor resides in the perceived but unstated gap between the expectation of the rule-following audience and the rule-breaking speaker (...). The humorist transgresses the rule of conversational cooperation by leading the listener toward the wrong interpretation" (1992: 37).

She goes on to discuss a wide range of examples and rightly makes explicit the caveat that it is pointless to attempt an exhaustive analysis of jokes, given that almost by their very nature they may all be analysed from different angles. Her aim is merely to outline those aspects of the unsaid that are most pertinent to each case. Here I will concentrate on only one of her examples, but will discuss it in detail. Consider (18)

(18) Don't keep on telling the lady you are unworthy of her. Let it be a complete surprise (Henry 1968: 22, quoted in Dolitsky 1992: 39)

Dolitsky's analysis is as follows. First, she argues that (18) has the following two presuppositions:

- (19) a. There is a specific lady (generated by the definite description)
 b. The hearer IS worthy of the lady

(19b) is said to arise because

"the word *tell* belongs to a group of verbs (those that convey what illocutionary act has been performed) that 'are ascribed the property of blocking all the presuppositions of their complements unless they are used' (van der Sandt 1988: 44) specifically to perform an act. Thus it is assumed that the gentleman IS worthy of lady he is courting. However, the definite pronoun 'it' (the fact that he is unworthy of her) in subject position presupposes the truth value of this fact. Thus, what is normally blocked by rules of presupposition is not. The rules have

been broken; the presupposition does not hold" (1992: 39)

While processing the first part of the utterance we do seem to operate with an assumption that the hearer IS worthy of the lady in question. What is not true is that this should be a presupposition of the utterance. The second part of the utterance does make us abandon the assumption that the hearer is worthy of the lady in question. But that the interpretation process breaks pragmatic rules, in particular, those that govern the interpretation of presuppositions, is plainly false. Here is why.

Let me begin by questioning the status of (19b) as a presupposition of the utterance. The standard test for identifying presuppositions is to take their carrying sentence and negate it. Whatever inferences remain (i.e. are shared by the positive and the negative sentence) are presuppositions of the sentence (or the utterance). Let us take the first part of (19) and negate it. Because of scope ambiguities, we have two possible negations of (19), listed in (20). (20a) is the original sentence, whose logical form is (20b). The negative sentence that results from the negative operator taking wide scope ((20c)) is (20d), whereas (20f) results from its taking narrow scope.

- (20) a. Don't keep on telling the lady you are unworthy of her
 b. $[\neg (T(H,L)(\neg W(H,L)))]$
 c. $\neg \neg ((T(H,L)(\neg W(H,L)) \rightarrow (T(H,L)(\neg W(H,L))) =$
 d. Keep on telling the lady you are unworthy of her
 e. $\neg (T(H,L) \neg (\neg W(H,L))) \rightarrow \neg (T(H,L)(W(H,L))) =$
 f. Don't keep on telling the lady you are not unworthy of her

Now it rapidly becomes clear that the assumption that the hearer is worthy of the lady in question does not behave like a presuppositional inference at all. In fact, it doesn't

arise in any of (20a-d), at least, not in the clear way that standard presuppositions seem to be present in statements traditionally discussed, such as, for instance, (21), where (21c) is a presupposition of both (21a) and (21b).

- (21) a. The judge has stopped drinking
b. The judge has not stopped drinking
c. The judge used to drink

(19b) seems to be rather an assumption we bring to the context of interpretation, and not an inference that arises from the linguistic form of the utterance in the way presuppositions do. That this is so is troublesome, because it raises the issue of why we bring to the context of interpretation the assumptions we do and not others, but it is telling. I will return to this below¹⁵.

The second step in Dolitsky's analysis is to show that (19b) is revealed to be

interpretation principles she assumes we use¹⁶, the point is that we pick out the object of the verb *tell* ('that you are unworthy of her') as the referent of it¹⁷, and we know that only what we can entertain as true or probably true can be the object of surprise¹⁸.

But the really far-fetched part of Dolitsky's analysis comes in the next step. Recall that she is committed to the carnivalesque rule-breaking nature of humour. So far, no rules have been transgressed. Presuppositions (not entailments) are known to be defeasible in certain discourse and intra-sentential contexts¹⁹. Notice also that presuppositions can be suspended with the use of a subsequent if-clause, as in (23) below (see Horn 1972).

(23) John didn't lie again, if indeed he ever did.

Hence, there is nothing inherently disruptive in having (19b) cancelled. She is however led to suggest that there is a transgression of one of the pragmatic principles that

¹⁶ She assumes that conversation is guided by Grice's conversational maxims.

¹⁷The question for pragmatics is why and how we do so.

¹⁸Incidentally, this is the definition of *manifestness* given in the framework of relevance theory, and it plays a central role in my account of humour.

¹⁹An inference is *defeasible* if it is possible to cancel it by adding some additional premises to the original ones (Levinson 1983: 144). Add to Dolitsky's humorous utterance the following premises:

- a. The speaker and the hearer are two gangsters in the business of infiltrating an organisation to which 'the lady' belongs.
- b. The lady is a respectable, intelligent, trust-worthy, loyal, hard-working, sincere, honest, beautiful woman.
- c. The lady possesses important secret information that the gangsters are determined to extract from her.
- d. The gangsters are planning a seduction plot to fulfil their aims.

The 'inference' that the hearer is worthy of the lady does not even arise in this context.

operate upon presuppositions to block them (recall her quote above). Let me go through her argument to show where it goes wrong.

The phenomenon of presupposition blocking that Dolitsky attributes to the verb *tell* was studied by Karttunen (1973) in attempting to characterise the presuppositions of compound sentences. Karttunen wanted to account for the observation that the presuppositions of a subordinate clause do not compound either with presuppositions or assertions of higher clauses, but stand as presuppositions of the complex utterances in which they occur. So, he argued that all verbs that are used to convey what has been said, or what illocutionary act has been performed (e.g. *say, mention, tell, ask, promise, mumble, retort*), as well as those that express propositional attitudes (e.g. *want, believe, imagine, dream*), have the property of blocking all the presuppositions of their complements. This kind of embedding predicate is usually called a *plug*. The only exceptional case where plugs lose their blocking power is when they are used performatively.

The existence of plugs has been questioned and counterexamples abound²⁰. However, for the purposes here, we can assume with Dolitsky that Karttunen is right. Even in that case, it is one thing to say that the verb *tell* should block the

²⁰ Consider for instance the following pairs of sentences, where the *a* sentences continue to presuppose the *b* sentences despite the presence of plugs.

- a. The doctor didn't tell us that she would never be able to sing professionally again.
- b. She used to be able to sing professionally

- a. I said I would never regret being rude to him
- b. I was rude to him

For further discussion, see Karttunen and Peters (1975) and Levinson (1983).

presuppositions of its complement. It is quite another to ascribe to the complement of *tell* presuppositions that do not exist, and then go on to claim that these (non-existent presuppositions) should be blocked. Note that the complement of the verb 'tell' is the proposition in (24), which I will refer to as *p*.

(24) You are unworthy of her

Dolitsky appears to take the odd view that *p* presupposes *p*. Now *p* is not presupposed by the complement of *tell*, it is simply its propositional content²¹ Next, she goes on to claim that 'thus it is assumed that the gentleman IS worthy of the lady he is courting'. Why should this be so? Although the verb *tell* is not used performatively - hence it should work as a plug-, there is no presupposition in the complement to block, as I have just argued. And even if there were, blocking is not synonymous with producing a new presupposition. Dolitsky is assuming that to block means to attribute to the complement of the plug the negation of the original presupposition. This is confusing and wrong. But it works as a useful misunderstanding in producing an intricate -and, of course, flawed- argument that attempts to rescue the view that humour is 'carnavalesque transgression', and to supply evidence in its support. Let us consider its final stage. Dolitsky goes on to claim that, because the pronoun appears in subject position, the original presupposition re-emerges, and that in consequence, "what is normally blocked by rules of presupposition is not. The rules have been

²¹ Contrast this with a true case of presupposition in the complement of a plug.

a. He told her he regrets having lied to you

Here the complement of the verb *told*, 'He regrets having lied to you', presupposes 'He lied to you', as the negation tests shows ('He doesn't regret having lied to you' preserves the inference that he lied to you)

broken; the presupposition does not hold" (1992: 39)

Now why is this series of mistakes worth discussing at such length? First, I believe that Dolitsky has a crucial insight that "in humour hearers are led to make *assumptions* that do not hold" (1982: 36, emphasis mine). This has gone relatively unnoticed in the pragmatic literature, and I find it surprising²². With some qualifications and variations, I will take this suggestion seriously. My analysis will support the view that in humour a hearer often finds that he has taken on board an assumption that either does not hold, or whose value the speaker tacitly questions, for instance, by implicitly expressing a dissociative attitude to it. But I will argue that it is better not to talk about this assumption in terms of presupposition, script-opposition or ambiguity at the lexical, structural, locutionary or illocutionary level. These categories are not crucial for an analysis of verbal humour. I will argue that it is enough to look at the subset of the hearer's beliefs that are retrieved from memory or constructed on the spot in interpreting an utterance, and to consider their relative saliency at any given time. The notion of assumption is simultaneously more general, in that it is able to subsume all important phenomena captured by the notion of speech act, preparatory conditions, script content and so on, and more specific, in that it allows close consideration of the precise propositional content involved in the creation of the humorous effect. I will argue that this has important consequences that can push explanations of verbal humour one step further.

²²Recall that standard analyses emphasize the role of double isotopies, ambiguities, overlapping of opposed scripts, rule violation, maxim exploitation, breaching of felicity conditions and so on.

The second reason why I consider Dolitsky's work important is that it represents very clearly the tradition that believes that it is part of the essence of humour that rules should be transgressed. In its more extreme versions, this line of thought is what has led some to argue for a proliferation of essentially different - humour-specific - principles of language interpretation. It should be clear by now that I intend to argue against this position. Although I don't think it controversial that some form of transgression of standards, or deviation from general expectations is often found in humour, it seems at least dubious that this should be its most essential characteristic.

Instead of going along with the view that in humour (and in certain other non-humorous cases), it is the breaking of rules that leads a hearer to entertain assumptions that do not hold, I believe that it is only because humorists can rely on the automatic operation of an exceptionless cognitive principle that guides the interpretation of utterances that such taking on board of ungranted assumptions can occur in the first place²³. The exceptionless operation of this principle is what, for instance, blocks the continued conscious activation of assumptions which are taken for granted and instead, treats them as background, thereby allowing them to remain relatively inactivated. It is the involuntary application of the same principle that will automatically select some assumptions against which to process an utterance and will ignore others. An important objective of this thesis is to make a start at developing this view.

²³ I refer to the principle of relevance, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The last approach I will review in this chapter is also in the tradition that considers humorous discourse marked or deviant.

4. Humour as violations of graded informativeness

The discussion so far has illustrated how the literature on verbal humour converges on the view that there is something deviant in its nature. In his criticism of Suls's for assuming that there are common principles underlying our understanding of humorous and serious discourse, Mulkey has gone as far as implying that humour and serious discourse lack, as it were, a common denominator:

"Suls's central mistake, as I hinted above, is to assume that information-processing within the humorous mode is identical to that underlying serious discourse" (1988: 32),

and of Raskin for attempting to account for humour using the serious mode of communication in his explanations:

"There is, however, a certain element of paradox and incongruity about the humorous realm which, I believe, cannot be grasped by an analytical discourse such as Raskin's that is itself so emphatically realist" (1988: 42).

Yet another way of viewing humour as deviant comes from establishing conditions for text well-formedness, therein proposing a 'grammar' of standard informative texts, and showing that the 'grammar' of humorous texts does not conform to the principles of such 'grammar'. This is the perspective adopted by Giora (1991). It is worth remarking at the outset that Giora does not assume that the principles underlying such 'grammars' differ for the serious and the humorous mode, only that the conditions for

well-formedness are specific to each. Her assumption in this respect is that

"both the 'grammar' of the standard informative texts and the 'grammar' of the joke derive from principles regulating concept formation" (1991: 465).

These principles, she believes, are merely an application of those ruling categorial organisation in general, and she advocates the views of Rosch (1973) and Rosch and Mervis (1975) on prototype theory in this respect²⁴.

One of Giora's central assumptions is that texts, like category concepts, are also hierarchically organised around a discourse topic, which is taken to be a "prototypical proposition" that bears the highest amount of conceptual intersections with the other propositions in the set. Her first main claim is that a text is well-formed if it meets the following conditions:

- (25) a. *The relevance requirement*, which establishes that the text begins with the least informative message in the given text or text-segment. This least informative message, termed Discourse Topic (DT) is a generalisation that governs the rest of the messages in the text. Cognitively, it functions as the prototypical category member which represents the redundancy structure of the set. (Giora 1985, 1991:467), and
- b. *The graded informativeness requirement*, which makes the text proceed *gradually* along the informative axis whereby each message is more informative than the one it follows. Given this graded

²⁴ Rosch and her associates suggested that informants judge some members of taxonomic categories (such as birds, furniture and even numbers) to be 'better' or 'more central' elements in the set. These are called *prototypes* and the features that correlate with judgements of better category membership are called *prototypical features*. There are several arguments against looking at meaning in terms of prototypes, the most common being that prototypes are not compositional. Furthermore, Barsalou (1987) has shown that graded structure is unstable and that prototypical members of a category shift according to context, for instance, the prototypical food for a picnic is not the same as the prototypical food for a low calory diet and so on.

informativeness requirement, the text must end with the most informative message in the text. Informativeness is defined in terms of class membership and in terms of classical theories of information (Shannon 1951, Attneave 1959, *inter alia*) (Giora 1988, 1991: 467)²⁵

A word on her notion of informativeness is required before considering her second main claim. Following Shannon (1951) and Attneave (1959), Giora adopts the definition of informativeness of classical information theory, whereby

- (26) A message is *informative* relative to the number of uncertainties it either reduces or eliminates relative to a question.

She offers two illustrations. One is the chequer-board game example, whose goal is to discover which of the 64 possible squares is on the mind of a person. It can be shown that six questions are always necessary to locate the square²⁶. Her other example is an adaptation of one of Sperber and Wilson's (ms, cited in Giora 1991: 468). Given the context in (27 a-f), (27f) is more informative than (27e) relative to the question: who won the prize?

- (27) a. People could buy only one ticket.
 b. There were 39 blue tickets and 1 green ticket.
 c. Forty people bought tickets.

²⁵ Giora acknowledges the existence of texts whose structure consists of equally informative messages, but she seems to assume that these kind of texts contain 'uninformative' messages which count only as evaluative devices, and hence that they do not constitute a complete refutation of her main claim (1991: 467).

²⁶ In general, given a board with 2^n squares, n questions are necessary and sufficient to determine the location of any given square. The strategy is as follows:

- i. Is it one of the 2^{n-1} on the left half of the board? Yes (No)
- ii. Is it one of the 2^{n-2} in the upper half of the 2^{n-1} remaining (on the right)? No
- iii. Is it one of the 2^{n-3} in the left half of the 2^{n-4} remaining? No...
- ... Is it the upper one of the 2 remaining?

- d. The person who bought the green ticket won the prize
- e. Someone bought the green ticket.
- f. James bought the green ticket

Giora notes that the probability of (27e) is 1, while the probability of (27f) is 0.025²⁷, and goes on to claim that "the most informative message in a set is the *least probable* message in that set" (1991: 468). However, she qualifies this definition of informativeness and conceives of it also in terms of category inclusion. She goes on to say that

a category member in a given set is informative is to say that it has more features (information) than necessary for category inclusion" (1991: 468).

She wants her notion of informativeness to pick out less statistically probable messages, but also less psychologically probable messages. So, for instance, she argues, in a context where Susan is a much brighter student than James, the message that 'Susan flunked the test' is more informative than the message that 'James flunked the test', when what is at stake is that 'someone failed the test'; or, more generally, the chance that 'I saw a bird' means 'I saw a robin' is higher than 'I saw a chicken', hence, 'I saw a chicken' is less accessible psychologically, less probable, and more informative (Giora 1991).

Because informativeness is defined this way, she can argue that it is assigned *surprise value*. So, the notion relevant for the well-formedness of jokes is *marked informativeness*. A markedly informative message is hence one that is "too distant, in

²⁷Assuming that the universe of people under consideration is only 40.

terms of number of similar features, from the messages preceding them" (1991: 469).

This leads Giora to her second main claim, which concerns the well-formedness of jokes:

- (28) A joke is well-formed if and only if it
- a. obeys the relevance requirement, and
 - b. violates the graded informativeness requirement in that it ends in a markedly informative message. (Giora refers to this as the *markedness informative requirement*.), and
 - c. causes the hearer to perform a linear shift whereby the reader is made to cancel the first unmarked interpretation upon processing the second marked interpretation (Giora 1991: 468).

Giora herself recognises that this generalisation is limited and has some exceptions.

First, it is meant to characterise only what she calls *semantic* jokes, as opposed to syntactic and pragmatic jokes²⁸. Second, she notes that some jokes end with a rather less informative constituent, such as

- (34) A tourist in the Jewish quarter of the old city of Jerusalem asks a local boy: "Where is the Wailing Wall?", to which the boy replies "In Israel".

In foreseeing a number of possible counterexamples, such as the story with a surprise

²⁸ Giora gives as an example of a syntactic joke the following:

"Can you tell me how long cows should be milked?" "

"They should be milked the same as short ones, of course",

and of a pragmatic joke,

" You know what tests you have to pass to become a member in Kahana's party?"

"Well?"

"You have to kill two Arabs and a cat"

"Why a cat?"

"You passed the test".

Notice however that there is no positive definition of what a semantic joke is.

ending, or detective stories, she suggests that pragmatic considerations should be brought into account:

"Pragmatically, what joke telling requires is that the hearer's emotions or sensitivity be uninvolved" (1991: 484)

Clearly, though the issue of emotions in the experience of humour needs to be addressed, this does not explain away the counterexample of detective stories. It is perfectly possible to imagine a story one processes with complete detachment and lack of involvement, which ends in an unexpected way, and still fails to be humorous. Surprisingly, Giora does not mention issues of brevity and condensation as part of the difference.

Let me first show that a text that fulfils (28), and hence is, according to Giora, a well-formed text, need not be funny. Consider (30)

(30) Jane could not get rid of the idea that Peter was being unfaithful. She had noticed how he would get uneasy whenever she mentioned Susan. Peter had been late every Monday for the past two months, the same evenings that Susan had free at the theatre. Susan had rung twice when Jane was last in Peter's office, and yesterday evening she'd overheard him making arrangements to meet someone. Jane couldn't stand the uncertainty any more. She waited outside Peter's office and told the taxi driver to follow his car. When he stopped she looked out of the window. Peter, holding a bunch of roses, rang the bell. Mary's flat.

This shows that the conditions Giora suggests are not sufficient for a text to be a joke. The following example shows that the conditions in (28) are not necessary either to generate humorous effects²⁹. Consider the following lines from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, where at a dinner party, Mrs Ramsay serves her sacramental *boeuf en*

²⁹Although Giora talks of semantic jokes all throughout her paper, her arguments and examples show that the principles on which the definition of this category is based are not always clear.

daube.

- (31) It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity.

Now consider (37), from David Lodge's novel *The British Museum is Falling Down*, where the hero, working in the British Museum in Bloomsbury, notes:

- (32) From nearby Westminster, Mrs Dalloway's clock bloomed the half hour. It partook, he thought, shifting his weight in the saddle, of metempsychosis, the way his humble life fell into moulds prepared by literature.

Hutcheon (1985) uses (31) and (32) to illustrate how Lodge parodies Virginia Woolf's style, in particular, her technique of "mingling the trivial and the significant to create psychological realism" (1985: 105). My more general point here is that in cases of satiric parody resemblance of form is accompanied by an attitude of mockery on the part of the speaker/writer. This can be very funny while still adhering to both the relevance and graded informativeness requirement. What is missing in the non-parodic cases is the implicitly conveyed attitude of ridicule, and this is not captured by the constraints in (29).

Giora, of course, has not suggested that her constraints can account for her so called "pragmatic" jokes; much less should one expect them to be able to apply to forms of humour which play on elements and aspects other than the surprise factor that is so central to the texts she analyses as jokes. However, it seems unlikely that the notion of informativeness can be developed in such a way that these other factors are captured so that her approach can be further generalised.

The discussion above shows that, like the code-based view, most inferentially

oriented accounts take the view that humorous discourse is deviant, and mainly suggest that whatever is humorous breaches the conventional. In the following chapter I introduce relevance theory and consider the analyses of verbal humour that have been developed within this framework. A rather different perspective, both on the nature of verbal humour and on the best way to approach it, will emerge.

Chapter Five

Relevance theory and verbal humour

For both the philosopher and the humorist nothing can be taken for granted

J. Morreal (1987)

There are a variety of ways in which information can be conveyed and communication achieved. For instance, as you enter my house you may find me sleeping, cooking, reading, or speaking on the phone. If so, you may perhaps notice the colour of the clothes I am wearing, the kind of dish I am preparing, the title of the book I am reading, to whom I am talking on the phone, or the mood I am in. It is conceivable that you may get all this information without me intending you to do so. In cases like these, you will be provided with direct evidence of the information conveyed. By contrast, when an utterance is aimed at an audience, hearers are provided with direct evidence not of the information conveyed, but rather of the speaker's intention to convey it and hence, only with indirect evidence of the information itself. This last form of communication, whereby a communicator provides direct evidence of his intention to communicate a piece of information, is generally called *ostensive communication*, and verbal communication is a particular instance of it.

Intentional verbal humour is a result of ostensive communication. It arises from the processing of utterances, which are a kind of ostensive stimuli. This gives rise to a general question about what a pragmatic theory should be able to do in accounting for humorous effects. As the discussion in the previous two chapters suggests, for some authors the natural response to this question seems to be that a pragmatic theory of verbal humour should be able to predict what kind of utterances and texts will be humorous and why. There is another way of viewing the problem, which I will opt for in what follows. Rather than assuming that being humorous is a property of texts, and hence concentrating on their structure, I will argue that texts are only indirectly humorous, and that what we need to understand to characterise verbal humour are the mental processes that a hearer goes through during interpretation when humorous effects are derived. Before addressing this question, two crucial aspects of utterance production and processing must be stressed. First, the thoughts that a speaker communicates through his utterances are not fully encoded in the linguistic expressions he uses. In the second place, given that what is linguistically encoded by utterances underdetermines the speaker's intended meaning, hearers necessarily engage in some inferential process that leads them to recover the message the speaker intends to convey. So, utterances provide the hearer with evidence of the speaker's intentions.

In this work I take the view that pragmatics is the study of the inferential processes that lead a hearer to retrieve the speaker's intended meaning. Relevance theory, the approach to pragmatics which I adopt here, rests on the following four main premises (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995):

- (1)
- a. Utterances have several possible interpretations, all consistent with the information they linguistically encode.
 - b. Not all these interpretations are equally accessible to the hearer at the time of utterance.
 - c. Hearers have at their disposal a general criterion for choosing amongst all the possible interpretations of an utterance as they occur to them, and they use it consistently.
 - d. This criterion allows for only one interpretation to be accepted as the one intended by the speaker.

A theory which holds (1a-b) as central premises is incompatible with the claim that humorous interpretations derive from text: features on their own, such as double isotopies, for instance. The view that understanding humorous discourse requires the operation of humour-specific principles of interpretation is incompatible with a framework in which (1c) is essential. Explanations in terms of exploitation of maxims and rules, and/or violation of linguistic and social conventions are naturally also ruled out on this perspective. There is a question then as to whether the existence of humorous effects should be taken as evidence for or against the theory, whether they reveal its limitations, or rather the opposite: they show that it is possible to account for how hearers derive humorous interpretations -and understand them as such- without abandoning the commitment to a single principle that guides pragmatic inferencing. A consequence of the last possibility would be that several conclusions that have been drawn about the nature of humour on the basis that it is a different

mode of communication are simply not correct.

1. Relevance theory: general aspects

Like Grice, Sperber and Wilson assume that communicators are rational agents and that communication involves their capacity to recognise intentions. Unlike Grice, they do not suggest that the inferential aspect of interpretation is guided by an essentially social principle (e.g., the Cooperative Principle). Rather, they suggest that ^{what} guides this is a cognitive one. So, the pragmatic theory developed within the relevance-theoretic account of cognitive processing differs from the approaches I have discussed in that it does not assume the existence of communication maxims on which speakers and hearers rely. The theory, by contrast, suggests the existence of a single criterion which cannot be violated and which selects among possible interpretations. This criterion emerges from the following very general assumption about human cognition: we pay attention only to information that seems relevant to us.

Relevance is a technical notion defined in terms of the cognitive gains obtained from the processing of a given piece of information and the processing effort invested in deriving such cognitive gains. The greater the cognitive effects derived, the greater the relevance; the greater the processing effort invested in it, the lower the relevance. The fact that the human cognitive system is looking for relevant information, and the more relevant, the better, is called the *cognitive principle of relevance*.

It is important to note at the outset that it makes no sense to talk about the relevance of an ostensive stimulus on its own. Relevance is a notion relative to an individual, in a particular context, at a particular time.

The definition of the context of interpretation in relevance theory is also different from the one traditionally used in pragmatics. While other authors consider that the context of interpretation is predetermined at each point during the interaction, and that it consists of a set of assumptions explicitly expressed by the preceding discourse, together with the setting of the utterance (e.g. Lyons 1977, Brown and Yule 1983, Levinson 1983), for Sperber and Wilson the context of interpretation is a subset of the total set of beliefs of an individual against which he processes a given utterance.

A new piece of information achieves relevance in a given context by interacting with it to yield cognitive effects in any of the following three ways:

- (2) a. by strengthening an existing assumption in that context,
- b. by contradicting and weakening or eliminating an existing assumption,
- c. by combining with existing assumptions to create new assumptions called contextual implications.

Concerning the effort involved in computing these effects, several factors^{are} known to affect it; most notably, the linguistic complexity of the utterance, the accessibility of the context, and the inferential effort needed to compute those effects in the chosen context (Smith and Wilson 1992: 4-5).

Sperber and Wilson propose that humans automatically tend to balance effort and effects when processing information. When it comes verbal communication,

speakers know, at least tacitly, that their audience will allocate their cognitive resources to process the utterances they produce in a relevance-oriented manner. To succeed, an act of ostensive communication must first attract the audience's attention. So, every act of ostensive communication automatically conveys a presumption of its own relevance. Utterances though, do not create expectations of *maximal* relevance. Notice that to achieve her communicative intention, a communicator must choose one of a range of possible different stimuli. Because an utterance is a request for his attention, the addressee is entitled to expect it to yield *enough* cognitive effects to be worth this attention. Also, since it is in the communicator's best interest to get her intentions recognised, a hearer may assume that she will eliminate any of those which will require unnecessary effort to process. In sum, every utterance conveys the presumption that it will achieve enough cognitive effects to be worth the hearer's attention, and that it will put the hearer to no unjustifiable effort in achieving those effects. Additional effort should be offset by additional cognitive effects. More specifically, the addressee is entitled to expect the highest level of relevance the communicator was capable of achieving given her means and goals, so an utterance conveys that it was the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences. This is what is known as *optimal relevance*. The central claim of relevance theory, known as the *Communicative principle of relevance*, which applies not only to utterances, but to every ostensive stimulus, is as follows:

- (3) *Communicative principle of relevance*: Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance. (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 158/1995²)¹

In order to be acceptable and comprehensible, an utterance does not actually have to be optimally relevant. The fact that some speakers are less competent and benevolent

¹ This terminology was adopted in the second edition of *Relevance* to avoid a common confusion that has led many authors to interpret the claim about communication (the original *Principle of Relevance*) as referring to the more general cognitive claim (see the postface to Sperber and Wilson 1995).

than others, but they can still be understood shows this. All that is required is that the hearer should be able to see how the speaker might have intended it to be so. The pragmatic criterion that relevance theory suggests guides interpretation is the criterion of *consistency with the principle of relevance*.

- (4) *Criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance*: An utterance, on a given interpretation, is consistent with the principle of relevance if and only if the speaker might reasonably have expected it to be (or to seem) optimally relevant to the hearer on that interpretation.

The more specific claim is that the first interpretation tested by the hearer which meets this criterion is the one he selects as the interpretation intended by the speaker; in other words, the criterion enables hearers to exclude all other possible interpretations. To illustrate this, consider example (6) in the second chapter, repeated here for convenience

- (5) Can you spot who is wearing the towel? (Merino-Ferradá, 1993)

This sentence is ambiguous in a way that is not easy to spot in the absence of the graphic context in which it occurs: a picture of three girls sideways, two of them with nothing on and the third wearing a pink bath towel around her body. The logo of the trademark LIL-LETS is also present. Without this logo, the ambiguity of the word 'towel' will go unnoticed. If the hearer spots the girl in the pink towel, and the logo is not salient, he will select the interpretation on which 'towel' means 'bath towel'. If the logo is sufficiently salient though, the hearer will use it as part of the ostensive stimulus, and will, as a consequence search for additional cognitive effects. Most

likely, the intended ambiguity will be detected.

What speakers do when they communicate is convey complex thoughts using their utterances as an ostensive stimulus to this end. The interpretation a hearer constructs is intended to resemble the complex thought of the speaker that his utterance represents. So, the interpretation of an utterance consists in a set of assumptions regarding which a speaker made *mutually manifest* her intention to make *manifest* to her audience (see below). Not all the assumptions a speaker conveys through an utterance are of the same kind. Some are explicitly communicated, others are conveyed implicitly. Also, assumptions that are implicitly conveyed are communicated with different degrees of strength. So, some get communicated in a more determinate form than others. What is meant by this is that a hearer is *strongly* encouraged to supply them either as implicated premises or to derive them as implicated conclusions in his search for an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. Other implicitly conveyed assumptions are less strongly determined in this sense, and the speaker cannot be seen as fully endorsing their specific derivation. The hearer takes some of the responsibility for this. The more this is the case, the more *weakly* they are said to be communicated.

2. Relevance theoretic approaches to verbal humour

Sperber and Wilson have provided a detailed account of irony (Sperber and Wilson

1981, 1986, Wilson and Sperber 1992), which I will consider in chapter nine. Of course, not all irony is humorous, but a relevance theoretic account of verbal humour should be able to accommodate those ^{cases} which are. The first extensive study of verbal humour from a relevance theoretic perspective is, to my knowledge, Jodlowiec (1991), which places a strong emphasis on the role of the context of interpretation and focuses on verbal jokes that rely on ambiguity.

2.1 Ambiguity jokes and contextual reorganisation

Jodlowiec views the context of interpretation along relevance theoretic lines, where it is defined as a subset of the hearer's beliefs and assumptions about the world, and she notes with Navon (1988) that every verbal joke consists of just two parts: the setting and the punchline. Her central claim is that it is on the speaker's control over contexts that hearers access that the mechanism for generating humorous effects rests. When processing starts, the interpretation of the utterances in the setting give access to a set of immediately available assumptions that constitute the initial context for interpretation (C1). The hearer is strongly biased to make a specific hypothesis H1 with regard to what is being or what is about to be communicated. However, when the punchline is delivered, the hearer finds a new unexpected interpretation (H2) in a new context C2. Far from supposing that hearers need to operate in two different modes of communication and to apply different interpretation procedures, Jodlowiec maintains that both H1 and H2 are retrieved on the assumption that the utterances are

consistent with the principle of relevance. What is characteristic is the sudden reorganisation of contexts that takes place in going from H1 to H2. To illustrate this she offers the following example:

- (6) A nervous husband is impatiently waiting for some news in the obstetric ward lounge. The doctor assisting his wife thoroughly examines and weighs the baby before he breaks the happy news to the father. Finally, all smiles, he enters the lounge and says, 'Congratulations. It's a healthy boy. Eight pounds exactly' 'Oh dear', replies the flustered man, 'can I pay by cheque?'

In interpreting the setting, she argues, the hearer builds up the context C1 consisting roughly of the propositions expressed by the utterances used, and formulates H1 = "The doctor informs the father that the baby weighs eight pounds". When the punch-line is reached, the hearer discovers that the only interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance is (H2) = "The father uneasily asks the doctor if he can pay him by cheque". (1991b: 96)

And, she goes on to argue,

"The utterance which is responsible for the humorous climax achieves optimal relevance in the context (C2), which is the assumption that the punch-line makes highly accessible to the hearer. C2 = The man thinks the doctor is charging him £8 for the services" (op.cit.)

It seems to me that Jodlowiec is not always clear enough about two important things. First, she singles out important assumptions that need to be used in the process of interpretation in order to derive a humorous effect, but the precise status of these assumptions is not made clear. For instance, (H1) and (H2) are not two competing interpretations, as she initially seems to suggest in her claims about the general process underlying the interpretation of jokes. Rather each one is an interpretation of

a different utterance. Second, she remains extremely vague about the nature of the 'contextual reorganisation' she proposes as characteristic of the interpretation of jokes. In what sense is C2 a new context? Do we abandon C1 altogether, as her use of the word 'switch' suggests? We probably don't. Does 'reorganisation' mean addition of new assumptions? Abandonment? Replacement? Does the difference matter? Her account is not clear about any of these.

Jodlowiec notes, however, that not all jokes involve two competing interpretations, nor a drastic contextual reorganisation, or a "sudden and unanticipated switch from one context to another" (1991a: 250). She illustrates this with (7)

- (7) As a passenger boarded the Los Angeles-to-New York plane, he told the flight attendant to wake him to make sure he got off in Dallas. The passenger awoke just as the plane was landing in New York. Furious, he called the flight attendant and demanded an explanation. The fellow mumbled an apology and, in a rage, the passenger stamped off the plane.
 'Boy, was he ever mad!' another crew member observed to her errant colleague.
 'If you think he was mad,' replied the flight attendant, 'you should have seen the guy I put off the plane in Dallas!' (1991a: 250)

This leads Jodlowiec to her second point. She claims that, in cases like this, the funniness is created because when the punchline is interpreted, "the hearer is left with a whole range of weakly communicated implicatures and it is entirely up to him to recover those that are more manifest to him" (1991a: 251). So, she maintains that humorous effects are essentially connected with weak communication and speculates that

"the more weakly communicated assumptions the hearer comes up with in joke processing, the more humorous he is likely to find the text" (1991a: 252)

As Jodlowiec argues, her approach has the advantages of making some clear predictions about what may kill some jokes. For instance, if the speaker fails in guiding the hearer to use C1 as the context of interpretation, or if he facilitates the activation of C2 and the retrieval of H2 before the punchline is delivered, the effect will not be same. It also explains why people may laugh at the same things for different reasons. Different hearers will derive the weakly implicated material that seems more relevant to them, thereby choosing amongst a variety of perspectives from which the humour can be seen as deriving.

It seems very unlikely however that it is the quantity of weakly derived assumptions that makes a text more humorous. Take for instance a simple 'No' as a reply to an invitation or an offer, as for instance in (8)

- (8) Peter: Would you like to come to the cinema?
Mary: No

Surely, the definiteness of the unhedged answer in the right context may suggest a considerable amount of weakly conveyed assumptions. It is up to the hearer to decide where to stop (i.e., Mary is not a film enthusiast, she is tired, she is busy, she's got a headache, she's angry, she doesn't like Peter, she hates Peter, she would like Peter to disappear, and so on). At least in a neutral context, these do not make (8) funny.

Consider (7) again. Jodlowiec claims that there is no switch from an H1 to an H2, nor from a C1 to a C2. But notice that before the punchline is reached, hearers will probably have used in the context of interpretation the assumption in (9a). In order to interpret the punchline as consistent with the principle of relevance, the

assumption in (9b) needs to be supplied as an implicated premise.

- (9) a. The flight attendant forgot that a passenger wanted to get off the plane in Dallas.
 b. The flight attendant did not forget that a passenger wanted to get off the plane in Dallas.

Notice that the process leads the hearer to entertain two contradictory assumptions. In the following two chapters I will show how the development of this observation not only gives more precision and meaning to the claim that there is some form of contextual reorganisation in the interpretation of humorous discourse, but also makes possible interesting generalisations about the generation of humorous effects.

2.2 Interpretive use and other mechanisms

Ferrar (1993) has also considered humour from a relevance theoretic perspective. She points out that humour relies on a host of mechanisms that are not exclusive to it. With regard to the feature of contextual reorganisation specifically she suggests that

"the humour lies not in the context reorganisation as such, but in the assumption underlying the fact that we have to modify the context in the first place" (1993: 208)

As for the precise way in which contexts get reorganised, Ferrar suggests a bit more than Jodlowiec, who, as I noted above, says nothing very specific on this issue. Ferrar claims that in humorous cases, during the reorganisation of the contexts one is led to entertain the absurd, and to recover a wide range of implicated material.

Ferrar points out that a massive reorganisation of the context constitutes a first

layer of processing², but that humour requires two layers of processing. She shows that in non-humorously intended utterances speakers leave material that can be taken for granted implicit, in order to save hearers from unnecessary processing. However, in humorously intended utterances, the material that is left implicit cannot always be taken for granted³. A second layer of interpretation leads a hearer to recognise the joke as an instance of interpretive use, and it is essential, she insists, that the hearer arrives at the intended interpretation by virtue of his own processing efforts. The additional effort is cashed out as additional (humorous) effects.

All these features, she goes on to argue, are not unique to verbal humour. For instance, reorganisation of contexts occurs in the interpretation of advertising slogans, the recovery of weakly implicated material is also characteristic of poetic effects (see Pilkington 1992, 1994), and the interpretive use of language extends to many other types of utterance, such as irony in general and reported speech, for instance. Nonetheless, she concludes that what is unique to humour is the *combination* of these devices. Unfortunately, this claim is too vague to be assessed in detail. Does she mean that all these features need to be present simultaneously? That they interact with one another? If so, how?

Ferrar's work provides a wealth of examples as well as several scattered and isolated remarks which unfortunately, though interesting on their own, are not

² Notice that her use of the term 'massive' is not very informative. Does it refer to the quantity of the assumptions that get modified? To their quality, for instance, their relative importance in the derivation of cognitive effects, or their saliency?

³ Notice the similarity of this point to Dolitsky's suggestions discussed in the previous chapter.

connected, articulated and systematised as fully as one would hope.

2.3 The interpretation of puns

As mentioned in the second chapter, there are also two accounts of punning phenomena in relevance theoretic terms (Tanaka 1992, 1993, Merino-Ferradá 1993).

Merino-Ferradá (ms 1993) defines a pun as a single utterance which has to be assigned two different interpretations, both of which are relevant in the context of interpretation. Punning utterances express at least two propositions with different sets of truth conditions. Each propositional form yields an interpretation which is, on its own, consistent with the principle of relevance. This is a crucial observation, which raises the question of why two propositions are recovered and maintained. Recall that relevance theory predicts that the first interpretation to be found consistent with the principle of relevance is the one the hearer will select as that intended by the speaker. Merino-Ferradá considers a number of possibilities to explain this apparent paradox.

First, she suggests the possibility that a punning case is in fact a case in which two utterances are made, each having an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. This would be the case of the examples in (8)

- (10) a. The perfect car for the long drive. MAZDA.
 b. It's not the quality that moves you. BARRAT.
 c. Lose Weight. Get Slender. CARNATION SLENDER.

Merino-Ferradá wants to account for the intuition that there are two propositions expressed by the utterances in (10), which she found incompatible with the relevance-

theoretic framework. However, this proposal doesn't seem the most desirable line to follow, if only because, in the absence of overt parenthetical constructions and/or intonation, it betrays the intuitions that an utterance is the single issuance of a sentence at a given time.

A second possibility she mentions is to consider (10a-c) as cases of a single utterance where neither of the two interpretations alone satisfies the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance. Hence, sufficient effects are only derived by running both possibilities together.

As a third alternative, Merino-Ferradá ponders the view that no propositional form is ever decided upon as the one expressed by the utterance. Instead, because of the way context is set in a punning situation, the hearer has to move forward and backwards between two possible ways of resolving the ambiguity.

Both the second and the third options pose a problem for the view that each utterance expresses one and only one proposition⁴. Still, notice that there seems to be a further way out, suggested by the third possibility above. We do not need to oscillate between the level of the utterance and the level of the proposition expressed to see what may be going on. What these cases strongly suggest is that hearers begin to derive contextual effects well before a decision about the proposition expressed by the utterance is taken. This means that the logical form of an utterance plays a more important role in this process, on its own, and earlier than what is usually assumed.

⁴ The issue here is further confused by the fact that proposition and interpretation are sometimes used indistinctly, but it should be stressed that what is being discussed here is a manuscript draft of work in progress.

Entertaining the two propositional forms may be instrumental in the derivation of effects, and hence worth the effort of so doing in terms of the relevance of the utterance. Yet, perhaps in these cases hearers do not need to compute "the" proposition expressed by an utterance to retrieve an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance.

Merino-Ferradá makes some further suggestions. She offers a solution involving the process of concept formation, which she illustrates with the following example. It may be that one does not have readily available either the word "caravan", or its conceptual representation. Now imagine that in these circumstances someone says

(11) John bought himself a housecar.

The only alternative is to list from encyclopaedic knowledge all the propositional interpretations that could be relevant, such as (10a-b), and then combine them into a conceptual representation of "a vehicle equipped to live in".

- (12) a. John bought himself something which could be a car.
 b. John bought himself something which could be a house.

In the same way, she argues, the hearer of (10a) could build the concept of a Mazda car as a car appropriate for wealthy people -who have long drives- and/or for people who drive long distances. So, a single proposition would be expressed by the utterance, but it will not result from a disambiguation process. Rather, it would result from the incorporation of the new ad-hoc concept to the logical form of the utterance.

This proposal is interesting, but it seems to me that the fact that, in general,

in the punning cases there is no problem of lack of conceptual resources as there is in (11). It seems to me that the paradox of punning utterance to which Merino-Ferradá draws attention is only apparent. We do not need to assume that two utterances are being made, nor to abandon the idea that each utterance expresses a single proposition, or that the first interpretation tested and found consistent with the principle of relevance is the one retained by the speaker to explain why we notice the pun. It is possible for the hearer to decide initially that the utterance expresses proposition p_1 , to begin computing cognitive effects and to notice simultaneously an additional element in the context which makes him realise that this cannot be the intended interpretation, and that there is another way of fleshing out the logical form of the utterance that yields p_2 . The hearer need not discard the cognitive effects he has derived so far if they are not inconsistent with those he will derive from choosing p_2 as the definite candidate for the proposition expressed. Proposition p_1 may not be another possible intended interpretation, but most likely works rather as a kind of contextual assumption the accessing of which enables the hearer to derive additional cognitive effects. In other words, entertaining p_1 would increase the overall relevance of the utterance. This would account for the intuition that we retain it. We probably do, but not as *another* intended interpretation of the utterance. Example (5) seems to illustrate this clearly.

Merino-Ferradá's work is still in progress but it raises a number of fundamental questions about interpretation in general, and suggests interesting answers.

Before proceeding to the next chapter, I want to draw some further basic relevance-theoretic distinctions which I will be using in the rest of this work.

3. Relevance theory: some further distinctions for the study of verbal humour

I have now sketched the main ideas underlying relevance theory. Before turning to the analysis of verbal humour within this framework, I will concentrate briefly on those concepts and distinctions of the theory that I find most central to the study of verbal humour.

3.1 Cognitive environments and mutual manifestness

An act of communication gives rise to shared information. Besides, if communication is to be achieved, some prior sharing of information is necessary. Any general theory of language use must address the issue of what one's interlocutor knows and the role this knowledge plays in interpretation.

In relevance theory the role of shared information in communication is accounted for by the notion of *mutual manifestness* (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995). For a fact or an assumption to be *manifest* to an individual it needs to be perceptible or inferable. Of course, as assumptions and facts can be more or less salient perceptually, and more or less difficult to infer, they differ in their degree of

manifestness.

Sperber and Wilson's notion of what is manifest to an individual is clearly weaker than the notion of what the individual actually knows or assumes. For instance, there is a sense in which you know that Margaret Thatcher never went shopping with Cleopatra, although this very thought had probably never been entertained by you before reading these lines. In this weaker sense, something can be known without ever having been entertained. In the same way something can be manifest without being known or assumed. It need not be one of your assumptions that Cleopatra was never jealous of Marilyn Monroe (or of Margaret Thatcher for that matter), but it is something you are capable of inferring from what you know and assume. Although the assumption that Cleopatra was never jealous of Marilyn Monroe is not part of your conscious and active knowledge, nor of what you assume, it is manifest to you because it can be inferred from what you know and assume.

Moreover, as mentioned above, something can be manifest simply by being perceptible. Imagine that you are so absorbed in a conversation you are having that you don't notice the *Concorde* flying over you. Although you have no knowledge or assumptions about it, because the fact that the *Concorde* is flying over your head now is perceptible by you, it is manifest to you.

The set of facts and assumptions that are manifest to an individual at a given time constitutes his *cognitive environment*. Because individuals share physical surroundings and cognitive abilities, their cognitive environments intersect to some extent. Although we never share our total cognitive environments, we do share them

to some extent.

When two individuals share a cognitive environment they do not necessarily make the same assumptions. Having a shared cognitive environment only means that the people who share it are *capable* of making the same assumptions, not that they actually do.

There is one further assumption about a cognitive environment that can be manifest to individuals: an assumption about the people who have access to it. If you and I are in the same room and no one else is or has ever been there, I know that we and only we have access to this cognitive environment. If I belong to a secret sect, I know that I share with the members of this sect a cognitive environment not shared by non-members of the sect. A *mutual cognitive environment* is any shared cognitive environment in which it is manifest to the individuals who share it which people share it. So, in a mutual cognitive environment, for each manifest assumption the fact that it is manifest to the people who share this environment is itself manifest. Another way of referring to this is to say that in a mutual cognitive environment every assumption is *mutually manifest*. I will return to this notion in my analysis of humorous interpretations and argue that it plays a crucial part in a theory of verbal humour.

3. 2 Explicit and implicit meaning

Utterance interpretation comprises two processes: one based on coding and decoding and the other on ostension and inference.

An utterance has a logical form yielded by automatic decoding by the language

faculty, which is inferentially completed by the hearer. This logical form is a well-formed formula, a structured set of constituents which can undergo formal logical operations determined by its structure (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 72). The hearer's initial task upon hearing an utterance is to flesh out its logical form into a propositional form. This completion process involves doing three basic things: assigning reference, disambiguating and eliminating vagueness through concept adjustment, and adjusting certain concepts encoded linguistically in the utterance. The result is the propositional form of the utterance, which in some cases, but not always, is one of the assumptions the speaker wanted to communicate. In such circumstances, Sperber and Wilson call the proposition expressed by the utterance an *explicature* of the utterance.

However, the development of a logical form need not stop at this stage. If p is the proposition expressed by the utterance, it is possible for the hearer to embed p in a higher-level description of the speaker's attitude towards the proposition he has expressed, such as

The speaker believes that p

The speaker regrets that p

Whenever such higher-level descriptions are part of what is overtly communicated, they are called *higher level explicatures* of the utterance.

So, any development of the logical form of an utterance which produces an assumption that the speaker overtly intended to make manifest by means of his utterance is an *explicature* of the utterance.

Assumptions which are communicated by the utterance but which are not a development of its logical form are *implicatures*. Assumptions can be implicitly communicated in two ways. A hearer may need to provide a contextual assumption in order to satisfy himself that the speaker's utterance is consistent with the principle of relevance. So, for instance, in the following exchange B needs to supply the assumption that Tommy is a musical.

- (13) A: Have you seen Tommy?
 B: I don't go to musicals

Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) distinguish between assumptions conveyed implicitly in this way, which they call *implicated premises*, and assumptions that the hearer derives deductively, such as the assumption that B has not seen Tommy. These are accordingly called *implicated conclusions*. In later sections I will show that implicated premises play a key role in verbal humour, as a typical feature in the creation of a humorous effect is to lead a hearer to supply an implicated premise that contradicts a weakly mutually manifest contextual assumption.

3.3 Interpretations and descriptions

Thoughts are not fully encoded in utterances. The latter are merely public representations whose contents resemble that of the former. The fact that utterances can be used to convey thoughts which they do not reproduce exactly is a particular case of our more general ability to represent in virtue of resemblance.

We are constantly using objects in the world to represent other things they resemble. Although resemblance is a very vague notion, when the representations and objects involved in a relationship of resemblance have propositional content, it is possible to define a specific type of resemblance on the basis of how close such propositional contents are. So, the resemblance between a thought and the utterance that is used to represent it can be defined in terms of the number of logical and contextual implications they share in a given context. The more shared implications they have, the greater their resemblance. Sperber and Wilson (1986) call this particular kind of resemblance *interpretive resemblance* and a representation that stands for some other in virtue of the interpretive resemblance between the two is called an *interpretation*.

Hence, two representations with a propositional content interpretively resemble one another in some context to the extent that they share logical and contextual implications in that context. Because of this, Sperber and Wilson argue that every utterance is an interpretation of a thought of the speaker's. In this framework, literal interpretations are simply a limiting case of interpretation by resemblance: those where the utterance and the thought it represents share all their logical and contextual implications in all contexts.

To sum up, there are two ways in which a representation with a propositional form, in particular, thoughts and utterances, can be used to represent things. As I have just discussed, a representation can be used to represent some other representation with a propositional form in virtue of a resemblance between their propositional forms.

In this case, the representation is an *interpretation*. But also a representation can be used to represent some state of affairs in virtue of its propositional form being true of that state of affairs. If so, the representation is a *description*.

Every utterance then is an interpretation of a thought of the speaker's. The thought itself may be a description of a state of affairs or a representation of some further thought or utterance. In the first case, we will talk of *descriptive use* of language, in the second, of *interpretive use*. Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) have shown how this distinction allows for a characterisation of tropes and illocutionary force.

3.4 Propositional attitudes

I mentioned above that the development of a logical form is not confined to the recovery of the proposition expressed by an utterance, and that there are other propositions that the hearer can obtain by embedding the propositional content of the utterance in a higher-level description of the speaker's attitude towards the proposition he has expressed. Indeed, in some cases the main relevance of an utterance can be said to lie more in the speaker's attitude towards the proposition expressed than in the proposition itself, a point to which I will return later in my analysis of some humorous utterances and irony.

The fact that a speaker wishes to convey a particular attitude towards the proposition he has expressed may or may not be evident from the linguistic form of

his utterance. There are linguistic and para-linguistic clues that may signal the attitude the speaker wishes to convey. Mood indicators, sentential adverbs, parentheticals and performative verbs are explicit markers of the speaker's attitude towards the proposition expressed. The speaker's tone of voice or the look on his face, for instance, may function as non-linguistic indicators of his attitude towards the proposition expressed.

As my treatment of humour below will show, a speaker can implicitly express his attitude not only towards the proposition expressed by his utterance, but also towards the assumptions it communicates implicitly. I will argue that humour exploits the entertainment of contradictory propositional forms as a mechanism that cues the hearer to the recovery of an implicitly expressed dissociative attitude.

3.5 Echoic use

There is a sub-type of representation by resemblance that is fundamental to the creation of humorous effects. It is possible for a speaker to use a representation that he attributes to someone other than himself at the time of his utterance, and simultaneously express one of a range of possible attitudes to it. In relevance theoretic terms, when a speaker uses a representation in this way, he uses it *echoically*.

In cases of echoic use, an utterance achieves relevance by informing the hearer that the speaker has in mind some representation which he is attributing to someone, and also that he has a certain attitude to it. The attributed representation may

be an utterance (actual or potential) or a thought, and in fact, any representation, not necessarily one with a propositional form⁵. The attitude expressed may vary from complete endorsement to total dissociation. Consider for instance the exchange below, where Peter echoes Mary's utterance with an attitude of incredulity.

Mary: Yes

Peter: Yes?

Echoic use is rather pervasive in language, and this technical notion has successfully been put to use in accounting for phenomena as diverse as metalinguistic negation and irony.

It is possible for speakers to echo full representations, as in (14) and (15), or part of them, as in (16) and (17):

(14) A: What did she say?

B: (in anger) "I know nothing about it"

(15) A: We are going

B: (with delight) We are going!

(16) We didn't see the HIPPOPOTAMUSES, we saw the hippopotami.

(17) Around here we don't eat tom[a:təuz], we eat tom[eiDəuz]

Examples (16) and (17) are from Carston and Noh (1995), who have shown that it is possible to echo segments of a representation (e.g. part of the material falling within the scope of a negation operator), which, they have argued, is typical of instances of metalinguistic negation

⁵ There can be, for instance, echoes whose targets are specific linguistic forms, intonation and so on.

The target of an echo may vary across a wide range of properties. As Carston and Noh mention (1995: 4) it can be one of a range of linguistic properties, for instance, phonetic, grammatical or lexical properties, aspects of dialect, register or style, as well as a number of paralinguistic features such as the tone of voice, pitch, and gestures. One can also have as a target the semantic content of a representation.

Also, utterances or thoughts can be echoed either implicitly, as in (18), where the range of attitudes that can be expressed varies from full endorsement to complete dissociation, or explicitly, as in (19).

(18) The ban on British beef should be lifted

(19) He said cynically "the ban on British beef should be lifted"

Echoes can then be explicit or implicit, a diversity of fragments and complete mental representations can be used echoically, a wide variety of attitudes can be expressed through such use and a number of linguistic and paralinguistic properties can be the targets of the echo.

In the next chapters I suggest that an important element in the process that leads to at least some humorous interpretations is the recognition of the speaker's implicit expression of his attitude of disengagement from an attributed implicit assumption. This assumption, made strongly mutually manifest by the utterance, functions as the target of the echo.

3. 6 Main relevance of an utterance

An important characteristic of the contextual effects yielded by an ostensive stimulus is that they are not derivable either from the context or from the new information

alone. Contextual effects result from an interaction between old assumptions and incoming information. So, a set of assumptions P contextually implies an assumption q in the context C if and only if the union of P and C non-trivially implies q , P does not non-trivially imply q and C does not non-trivially imply q either.

Suppose that an utterance u , relevant in a context C , makes manifest a set of assumptions P . It is conceivable that not all the assumptions in P will contribute equally to the overall relevance of u . For instance, a hearer may derive more contextual effects from the fact that a speaker has expressed his attitude towards the proposition expressed by his utterance than from the proposition expressed itself. Imagine that in uttering (20) a speaker also intends to communicate the higher level descriptions in (21)

(20) I must go to Paris

(21) a. I believe that I must go to Paris

b. I regret that I must go to Paris

In certain contexts, the main relevance of the utterance may lie more in the speaker's attitude towards the proposition expressed than in the proposition expressed itself. For example, in a context where both the speaker and hearer know that the speaker must go to Paris, and he repeatedly utters (20) with a particular tone of voice, the main relevance of his utterance may lie in the higher level explicature in (21b).

Equally, the main relevance of an utterance may lie in one of its implicatures.

So, consider the following exchange:

(22) Peter: Will Piet be willing to spend all this on us?

Mary: He's Dutch

Here, Mary's utterance activates a set of stereotypical assumptions which include the assumption that the Dutch are mean. This implicated premise is used to derive the implicated conclusion that Piet will not be that happy to spend much money on us. The implicated premise contributes to the overall relevance of the utterance by giving immediate access to a context that will allow the derivation of adequate effects, thereby helping to reduce the effort needed to derive them. The implicated conclusion is responsible for triggering a number of further contextual effects. Assuming that the hearer already knows that Piet is Dutch, the main relevance of the utterance lies less in the proposition expressed than in its implicatures.

Whenever most of the contextual effects of an utterance are derived from some specific (segments) of the representations to which it gives access, we can say that the *main relevance* of the utterance lies in them. This means that if a hearer fails to gain access to such (segments of) representations, his interpretation of the utterance will not be optimally relevant in the way intended by the speaker.

The following chapters will consider in more detail how relevance theory can be used to account for how hearers arrive at humorous interpretations.

Chapter Six

Incongruity, relevance and humorous effects

In the previous chapters I considered in some detail the main approaches to the philosophy, the psychology, the linguistics and the pragmatics of humour. One important observation that emerges from this discussion is the ubiquity of some notion of incongruity. This is a much used concept in the study of humour, but one whose meaning is usually vague and taken for granted, and in fact, little understood. In philosophy, there is a well-established tradition that regards the experience of humour as one among several possible consequences of the perception of what is incongruous. In psychology, a number of experiments have attempted to measure the relation between degrees of incongruity, or cognitive dissonance, operationalised in different ways, and perceptions of funniness. In linguistics and pragmatics, authors talk of semantic distance, opposition, bisociation, alienation, disjunction, violation and incongruity. What seems common to the use of all these terms is the attempt to capture an intuition that humour is about deviation and surprise. In fact, the accepted view, more or less explicitly, seems to be that incongruity amounts to deviation, that deviation produces surprise, and that surprise of the appropriate kind produces humour.

This picture opens at least two different avenues for exploration. First, one might attempt an elaboration of an adequate notion of incongruity that can capture

what is common to the variety of concepts that are operative in accounts of humour, and also pertinent to the creation of funniness, or wit. We need to know with more accuracy what sort of incongruity is significant when explaining humour, giving rise to humorous effects, as opposed to other outcomes. Perhaps precision and formalisation can clarify what it is about certain incongruities that produces humour, while others are merely nonsensical, paradoxical, or result in forms such as tragedy and absurdist art. There is, however, a foreseeable problem in this attempt. Incongruity is a notion that runs parallel to that of similarity. Just as any two things can be similar in some respect, any two things can be incongruous in some way. This suggests that attempting to refine and systematize an appropriate concept of incongruity may be difficult, if not futile.

Now, although it may be argued that perhaps it is possible to home in on "the way" in which two things have to be incongruous for humour to arise, what we are after is not so much a description of what makes something incongruous 'in the right way', as the intended effect that this incongruity is supposed to achieve upon a hearer in generating humour. If so, the aspects of humorous interpretations that relate to incongruity can perhaps not be fully characterized before interpretation is underway. And, most importantly, it may be that it is not incongruity itself that accounts for humour, but rather the ways in which hearers react to it and manipulate it. This points us in a second direction of inquiry.

Incongruities, however defined, are deviations from norms or expectations. In that sense, they introduce an element of complexity in processing. In the case of

intentional humour, they are also intentional. In the framework of relevance theory, if an element requires extra processing, a hearer is entitled to expect additional effects in return.

If during interpretation we find what we take to be an accidental, non intentional incongruity, we are likely to invest some effort in order to find out where and how we went wrong. If, on the other hand, we recognize the incongruity as one intended by the speaker, we will look for additional effects in order to justify our expectation of optimal relevance. It is in forcing the hearer to extend his interpretation beyond the obvious that the effect is created. But this merely pushes the problem one step further away. The same can be said about how poetic effects are created, how figurative language is understood, and in general, of literary interpretation at large. We still need to account for what makes the difference. My suggestion is that we need to progress along both lines suggested above, but that the main interest lies in the second. That is, although an adequate notion of incongruity is desirable, an account of the effects achieved by processing it is fundamental. We need to have a better understanding of why incongruity has played such an outstanding role in accounts of humour, and we need to make the notion more precise. But we also have to clarify what the effects of exposing a hearer to incongruity are throughout the process of interpretation. This, as a rule, is not addressed in the literature on verbal humour. If the assumption at the heart of relevance theory that communication is intended to modify cognitive environments is taken seriously, then rather than merely wondering what kind of incongruity is likely to result in a humorous interpretation, we should ask

what kind of modification to a cognitive environment is intended -or achieved- when a speaker produces an ostensive stimulus with a humorous intention. If this approach is correct, it will show that what makes humorous and non-humorous interpretations different is not that they involve the use of different principles of interpretation, but rather that they lead to different inferential patterns, and produce different types of modification to the cognitive environment of the hearer. None of these should require in itself the existence of a different communication mode governed by specific principles of interpretation.

What I do in this chapter is analyse closely the steps in the interpretation of some examples of discourse that is generally accepted as humorous. This leads me to the characterization of some pragmatic mechanisms that somehow induce the entertainment of "incongruities". I then suggest what may be common to all of them. In order to do that, I shift the centre of attention from the structural features of texts to the mental processes that a hearer goes through during interpretation, concentrating on the representations he is led to entertain, and the computations such representations enter into during comprehension. I suggest that at the heart of the process that results in a humorous or witty interpretation lies a particular kind of interaction between the perception and manipulation of the incongruous and the search for relevance.

1. The entertainment of incongruities

1.1 Conflicting propositional forms

One rather straightforward way of leading a hearer into the entertainment of the incongruous through language is to direct his process of interpretation to the recovery of conflicting propositional forms. But, of course, humour and the absurd are not the same. It is not just any way of arriving at contradictory assumptions that will play a significant part in producing a humorous interpretation or result in a witticism. In particular, explicit conflicting propositional forms are more akin to repairs in discourse, to ritual behaviours, or to plain nonsense than to humour. Consider for example (1-4).

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

But let us consider what may happen if, in interpreting an utterance, the search for relevance forces a hearer to recover two clashing propositions that are not both conveyed explicitly. This means that at least one of them will be recovered by the hearer as part of what is implicated in interpreting the utterance as consistent with the principle of relevance. The other clashing assumption may be manifest either from the current context of interpretation or alternatively, from the explicit content of the utterance. The examples below are cases in point. Listed under each are the corresponding clashing propositions¹.

¹Notice that my purpose here is merely to indicate the sort of assumptions involved in the process of interpretation. Different hearers will entertain different subsets of the assumptions made manifest by any given utterance, and the precise formulations they come up with will not necessarily bear much relation to the ones above. These are only intended to suggest the type of contents hearers are likely to manipulate. The point, however, is that in interpreting the utterance as witty or humorous, the search for relevance will lead hearers to entertain two contradictory assumptions of roughly the suggested content.

(5) Peter: Who was that gentleman I saw you with last night?

Mary: That was no gentleman. That was a senator

(Raskin, 1985)

(5a) Senators are gentlemen

(5b) Senators are no gentlemen

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

Premises:

(5c) The man is no gentleman (explicated by Mary's utterance)

(5d) The man is a senator (explicated by Mary's utterance)

(5e) Senators are no gentlemen (strongly implicated premise supplied by the hearer in order to derive adequate contextual effects)

Conclusion:

(5f) The reason why the man is not a gentleman is that he is a senator

Something similar occurs in (6).

(6) There is something tragic about the enormous number of young men there are in England at the present moment who start life with a perfect profile and end up by adopting some useful profession

(Oscar Wilde)

(6a) A useful profession is a cause for congratulation

(6b) A useful profession is a cause for commiseration

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

In the process of creating an incongruity between the propositional forms of two manifest assumptions, it is possible for the speaker to transfer to the hearer a great deal of the responsibility. This can be achieved by leading the hearer to construct both clashing assumptions himself. The speaker can thus exploit the hearer's search for an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance and lead him to supply implicated premises needed for such an interpretation at successive stages in the discourse, which nonetheless contradict each other. This is the case in the joke in (7), also mentioned in chapter five, and reproduced here for convenience.

- (7) As a passenger boarded the Los Angeles-to New York plane, he told the flight attendant to wake him and make sure he got off in Dallas. The passenger awoke just as the plane was landing in New York. Furious, he called the flight attendant

and demanded an explanation. The fellow mumbled an apology and, in a rage, the passenger stamped off the plane. 'Boy, was he ever mad!', another crew member observed to her errant colleague. 'If you think he was mad', replied the flight attendant, 'you should have seen the guy I put off in Dallas'

(Jodlowiec 1991)

- (7a) The flight attendant forgot that a passenger wanted to get off the plane in Dallas
- (7b) The flight attendant did not forget that a passenger wanted to get off the plane in Dallas

Although not conveyed explicitly by any of the utterances in (7), (7a) needs to be supplied if the passage between '*the passenger awoke...*' and the punchline is to be interpreted as consistent with the principle of relevance. Nonetheless, an interpretation of the punchline which is also consistent with the principle of relevance forces the speaker to provide (7b) as an implicated premise².

In fact, leading the hearer to entertain contradictory propositional forms is a very common feature of humorous interpretations. Recall Dolitsky's example, discussed extensively in Chapter Four, and reproduced as (8).

- (8) Don't keep telling the lady you are unworthy of her. Let it be a

²Recall that in chapter five I disagreed with Jodlowiec's idea that this example did not involve a reorganization of the context of interpretation. This is why.

complete surprise.

As I stressed then, my disagreement with Dolitsky is not that (8a) is part of the context of interpretation, which it of course is, but only that it should be a presupposition of the utterance. It seems clear that the first part of the utterance does make manifest at least the desire of the participants to believe that (8a). The assumption in (8a) may arise as a default assumption, in the absence of any indication to the contrary, perhaps because of politeness considerations, or because the topic facilitates the assumption that participants have a kind of relationship in which they hold each other in good regard, etc. The point is that it is brought to the context as a default contextual assumption for reasons of accessibility, and not as a presupposition of the utterance, as shown in Chapter Four. It should be clear now that the mechanism at work does not involve *breaking pragmatic rules* on presupposition, but rather on the contrary, it rests on the fact that the *automatic presumption of consistency with the principle of relevance* will lead a hearer to select certain assumptions as the intended context of interpretation and not others. A speaker who wanted to rule out the presence of (8a) as a contextual assumption would have needed to phrase his utterance differently.

As interpretation proceeds, the most accessible referent for the pronoun *it* is the object of the verb *tell*. If the speaker did not mean the hearer to select it in his process of reference assignment as the intended referent, he should have indicated so. Therefore, in order to interpret the second part of the utterance as consistent with the

principle of relevance, (8b) needs to be supplied as an implicated premise³.

(8a) The addressee is worthy of the lady in question

(8b) The addressee is not worthy of the lady in question

Yet a further example is (9).

(9) It is perfectly monstrous the way people go about nowadays saying things against one behind one's back that are absolutely and entirely true. (Oscar Wilde)

(9a) The things people tell against one behind one's back are false or disreputable.

(9b) The things people tell against one behind one's back are not false or disreputable.

Again, (9a) is taken for granted as one of the assumptions against which to process an utterance. By the end of the utterance one will have to supply (9b). In this case, (9b) is entailed by the explicit content of the utterance. Let me stress that I do not attempt to spell out in detail *what* makes (9) funny, or witty. As mentioned in Chapter Four, there are perhaps unlimited angles from which to view utterances like (9). In phrasing (9) the way he did, Oscar Wilde was perhaps parodying the upper classes in Victorian times, suggesting a contrast in moral values, mocking the accepted notion of what is respectable and what is not, questioning and ridiculing Victorian social values, principles and morals and so on. What interests me here is only the fact that

³ Recall that Dolitsky had to argue that it was the subject position which forced the truth of the assumption. Relevance theory provides a different explanation in showing that considerations of effort and effect are at stake when assigning reference.

the hearer of (9) will have to entertain two contradictory propositional forms in the search for an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance.

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

Assuming that the examples just discussed are perceived as reasonably funny by at least some people, it is clear that whatever humorous or witty effects they achieve do not simply result from this conflict in propositional content, but rather emerge as the outcome of a complex interaction of various factors. Nonetheless, if the entertainment of the incongruous (of which propositional form clash is just one instance) does effectively play some crucial role in their creation, this would suggest that witticisms and humorous effects arise from some process similar to what occurs with garden-path utterances. Having processed the material available in the most accessible context, the hearer encounters a contradictory effect and backtracks, looking for additional effects. I will take up below the issue of how he then goes about manipulating the contradiction encountered, but first I will consider further pragmatic

mechanisms frequently exploited in humour that can be treated as a means of instantiating the incongruous through language.

Having to entertain two contradictory propositional forms during the process of interpretation is, of course, not exclusive to humour, as demonstrated by (10), and indeed, by any case of bridging inference where the implicated premise contradicts an assumption so far held by the hearer⁴. Imagine that (10) is uttered in a context where the hearer believes that the speaker is single.

(10) My wife is waiting for me next door

Here, the hearer will be forced to supply (10b) as an implicated premise, contradicting his contextual assumption in (10a)

(10a) The speaker is single

(10b) The speaker is not single

So why is this not (at least not in general) humorous? How does it differ from the cases above? This issue will be taken up in some detail in Chapter 8; here I will only point out some general aspects.

The most obvious result of the process above is that (10a) is abandoned. This

⁴ A *bridging inference* is made when some information is required to make a connection between two assumptions, such as in

- a. Mary got some picnic supplies out of the car.
- b. The beer was warm

- c. The picnic supplies mentioned include some beer.

Here (c) would be a bridging assumption. Brown and Yule refer to this kind of information as 'missing links', and to bridging as a process of providing the missing links between assumptions (1983: 257). Bridging phenomena have been studied (Clark 1977) with respect to reference assignment (Haviland and Clark 1974), indirect requests (Clark and Lucy 1975), and style and acceptability (Clark and Haviland 1977, Sanford and Garrod 1981), *inter alia*, and, from a relevance theoretic perspective, by Matsui (1993a, 1993b, 1994).

is in line with Sperber and Wilson's suggestion that the deductive device monitors for contradictions when deriving cognitive effects. They say:

"The deductive device has the power not only to read and write assumptions in its memory, but also to erase them. Let us assume that when two assumptions are found to contradict each other, if it is possible to compare their strengths, and if one is found to be stronger than the other, then the device automatically erases the weaker assumption. When an assumption is erased, the device also erases any assumption which analytically implies it, and the weaker of any pair of assumptions which synthetically imply it; this procedure applies recursively until no more erasures can take place. When such a procedure is possible, the contradiction is eliminated at the root, and the deductive process can be resumed." (1986: 114)

However, in cases such as (5-9) above, it is not always easy to see how hearers will assess the strength of the (b) assumptions relative to the (a) assumptions. Consider (5).

A hearer who believes (5a) is unlikely to abandon it just because the speaker has implied (5b), and the same goes for (6a) and (6b). In the case of (7), we do abandon the assumption in (7a) that we had taken on board in favour of (7b), but the case of (8a-8b) is not that straightforward, nor is that of (9). So, what are the contextual effects achieved in processing (5-9)? Sperber and Wilson note that it may not always be possible to solve the contradictions in this way.

"There are situations where this straightforward method of resolving contradictions yields no result: for instance, because the device is unable to compare the strength of the two contradictory assumptions, or because they are equally strong. We assume that in these situations the contradiction is resolved by other means: for example by a conscious search for further evidence for or against one of the contradictory assumptions." (1986: 115)

Now, a humorous response precisely involves not searching further for such evidence.

If the hearer of (5) begins arguing with the speaker that indeed senators are gentlemen, or if the hearer of (6) were to ask Wilde why he considers a useful profession to be a cause of commiseration, and so on for the rest of the examples, they would simply have missed the point, and the humorous effect or the wit will not be recovered.

Given that cognitive effects arise from an interaction of the context and incoming information, following Sperber and Wilson, we would be forced to conclude that, in these cases, if the new assumption is rejected, no contextual effects would be achieved:

"Contextual effects are achieved only when (...) the new assumption displaces an assumption already present in the context, with subsequent weakening or erasure of other contextual assumptions linked to it by relations of analytic and synthetic implication" (1986: 115).

We are then left with two possibilities: either humorous effects arise from utterances that are not relevant, or the hearer needs to search for contextual effects beyond the propositional content of the assumptions made manifest by the utterance. The first conclusion is odd. If humour arose from non relevant material, we would tend not to pay attention to such discourse. But we clearly do. So, humorists must intend to communicate more than the propositional content of the assumptions involved, and they can reasonably expect their audience to recover such additional effects in their search for an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. What could these additional effects be?

In interpreting utterances, a hearer derives cognitive effects at four related but different levels: the level of what the speaker intended to say, the level of what he intended to imply, the level of the intended context of interpretation, and the level of the speaker's intended attitude to what was said and implied. One of the fundamental differences between (5-9) and (10) above lies precisely in the speaker's attitude towards the clashing assumptions. While it is clear in (5-9) that the speaker intends the hearer to entertain both of them, it is much less clear that the speaker intends to

commit himself to their truth. In fact, no rational speaker could endorse the (a) and the (b) assumptions simultaneously as they stand, so the speaker of our examples must be intending to convey some specific attitude towards them. I will take up this issue in later chapters.

1.2 Foreground and background swapping

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

1.2.1 *Anticipatory hypotheses*

An utterance is produced and processed over time. A hearer will therefore access and process some of the concepts it encodes, and their associated logical and encyclopedic entries, before others. To some extent, disambiguation, reference assignment and even parsing are top-down processes. What this means is that, on the basis of what they have already heard, hearers construct anticipatory hypotheses about the overall structure of the utterance being processed. These include hypotheses about its syntactic and logical structure on which hearers rely to resolve potential ambiguities and eliminate vagueness.

Sperber and Wilson suggest a way of constructing anticipatory logical

hypotheses on the basis of syntactic hypotheses, whose role in comprehension is rather well established (1986: 205). Their assumption is that logical forms, like syntactic forms, are trees of labelled nodes. The logical labels are drawn from a set of logical categories, which are variables over conceptual representations. These categories are presumably part of basic human mental equipment. They use the pro-forms of English to represent them, so that *someone* is a variable over conceptual representations of people, *something* over conceptual representations of things, *do something* over conceptual representations of actions, *some time* over temporal conceptual representations, *somewhere* over spatial conceptual representations, and so on. In this way, the logical form of (11) could then be represented by (12).

(11) Susan saw the senator last night

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

The idea is that a hearer who has heard *Susan* will have assigned it to the syntactic category NP and made the anticipatory syntactic hypothesis that it will be followed by a VP. By variable substitution this should yield the logical hypothesis (13).

(13) Susan did something

In his search for consistency with the principle of relevance, the hearer will then assume that the speaker intended to raise the question *What did Susan do?* and that the rest of the utterance will answer it. Again, upon hearing *saw* and assigning it to the syntactic category VP he will make the syntactic hypothesis that it will be followed by a NP and the logical hypothesis that Susan saw *something/someone*. Most likely, he will then assume that the rest of the utterance will answer the question *Whom/what did Susan see?*, and so on. Such a process produces a set of anticipatory hypotheses. Those which turn out to be correct are logically related to one another, and can be placed on a scale where each member analytically implies its immediately preceding member. The scale of anticipatory hypotheses for (11) is represented in (14) below:

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

Although the question at the bottom of the scale gets answered by the end of the utterance, and at that stage in processing relevant answers to the questions in the scale will have been provided, the interpretation of the utterance itself will most probably

raise still others, such as, for example, *Why did Susan see the senator?* or *Where did Susan see the senator?* The hearer will thus develop expectations about the ways in which upcoming material is most likely to achieve relevance.

In principle, a hearer could produce an indefinite number of such hypotheses. In practice, he will formulate those which seem most relevant to him and will adjust them to the direction in which the exchange or the discourse that he is processing develops. Of course, not all the hypotheses in the anticipatory scale are recovered at the same time. On the other hand, for each of these hypotheses the hearer will find either that it is relevant in its own right or that it raises a relevant question (i.e. a question the answer to which is certain or likely to be relevant). Let us call an implication in the scale of correct anticipatory hypotheses that has contextual effects of its own a *foreground implication*, and an implication that is not relevant on its own, a *background implication*.⁵

1.2.2 *Focal scales*

One of the ways to find the focus of a declarative utterance is to see what wh-question it was designed or could be appropriately used to answer. Wh- questions have the

⁵ Sperber and Wilson (1986: 209) define this notion not for the scale of anticipatory logical hypotheses, but for another type of scale, which is constructed on the basis of focal stress placement, and which they call *focal scale*. The set of anticipatory logical hypotheses made during the interpretation process coincides with the focal scale only when focal stress falls on the last word of an utterance.

form *wh-p*, where *p* is a less than fully propositional form. Once the empty slot in *p* is filled in, the result is a declarative proposition that answers a *wh*-question. Before this, although *p* is not fully propositional, it has a logical form and hence, analytic implications. We can therefore construct an ordered subset of the analytic implications of *p* using the empty slot as a point of departure in a way that parallels what would otherwise be a focal scale. Moreover, it is also possible to use the notion of foreground and background implications meaningfully for this scale⁶.

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

1.2.3 The switch from the background to the foreground

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

⁶ In many cases, the scale so constructed will be the focal scale.

to achieve relevance. Such a case is illustrated in (15) below.

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

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

- (16) p= How far is an unseen world from midtown?
 q= How late is an unseen world open?

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

- (17) p' = An unseen world is _____ from midtown
 p''= An unseen world is some measurable distance from midtown

Now notice that what is conveyed is that there is a completion of p' into a propositional form that would make it relevant if true, that is, which would yield

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

- (18) q' = An unseen world is open until _____
 q'' = An unseen world is open until some real time

However, because of the context in which (15) is being processed, p'' and q'' are relevant in their own right. The fact that a supernatural world should have a physically determined spatial-temporal location would yield enough contextual effects to be relevant in its own right if it were true. In fact, p'' and q'' are foreground assumptions, given that they are so much in conflict with the assumptions in the current context of interpretation, and regardless of a more specific completion of p' and q' .

The next example is taken from Woody Allen's *Examining Psychic Phenomena*, a short story in which the discourse preceding (19) has made strongly manifest the assumption that the speaker is advocating the existence of the supernatural, and providing evidence to support his claims. Here, an assumption from the background is suddenly brought into the foreground and denied explicitly.

- (19) Unexplainable events occur constantly. One man will see spirits. Another will hear voices (...) How many of us have not at one time or another felt an ice-cold hand on the back of our neck while we were at home alone? (not me, thank God, but some have).

The speaker's question in (19) is rhetorical and as such implicates its answer. It hence communicates that there is some completion of *p* in (20) that would be relevant if true, and, because of its rhetorical nature, also that such a completion is strongly manifest to him and his audience.

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

Possible completions of *p* are *all/most/many/some/few*. In the context of interpretation, the completion of *p* as *p'* in (21) is highly predictable

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

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

the background into the foreground, and explicitly denying it.

In this section I have shown how a speaker can treat an assumption that belongs in the foreground as if it were part of the background. Notice that such an assumption, analytically implied by the utterance, would carry more contextual effects than the material explicitly foregrounded, if it were being put forward as a description of a state of affairs in the world. Being told that an unseen world is some measurable distance from midtown, and that it can be open or closed at some real time contradicts taken for granted contextual assumptions.

The manipulation described above is intimately associated with the encountering of some rather abrupt deviation from the ways in which upcoming material is expected to be relevant. In a sense, the distinction between background and foreground assumptions divides the cognitive environment of a hearer into two distinct spaces. These can be conceived of as *relevance search fields*. A speaker normally exploits this fact to direct the hearer's search for relevance. The natural tendency will be for hearers to search for relevance in the answers to the questions that foreground assumptions raise (i.e. within the *foreground relevance search field*), given that information contained in background assumptions is standardly treated as not relevant enough in its own right, but as supplying contextual assumptions for the processing of foreground implications. What we find in the cases of verbal humour just discussed is that this tendency is reversed. Do we need to conclude, after all, that humorous discourse is deviant and that it requires the operation of special-purpose principles? Clearly not. Notice that the whole process is driven by the search for consistency with

the principle of relevance. Moreover, whatever additional effects are communicated in leading a hearer to manipulate incongruities in any of the ways discussed above does not call for the postulation of additional principles; rather, it raises the question of what motivates a speaker to lead a hearer this way. The humorous examples in (5-9) demand additional effort on the part of the hearer. It does not follow, though, that humorous discourse is deviant, nor that it has a marked nature. If the additional effort involved were enough to make humorous discourse abnormal in some way, we would need to include in this deviant category of deviant utterances all cases that demand any extra processing effort, humorous or not; but we don't.

The answer suggested by relevance theory is that what the devices just discussed will do is to push interpretation beyond the propositional level of the assumptions that the utterance makes manifest, thus forcing hearers to search for additional effects. I will suggest that these effects crucially involve the implicit expression of the speaker's attitude towards some of the assumptions that his utterance makes manifest. The details of this are left for later chapters⁷, but it is worth noticing here that although a relevance theoretic approach to humour along these lines does not settle the issues raised by the creation and interpretation of humorous effects, it provides a more coherent and complete picture than explanations solely based on the notion of incongruity can offer. For instance, it fits our intuitions that a humorous experience involves some form of cognitive mastery, and it provides much more

⁷ On this, see mainly chapter seven.

insight as to why the entertainment of the incongruous should be a possible basis for humour in the first place. Still, I need to address the problem of what precisely those additional effects consist of in the case of humour. I will do that in the next two chapters.

2. The incongruous and its role

Let me return to the concept of incongruity. In what sense are the features described above a manifestation of the incongruous? So far I have been using the notion of *incongruity* in a loose manner, as is the tendency in humour research in general. Incongruity is a notion whose meaning is often taken for granted, and seldom clarified or discussed in detail.

Consider psychology. In this field, incongruity theories of humour have operationalised their central concept in a variety of ways, all of which involve a degree of deviation from a given pattern of expectations. For instance, the research conducted by Nerhardt and his colleagues, mentioned in the first chapter, gave rise to what became known as the weight-judging paradigm for the study of humour (see Deckers 1993). On the other hand, when it comes to verbal humour, psychologists have found the ideas of grammatical deviation (Hoppe 1976) and semantic distance useful (Golkewitsch 1974, Hillson and Martin 1994), as they provide some (if doubtful) standard of measure and seem to be present in some forms of humour. But

what psychology has shown is quantitative rather than qualitative. Many experiments have provided evidence that the relation between degree of incongruity and perceived funniness is not linear, but is a function with an inverted U-shape. So, assuming that the level of incongruity can be adequately measured, there seems to be an optimal value of incongruity to produce humour. Below or beyond that, the effect tends to fade away. The issue of *why* humorous effects can be derived from the perception of incongruity is usually not addressed in much detail though.

The concept of incongruity regularly used in the literature on humour does not differ much from the meaning it receives in ordinary speech. Although without much precision, Forabosco (1992) is amongst the few who have supplied an explicit definition of incongruity. He characterizes it as a feature of the relation between an object and the subject who perceives it, and not as a property of the object itself. So, he says that

"a stimulus is *incongruous* when it differs from the cognitive model of reference" (1992: 54).

where by *model* he means

'a sort of preliminary representation and minitheory which the subject uses in his relationship with reality' (1992: 54),

Forabosco takes a *cognitive model of reference* to be what a subject constructs as the result of the contents of his experience and the processes through which he organizes knowledge, such as knowledge acquisition methods (selection, categorization, generalization, etc.). Vague as this concept remains, the notion of cognitive model is meant to delineate a field of variation within which the characteristics of the stimulus

must fall in order to be perceived as conforming and hence congruous.

Notice also that the notion of cognitive model of reference conflates what are most likely to be rather different categories: knowledge, or the content of knowledge, and the processes through which knowledge is organized. Forabosco does not give much attention to this point, but it raises an issue. While it seems intuitively possible to characterise an incongruous stimulus as one that falls beyond the field of variation delineated by the cognitive model that emerges from the *content* of knowledge, it is much less clear what it would mean for some stimulus to fall beyond the field delineated by the *processes* that organise knowledge, or even to be certain as to what such field would be. One may speculate that what Forabosco has in mind are instances where our standard processes of selection, categorisation, generalisation, do not yield *congruous* (in his sense) results in terms of the content of our knowledge. However, one would expect that, in such cases, the *processes* that organise knowledge themselves remain intact, and indeed, that the subject will strive further to produce consistent interpretations of the world precisely through the use of those processes. In relevance theoretic terms, these cases would merely be instances that demand the investment of additional processing effort. Hence, if the notion of *cognitive model of reference* is to be useful, it seems that it needs be restricted to the contents of knowledge, and that it cannot be assumed to have any bearing upon the processes that organise it.

Being led to entertain as something accepted an implicated premise that contradicts some other assumption manifest in the context of interpretation,

recognizing that a foreground assumption is being presented as if it were a background assumption, and being forced to search for and find relevance in a field other than expected are all discrepancies that fit into Forabosco's definition of incongruity⁸. In all cases, it is the attempt to interpret utterances as consistent with the principle of relevance that leads hearers to entertain the incongruous.

What I have offered so far is a description of some mechanisms that trigger the perception of incongruity, still vaguely defined, in the process of interpretation in language. I have also argued that it is the principle of relevance that leads hearers to entertain different forms of the incongruous, and that this perception features characteristically, although not exclusively, in the experience of verbal humour. There are several immediate questions that arise from this picture, some of which concern non-literal uses of language.

First, how do ironical utterances, a prototypical form of verbal wit, fit into this view? Second, given that all forms of metaphor involve the entertainment of incongruities in ways that conform with Forabosco's definition, what makes some of them humorous, others poetic, and yet others simply conventional? What produces the difference?⁹ More generally, how do hearers go about processing the incongruities they encounter, particularly when these consist of contradictory propositional contents,

⁸It is worth stressing that Forabosco's definition remains too vague as to the precise ways in which any given stimulus should "deviate" from the cognitive model of reference for it to be considered incongruous.

⁹ It has been suggested that, in contrast with poetic metaphors, humorous metaphors are rare (Weiner, personal communication). I address this issue in Chapter 7, where irony and metaphor are considered in their relation to humorous effects.

whose corresponding assumptions cannot be assessed for their strength?

There are two obvious, non- mutually exclusive, ways of tackling these and other related issues. The first is to work towards a theoretically sound and more specific definition of incongruity. This path has been taken by Kittay (1987) in her study of metaphors, although she is not at all concerned with humorous effects. I will discuss her proposal in ~~the~~ chapter eight, because it constitutes one of the most elaborated attempts in this direction. I will argue, however, that this is not a very fruitful track. The second possibility is, rather than concentrating on the concept of incongruity itself, to focus on what effects intentional incongruity has on hearers, why and how speakers use it, and how hearers manipulate it to recover a variety of different effects, amongst which humour finds its place. These are the issues I deal with in the next two chapters.

Chapter Seven

The implicit expression of attitudes and mutual manifestness

Humour, I think, is responsible for more important human advances than physics, medicine or any other science. It teaches us to see things in proportion.

(Georges Mikes, *Humour In Memoriam*)

1. Pragmatic mechanisms of humour: entertaining the incongruous?

In the previous chapter I discussed in detail three mechanisms commonly at work in the production of humorous effects, which I summarize below.

First, I showed that a humorous interpretation often involves the entertainment of two contradictory propositional contents. Normally, this is triggered by leading the hearer to supply a strongly implicated premise that clashes with an accessible assumption in the current context of interpretation. The contradiction arises in the search for an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. I pointed out that entertaining contradictory propositional contents conveyed at the explicit level does not produce humorous effects.

A second device in the group of mechanisms discussed refers to the treatment

of foreground assumptions as if they were in the background. In doing so, a speaker presents information that is relevant in its own right as if it were taken for granted, and hence, not relevant in itself.

The third mechanism I mentioned was described as a clash between the expectations of the way in which upcoming material will achieve relevance and the way in which it actually does. It is often a consequence of the first two, and co-occurs with them, though sometimes, as in the case of (1) below, it can operate independently of both.

- (1) Inspector Ford burst into the study. On the floor was the body of Clifford Wheel, who apparently had been struck from behind with a croquet mallet. The position of the body indicated that the victim had been surprised in the act of singing 'Sorrento' to his goldfish. Evidence showed that there had been terrible struggle that had twice been interrupted by phone calls, one a wrong number and one asking if the victim was interested in dance lessons

(Woody Allen)

Of course, it is possible to create a context in which the fact that the victim sings 'Sorrento' to his goldfish is seriously taken as a clue in solving a murder, where there can really be evidence of this (say, a musical score lying right by the fishbowl), of the incoming of two phone calls during the struggle (say, an answering machine, or a tape recorder), and where all these pieces of information are meaningful in a serious way, and do not give rise to humour. In the absence of a such context though, this is not the kind of information one expects to follow after the first lines.

As I have tried to illustrate so far, theories of humour based on incongruity have become the standard paradigm in humour research. Pervasive as this position is,

still a consistent and well defined notion of incongruity is, as I have already noted, unavailable. Besides, and more importantly, there are only very few scattered insights as to *why* the perception of the incongruous should trigger a humorous reaction at all. This chapter attempts to explore these two issues further.

Let me begin with the notion of incongruity. When I discussed the three pragmatic mechanisms just summarised, I also considered the extent to which they are cases of incongruity, although only in general terms. I now want to extend this discussion slightly.

With some reservations, I followed Forabosco's general definition of incongruity as being a property of any stimulus which deviates from a cognitive model of reference. Recall that Forabosco takes a model to be "a sort of preliminary representation and minitheory which the subject uses in his relationship with reality". Cognitive models of reference, he argues, are thus constructed "as a result of the contents of experience and the processes peculiar to learning" (1992: 54).

Much of the interest in this definition is that, rather than specifying features and properties of stimuli in a fixed and predetermined way, cognitive models of reference outline the domain of variation within which the characteristics of any stimulus must fall in order to be perceived as conforming and, hence, congruous (ibid., 54-55). By placing the emphasis on the relationship of the stimulus to the mental life of the individual, and not on the structural properties of the stimulus exclusively, Forabosco's suggestion facilitates an approach that concentrates on processes of interpretation rather than on textual structures, and that is why I have adhered to it.

The trouble with this, intuitively acceptable, characterisation is that it remains largely vague. Forabosco does not suggest specific formats for the "cognitive models of reference" he talks about, nor does he clarify whether *any* deviation from them counts as incongruous, or only certain sorts of deviation. This is not a minor point. If cognitive models of reference "are constructed as a result of the contents of experience", then they are bound to be unstable. This gives rise to a fundamental question. Whenever a new piece of information does not fit neatly in the model as it stands at a given point in time, what determines whether this will produce an extension of the model or whether it will, by contrast, constitute a deviation from it? How far can models be stretched congruously, and when is new information found incongruous? Perhaps some information is first processed as incongruous and later, through some adjustment of the model, gets integrated, and turned congruous¹. If so, the concept of incongruity Forabosco uses is central to cognition in general, and not specific to humour. I think there are reasons to believe this is so. In any case, Forabosco's suggestions as to what incongruity is do not take us very far, as they stand, in understanding how incongruity works in humour, nor is it possible to define precisely the way in which two things have to be incongruous for humour to arise. Nonetheless, when specific pragmatic mechanisms, such as those discussed in the previous chapter, are considered, it is possible to narrow down the meaning of incongruity along Forabosco's lines, as I will show below. With the meaning of

¹ Indeed, this is what several studies in psychology, discussed below, seem to suggest.

incongruity more clearly specified, it is possible to assess whether humorous effects can be described in terms of the incongruity involved in generating it as such, or rather require an examination of the effects it has on the process of interpretation, and the cognitive environments of a hearer. This narrowing has the advantage of preserving his focus on the mental life of the individual, rather than on the structure of the stimulus, as most operationalisations of the notion of incongruity do. Still, the question as to whether humour can be characterised in terms of the nature of the specific type of incongruity from which it arises, or rather by a pattern of specific effects derived in processing the incongruity remains. I will provide arguments for taking a perspective that emphasises the latter, but let us first take up the three pragmatic mechanisms isolated in the last chapter, and examine their relation to the idea of incongruity.

Consider the set of assumptions that constitute the knowledge of a particular individual at a given time. Clearly, this is a cognitive model of reference in Forabosco's sense: it is 'a preliminary representation and minitheory which the subject uses in his relationship with reality', and it is 'constructed as a result of the contents of experience and the processes peculiar to learning'. We can look at a few of the features of this cognitive system in some detail, in particular, at how assumptions are stored and processed.

As Sperber and Wilson have suggested, a propositional attitude of belief is most likely pre-wired into the architecture of the mind, and so, representations entertained by an individual as true descriptions of the world are probably held in a

basic memory store, as what Sperber and Wilson call *factual assumptions* (Sperber and Wilson 1995/1986: 75). Thus, these representations are basic assumptions for which a propositional attitude of belief is not explicitly represented. Sperber and Wilson also point out that factual assumptions are the domain *par excellence* of spontaneous non-demonstrative inference processes. This point has consequences for the interpretation of humorous discourse, and I will return to it further on.

Besides factual assumptions, the human internal representation system is, of course, able to entertain higher-order representations of representations. So, it is not only possible to entertain the belief that *p*, but also to represent to oneself the fact that one believes that *p*, or that someone else believes that *p*, or that one believes that someone else believes that *p*, and so on. Apart from belief, Sperber and Wilson (1986: 74) recognise as plausible the idea that the attitude of desire could parallel that of belief in having its own basic memory storage, so that the desire that *p* could be held as the basic desire that *p*, or as an embedded representation containing an explicit representation of the propositional attitude of desire, such as *I desire that p*. Consequently, their view is that factual assumptions constitute the only certain case of an attitude marked off by a special form of storage, with desire as the only other plausible case. They thus rule out the likelihood that other propositional attitudes, such as wondering that *p*, fearing that *p*, doubting that *p*, pretending that *p*, regretting that *p* and so on, should have their own basic memory stores and could, therefore, be entertained as basic representations.

The importance of this point is that it leads to a distinction about how different

representations are cognitively processed. In Sperber and Wilson's view, new factual assumptions are processed in a spontaneous way, by being combined with a stock of existing assumptions and undergoing inference processes. The aim of these processes is, naturally, to improve the individual's overall representation of the world. On the other hand, representations embedded in propositional attitudes are often processed in a self-conscious, non-spontaneous way (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 75).

Now, any organism interested in improving its cognitive environment will attempt to minimize inconsistencies in its representation system. This tendency has long been recognised for humans, and the related empirical findings raise the question of how incongruity is generally processed. It has been pointed out that incongruity is a crucial element not only of cognition, but also of perception (Siri 1975, quoted by Forabosco 1992: 50). This is illustrated by a number of studies which have shown that subjects display a "perceptive defence", tending to react with strategies aimed at not perceiving what is incongruous. So, for instance, in an old experiment conducted by Bruner and Postman (1949), subjects were asked to identify images presented on a tachistoscope of a number of playing cards. Amongst the set, some were incongruous in that their colour did not match their suit in a standard way. Subjects showed a tendency to ignore the incongruity by reporting, for example, "a slightly off-colour six of hearts" or just "a six of hearts" when confronted with a black six of hearts. Moreover, Wason (1969) argued that in thought processes, subjects also tend to create the conditions that will confirm their expectations, while Osgood and Tannenbaum (1955) proposed a "congruency principle", which states that individuals possess an

internal frame of reference, whereby changes in information always tend towards an increased congruency with this frame. Another proposal along these lines is provided by Festinger (1957), who argued that there is an essential tendency in humans to reduce "cognitive dissonance", and studied the techniques involved in fulfilling this purpose.

These results are what one would expect of cognitive systems oriented towards the search for relevance. Not very salient incongruities will tend to go unnoticed because the cognitive effects that can be derived from their processing do not offset the effort required to process them. If noticed, as in the playing-cards experiment, they will be accommodated into the system of beliefs of the subject in such a way that strongly held basic beliefs are not shattered. When incongruities are salient and get fully processed, cognitive effects are derived, in a way that is consistent with what Osgood and Tannenbaum call the "congruency principle". The derivation of cognitive effects in any of the ways suggested by relevance theory produces an increased congruency in the representational system of an organism whose cognitive apparatus is guided by considerations of relevance.

Going back to the mechanisms discussed in the previous chapter, notice that being led by a speaker to entertain two clashing propositional contents poses a challenge to the stability of the set of beliefs of a hearer, and hence involves an additional task for him. A hearer aiming at an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance must find an interpretation that either eliminates or prevents the inconsistencies that the incongruous propositional contents might give rise to. Amongst

the mechanisms I discussed in chapter six, this one constitutes the most clearcut case of an instantiation of the incongruous in the mind of a hearer. Besides, the incongruity thus generated is salient. It has been produced as a consequence of an assumption communicated strongly by the speaker through the use of an ostensive stimulus. Once such an incongruity has been encountered, the question is how a hearer manipulates it, so as to produce a congruous set of representations. I will return to this issue shortly. It should be noted here, though, that there are two different ways of handling this problem. A hearer can either revise the set of beliefs he holds, or he can revise the interpretation he has given to an utterance. I will suggest that hearers only proceed to revise their beliefs when no revision of an interpretation which is found consistent with the principle of relevance can be recovered. This follows naturally from considerations of effort.

Take now the second mechanism, where a speaker presents a foreground assumption as if it were part of the background. Because of the tendency to process ostensive stimuli in accordance with the principle of relevance, competent speakers usually omit in their formulations the information that can be taken for granted, and hence, that is not relevant in its own right. Doing otherwise would merely impose additional processing effort with no derivable cognitive effects to redress the balance. Background information is thus often given to facilitate processing (e.g. accessing context). It is not supposed to yield contextual effects on its own. Notice that the distinction between foreground and background presumably gives rise to a "cognitive model of reference" in the sense of Forabosco. The immediate consequence of using

this device is that some taken for granted assumption in the context of interpretation is denied or at least challenged in the process of interpretation. This mechanism deviates from the "cognitive model" delineated by these general patterns and can, therefore, also be considered as an instance of the entertainment of the incongruous.

The linguistic choices a speaker makes with regard to how to formulate his utterance divide the assumptions made manifest by the utterance into two sets: background and foreground assumptions. I suggested before that this distinction divides the cognitive environment of a hearer into two distinct spaces determined by the background and the foreground assumptions respectively. I called these spaces "relevance search fields". Because background assumptions are taken for granted and are not relevant in their own right, speakers, in their search for relevance, will tend to look for relevance in the *foreground relevance search field*². This tendency conforms to Forabosco's idea of a "minitheory which the subject uses in his relationship with reality", and hence can also be said to constitute a cognitive model of reference. By treating a foreground assumption as if it were in the background, a speaker forces a deviation from this model, and thereby introduces an incongruity. A hearer in the search for an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance will, as in the case of a clash in propositional content, strive to eliminate it. The question is, again, what available ways there are to achieve this, the cost in processing that the procedure brings about, and, most importantly, what the intended effects of

² The space created by all the foregrounded assumptions.

this additional effort are.

The last mechanism is also very clearly a case of incongruity, given that the hearer faces a discrepancy between what he has come to expect and what he finds. Our set of expectations is also a model that we use in our relation with reality. Deviations from this will, consequently, produce incongruities, although the relevance of each incongruity thus encountered will, of course, vary across a wide range of possible degrees³. In the search for an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance, a hearer will have to accommodate relevant incongruities, always at some additional processing effort, resulting from the abandonment of previously held assumptions and their replacement with others.

Now, although the three pragmatic mechanisms on which I have focused produce incongruities during the process of interpretation, in what follows I will develop the idea that incongruity, whenever present in humorous interpretations, is only instrumental in creating (at least this kind of) humorous effects, but is not, on its own, responsible for them.

I have been suggesting so far that the reason why incongruity is of significance in creating and understanding verbal humour is, partly, that it demands additional processing effort, and hence calls for additional effects, pushing the interpretation beyond the propositional contents of the assumptions made manifest by the utterance.

³As for any other piece of information, each incongruity created by an ostensive stimulus can be said to be more or less relevant depending on the cost imposed by its processing and the cognitive benefits thereby obtained.

I have, however, made only scattered and passing comments as to what precisely these additional effects consist of, and what facilitates their retrieval. So, I have, for instance, not said much about the modifications to the cognitive environment of the hearer that a humorous interpretation brings about. Also, I have stressed the general vagueness with which the notion of incongruity is treated in the literature, and proposed that, rather than striving to characterise more precisely the kind of incongruity that leads to humour, there is a more promising avenue of exploration. It consists, I claimed, in working towards an understanding of the effects achieved in processing the incongruities hearers encounter. In turn, this perspective will shed light on the kind of modification to the cognitive environment of the audience that a humorist intends to achieve. The adoption of an approach along these lines not only involves a shift in emphasis from texts to processes, but to a great extent, it also moves us forward from description to explanation. I will try to show that a relevance theoretic perspective is able to go beyond the attempt at merely characterising humorous stimuli to an explanation of how humorous interpretations are possible.

2. The implicit expression of the speaker's propositional attitude

A strictly incongruity-based approach would not have much else to say about the generation of humorous effects at this point. Most likely, its interest would focus on

understanding what, if anything, is special about the specific types of incongruity brought about by the three pragmatic mechanisms discussed so far. There are clear indications that perhaps nothing about the incongruity itself is specific to humour. Take for instance the nonhumorous example (10) in chapter six, reproduced here for convenience as (2), uttered in a context where the hearer believes that the speaker is single.

(2) My wife is waiting for me next door

Indeed, any case of bridging inference where the implicated premise contradicts an assumption so far held by the hearer will reproduce the structural pattern of incongruity triggered by the humorous examples I have been looking at. There is nothing about the incongruity on its own that can set (2) apart from the other humorous examples. The difference arises further on in the process of interpretation. In the humorous cases, the contradiction cannot be resolved by mere elimination of one of the clashing assumptions and the interpretation undergoes revision.

In fact, relevance theory predicts that the inferential part of processing cannot stop with the entertainment of the incongruous. Let me concentrate here specifically on the incongruity that arises from leading a hearer to represent mentally two contradictory propositional contents in the way described above.

Such an incongruity arises from an ostensive stimulus. The clashing assumption is a strongly implicated premise, which means that the speaker can largely be deemed responsible for making it mutually manifest, and thereby for communicating it. In the discussion of the examples where this happens, I pointed out that it is often the case

that a hearer will not be able to decide which of the two assumptions to entertain with greater strength. One of the assumptions is *strongly* communicated by the speaker, the other is part of the context of interpretation; hence, likely to belong to the set of the beliefs of the speaker. As it has been left in the background by the speaker, it is a taken for granted assumption. So, it is presumably retrieved from memory with a high degree of initial plausibility, and hence, a high degree of strength.

Although in some cases this pattern of clashing does allow for the elimination of one of the contradictory assumptions on the basis of the assessment of the relative strength with which each one is held⁴, this is not necessarily the case. What this means is that a hearer aiming at an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance will take the incongruity thus generated as a potential source of extra cognitive effects.⁵

Now, no rational speaker will put forward and endorse two obviously contradictory assumptions at a time. Recall that in the framework of relevance theory, possible interpretations are considered in their order of accessibility. Note also that, as I pointed out above, hearers will attempt a revision of their interpretation before they engage in a process of belief revision⁶. In these circumstances, the possibility

⁴ (2) illustrates a case where this assessment is possible.

⁵ Notice that the crucial difference between (2) and the humorous cases is that the assumption that the speaker is single is simply a false belief of the hearer so the speaker bears no responsibility for it.

⁶ This most likely follows also from considerations of relevance. The effort invested in revising a single interpretation is notably less than the effort needed to revise a whole set of beliefs, so the derivation of cognitive effects will follow the revision of the interpretation as an initial track.

that the speaker is attributing one of the two clashing assumptions to someone else, or to himself at a time removed from the time of his utterance becomes very accessible to the hearer, and so is the likelihood that the speaker could be holding a non-endorsing attitude to it.

So, we come to the point of examining what hearers do with the two conflicting assumptions they are led to entertain in the humorous examples illustrated so far. For future reference, I will call one of them the *key assumption*, and the other the *target assumption*. I reproduce below some of the humorous examples discussed so far, together with their corresponding key and target assumptions, for ease of exposition. Notice that the key assumption is always the implicated premise that the hearer is strongly encouraged to supply, and the target assumption the one in the context of interpretation, so far, only weakly manifest.

(3) Don't keep telling the lady you are unworthy of her. Let it be a complete surprise.

(3.1) TARGET ASSUMPTION: The addressee is worthy of the lady in question.

(3.2) KEY ASSUMPTION: The addressee is not worthy of the lady in question.

(4) There is something tragic about the enormous number of young men there are in England at the present moment who start life with a perfect profile and end up by adopting some useful profession

(Oscar Wilde)

- (4.1) TARGET ASSUMPTION: A useful profession is a cause for congratulation
 - (4.2) KEY ASSUMPTION: A useful profession is a cause for commiseration
- (5) There is no question that there is an unseen world. The problem is how far it is from midtown and how late it is open. (Woody Allen)
- (5.1) TARGET ASSUMPTION: An unseen world has no physically determined spatial-temporal location
 - (5.2) KEY ASSUMPTION: An unseen world has some physically determined spatial-temporal location
- (6) It is perfectly monstrous the way people go about nowadays saying things against one behind one's back that are absolutely and entirely true.
- (6.1) TARGET ASSUMPTION: The things people tell against one behind one's back are false.
 - (6.2) KEY ASSUMPTION: The things people tell against one behind one's back are not false.

My suggestion is that in all cases, the speaker is implicitly expressing his attitude of

dissociation from the target assumption, and that its retrieval by the hearer is crucial for the humorous interpretation to be hit on. There exists a wide variety of dissociative attitudes, and not all of them lead to humour. Clearly, it is possible to dissociate oneself from a propositional representation for a number of different reasons; and with different accompanying emotional overtones: anger, bitterness, surprise, reproach, incredulity, mockery, scorn, regret, etc. In the specific variety of dissociation present in the humorous cases above, which I will call *self-distancing*, emotional overtones are either not present, or not relevant. In cases of humour, only ridicule remains⁷.

In all the examples above, before the key assumption is recovered as an implicated premise, the target assumption is only weakly manifest in the context of interpretation. Target assumptions are usually instances of downright taken for granted assumptions, not relevant enough to be worth foregrounding. Notice besides, that the target assumption usually represents an attributable thought. In (3), the thought represented by the target assumption (or at least the desire to believe it) is attributable to the hearer, while in (4) the thought is attributable to a group of people. Oscar Wilde is known for his incisive and scathing attack on Victorian values, which are echoed through his utterance.

Let us consider the Woody Allen case in (5). The target assumption that the supernatural has no physically determined spatial-temporal location is an assumption shared by most human beings, ^{and} moreover, one that it would be difficult not to endorse.

⁷ Of course, one can make a jokey remark, which also conveys, for instance, some regret, bitterness, or anger as the reason for dissociation. What matters is not that these more emotionally laden attitudes should remain completely absent, but that the main relevance of the utterance does not derive from them.

What can the point of expressing an attitude of dissociation from it possibly be? What we have here is a case of double interpretive use. The target assumption is an interpretation of a complex thought, which we can simplify as the view that the supernatural and all we relate to it (the afterlife, the mystic, the superior, the occult, the unknown) is of a totally different nature from the concrete mundane day-to-day. By questioning this rather uncontroversial assumption, the speaker is suggesting that indeed the supernatural can be somehow reduced to the concrete. This reduction of the supernatural, the mystic, the superior, the unknown to alarmingly specific and material obsessions and doubts is also interpretive in the following way. The speaker depicts himself as someone obsessively and neurotically concerned with properties, values and doubts of urban middle-class life⁸. Such people could conceivably question the diverging nature of mystic and temporal issues. Of course, there is an element of exaggeration and caricature that contributes largely to the humorous effect. These caricaturing possibilities are captured, of course, by the notion of interpretive use (see, for instance, Wilson ^{and Sperber} 1992). It is this type of person represented by the speaker, a comedian, who implicitly express an attitude of dissociation from the target assumption. The comedian, in turn, implicitly expresses mockery towards this type of person. The distancing element probably emerges from our recognition of this interpretive relation between the set of beliefs that the speaker -the comedian- appears to hold and the set of beliefs of the potential speakers -the targets of the mockery. The assumption that the supernatural has a physical spatial-temporal location merely

⁸ In particular, as we know, the Manhattan stereotypical characters usually represented by Woody Allen.

resembles interpretively the assumptions that determine the behaviour, concerns, and attitudes of such people. Something similar occurs in (7)

- (7) Not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on weekends.

Here the search for relevance forces us to supply an implicated premise that there is some connection between the difficulty of proving the existence of God and the difficulty in getting a plumber on weekends. This key assumption makes manifest the target assumption that there is no connection between the two facts. The target assumption here has so far remained as weakly mutually manifest as anything involved in communication can be. People simply do not entertain explicitly assumptions like this one, which are so strongly taken for granted. But by being forced to entertain its negation, it emerges forcefully from the background and becomes strongly mutually manifest. The next inferential step is that the speaker should be questioning the sensibleness of holding such an assumption. But what kind of speaker could do this? Either an insane speaker, or a speaker who is presenting himself as holding a set of beliefs which stands in interpretive resemblance to those of a specific sort of person, who in turn is ridiculed. Again, it is the neurotically obsessed, educated New York middle-class.

3. Pragmatic mechanisms of humour: generating the overall effect.

Let me now try to put together the points I have been making so far. The mechanism that underlies these cases can be generalized as follows:

- i) An utterance is produced that makes strongly mutually manifest a *key assumption*. The key assumption is in overt contradiction with the *target assumption*. The target assumption has so far been only very weakly mutually manifest.
- ii) The overt contradiction suddenly makes the target assumption strongly mutually manifest.
- iii) The entertainment of an incongruity produced by an ostensive stimulus signals to the hearer the possibility that the speaker is expressing more than the propositional content of the assumptions the utterance has made manifest. An accessible revision of the interpretation is the addition of the implicit expression of an attitude of dissociation from one of the assumptions.
- iv) Because the key assumption is either strongly implicated or explicated, the expression of a dissociative attitude is attached to the target assumption
- v) The dissociative attitude is extended to one of distancing. There are

presumably a variety of indicators that may cue the hearer in this direction, such as tone of voice, gestures, and the recognition of multiple and recursive interpretive use.

- vi) This revised interpretation produces enough cognitive effects to offset the additional effort invested, and is therefore retained⁹.

It is conceivable that the analysis can be extended to cover other types of humour, but I won't pursue this here.

To sum up, I have argued that humour is to a large extent a matter of implicitly calling into question some taken for granted aspect in the world -often an attributed thought- and doing it with a certain attitude of disengagement. Also, I have outlined a process by means of which the assumption that represents the aspect in the world that is called into question becomes strongly mutually manifest through the implicit import of an utterance, and the attitude implicitly expressed gets recognized. I have shown how the entertainment of the incongruous plays an instrumental role in this. Crucial elements in a humorous interpretation are a sudden change in the mutual manifestness of the target assumption, and the implicit expression of the speaker's dissociative attitude from it. In all cases I have discussed, the target assumption represents an attributable thought. In some of the examples, the target assumption is attributed to the hearer, in others, to an identifiable (group of) person(s).

⁹ Of course, hearers may go on deriving some more weakly communicated effects.

4. Echoic interpretations and the interpretation of verbal humour

Recall that relevance theory makes a distinction between descriptions and interpretations¹⁰, and that any utterance, can be used to represent things in two ways. On the one hand, it can be used to represent some state of affairs in virtue of its propositional form being true of that state of affairs. In such cases, the representation is said to be a *description*, or to be used descriptively. On the other hand, it can represent some other representation which also has a propositional form -a thought, for instance- in virtue of a resemblance between their two propositional forms. In this case the first representation is said to be *interpretation* of the second one, or to be used interpretively.

What makes the distinction significant and well motivated is, to a large extent, that this set of relations allows for an account of basic illocutionary forces and tropes. What interests me in this section is its significance for humorous interpretations.

Some utterances are used as interpretations of someone else's speech or thought as, for instance, in reported speech. Let us consider the question of how interpretations of someone else's thought achieve relevance. In the case of reported speech, they achieve relevance by informing the hearer that the speaker has in mind what someone said or thinks. In other cases, a speaker may simultaneously intend to

¹⁰ This was discussed in Chapter Five.

communicate also a certain attitude towards what someone said or thinks, or may say or think. When interpretations achieve relevance by informing the hearer both of the fact that the speaker has in mind what someone said or thinks, or may say or think, and also that the speaker has a certain attitude towards it, Sperber and Wilson call them *echoic*. An echoic utterance, however, need not interpret a precisely attributable thought: it may echo a (potential) thought or utterance of a certain kind of person, or of people in general¹¹.

Let us consider again the target assumptions in the examples discussed above. They are all assumptions in the context of interpretation, which the implicit content of the utterance makes strongly mutually manifest. So, they are mental representations with a propositional content. Also, the thought they represent is attributed to someone other than the speaker at the time of his utterance, and the speaker simultaneously expresses an attitude of dissociation from it. Notice the similarity of this to the relevance theoretic idea that when a speaker uses a representation in this way, he uses it echoically. What is not straightforward is the sense in which a speaker can be said to be *using* a contextual assumption echoically. In the relevance theoretic account of inferential communication, it makes sense to talk about a speaker *using* an ostensive stimulus in order to make manifest a certain set of assumptions to the hearer. A mental representation that works as a contextual assumption is naturally not an ostensive stimulus, and as it is utterances, or ostensive stimuli in general, which can

¹¹ This aspect of relevance theory was described in chapter five, and is mentioned again here for convenience and ease of exposition.

be echoic interpretations, it is, perhaps surprising, to jump to the conclusion that the cases above are instances of *echoic use*. However, the resemblance can hardly escape notice.

In cases of echoic use, an utterance achieves relevance by informing the hearer that the speaker has in mind some representation which he is attributing to someone, and also that he has a certain attitude to it. The attributed representation may be an utterance (actual or potential) or a *thought*, and in fact, *any representation*, not necessarily one with a propositional form.

It seems to me that this is exactly what goes on in the interpretation of the humorous examples I have discussed so far. In those cases, both the recognition that the thought represented by the target assumption is a thought attributed to someone other than the speaker at the time of his utterance, and the recovery of the speaker's dissociative attitude toward it, are essential to arrive at an interpretation that the speaker might have intended to be optimally relevant. Both aspects are also responsible for the generation of a humorous effect. It is in these two aspects of the interpretation that the main relevance of the utterance falls. Failure to retrieve them will most likely inhibit the humorous outcome.

So, can we treat these humorous examples as cases of echoic use? Certainly, humorous utterances are not, in general, put forward by a speaker as descriptions representing a state of affairs in the world in virtue of their propositional form being

true of that state of affairs¹². They are not, however, necessarily clear "interpretations of someone else's potential thought or utterance" Still, does this need be a requirement of echoic uses? In other words, is echoic use always a subtype of interpretive use or do both categories simply cross-cut?

It seems to me that what these examples suggest is that echoic uses of language are cases of interpretive use in those instances where it is propositional content that is echoed, but the complex thought the utterance interprets is not necessarily *in its entirety* attributable to someone other than the speaker at the time of utterance¹³. An utterance represents interpretively a complex thought. It makes manifest a wide range of assumptions either explicitly or implicitly, and with various degrees of strength. In principle, it seems that any (segment of any) of these could work as the target of the echo. Indeed, what distinguishes the cases I have been looking at from more standard instances of echoic use is precisely the target of their echo.

Traditionally, the term echoic use has been applied to material encoded by an utterance (e.g. the material within the scope of a negation operator (Carston and Noh 1995), the proposition expressed by an utterance, or the utterance itself (Sperber and Wilson 1986, Wilson and Sperber 1990, 1992). The analysis here shows that

¹² In some cases of echoic use, the propositional form of the utterance may indeed be true of some state of affairs in the world, and the speaker may also happen to endorse its content. When this happens, it is not in this fact that the main relevance of the utterance lies. The most obvious examples are those where a speaker means what he says, but is still ironic. I discuss this in detail in chapter nine.

¹³ This is also supported by the cases of irony which I will concentrate on in the following chapter.

communicators often use assumptions that become strongly mutually manifest by the implicit import of their utterances (what I called here target assumptions) in precisely the same way: they indicate that the target assumption represents a thought attributable to someone other than the speaker at the time of his utterance and they implicitly express their attitude of dissociation from it. The role of the key assumption in this process, and of the incongruity generated thereby, is, largely, to make the target assumption accessible, retrieved from memory, and mutually manifest. My suggestion is, therefore, that assumptions that become strongly mutually manifest by the implicit import of utterances (in the way the target assumptions do) should also be acknowledged as targets of echoic use. Humorous effects, in particular, often arise through such use.

Extending the concept of echoic use in this way seems to allow for a more unified picture of verbal humour and wit. In fact, given the view that the point of communication is to make a set of assumptions manifest through the use of an ostensive stimulus, and given the fact that speakers communicate both propositional contents and propositional attitudes, explicitly and implicitly, it is without doubt that the implicit expression of propositional attitudes can also occur with respect to material that is not encoded by an utterance, but is made manifest by its implicit import.

To sum up, I have argued that humour is to a large extent a matter of implicitly questioning some aspect in the world -often an attributable thought- and expressing an attitude of self-distancing to it. Also, I have proposed a mechanism

through which this assumption about the world becomes mutually manifest through the implicit import of an utterance, and the attitude implicitly expressed gets recognised. I have shown how the entertainment of the incongruous plays an instrumental role in this. In doing so I have suggested that echoic utterances can have as targets of their echo assumptions which they make strongly mutually manifest.

5. Incongruity and metarepresentation

Let me make a final point about the presence of an implicitly expressed propositional attitude of dissociation in humour. It can be argued that this is not essential. It may be that the enjoyment of incongruity is, after all, the essence of certain forms of humour. Notice that at a very early age children enjoy observing things that look or behave non threateningly in an incongruous way. In attaining such amusement, a child has certainly not had to recognize implicitly expressed attitudes or anything of the sort. However, what the child has gone through in perceiving the incongruous is a drastic and sudden change in the relative manifestness of some of his assumptions. He has found a new way of looking at an aspect of the world he had already come to take for granted. The perception of the incongruity has unexpectedly made some so far weakly manifest assumptions become strongly manifest. This stage is probably preliminary to the complex abilities involved in the recognition of intentions and attitudes that we later develop.

In particular, the ability to attribute to others intentions and beliefs which are different from our own plays a central role in the recovery of humorous effects. This capacity crucially involves being able to manipulate representations of representations, that is, to engage in metarepresentational thought. I mentioned this in previous chapters¹⁴, and will take this observation up in the next one, but here I want to illustrate briefly how the capacity for metarepresentational thought also allows for the elimination of an incongruity arising from a propositional clash in a variety of cases, not all of which are necessarily humorous.

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

¹⁴ See in particular Chapter Three.

deception), on the other, is also associated with the order of the metarepresentations in which the clashing propositions become embedded.

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

Case 1. Helen concludes that Steve is mistaken

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

Premises:

- (1) Steve intends
 Helen to know
 that Steve intends
 Helen to believe
 that Steve believes
 that Mary is a good person
- (2) Helen believes that
 Mary is not a good person

Conclusion: Helen believes that Steve is mistaken

Case 2. Helen concludes that Steve is lying

If Helen uses (1), and instead of embedding $\neg p$ as in (2) above she operates with a second order metarepresentation, she will conclude that Steve is not being truthful.

Premises:

- (1) Steve intends
 Helen to know
 that Steve intends
 Helen to believe
 that Steve believes
 that Mary is a good person
- (2) Helen believes that
 Steve believes that
 Mary is not a good person

Conclusion: Helen believes that Steve is lying

Case 3. Helen concludes that Steve is trying to convince her that p , or arguing that p

Embedding $\neg p$ in a third order metarepresentation will not result in a humorous interpretation either.

Premises:

- (1) Steve intends
 Helen to know
 that Steve intends
 Helen to believe
 that Steve believes
 that Mary is a good person
- (2) Helen believes that
 Steve believes that
 Helen believes that
 Mary is not a good a person

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

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

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

Premises:

- (1) Steve intends
 Helen to know
 that Steve intends
 Helen to believe
 that Steve believes
 that Mary is a good person
- (2) Helen believes that
 Steve believes that
 Helen believes that
 Steve believes that
 Mary is not a good a person

Conclusion: Steve is being ironical or joking

Dan Sperber has shown that in order to recognize a speaker's communicative intention, a hearer has to entertain a fourth order metarepresentation (Sperber 1994).¹⁵ Whenever a communicated proposition contradicts another one which is strongly manifest, and the deductive device does not reject either of the two, the hearer may proceed to embed at least one of them into a metarepresentation as a way to eliminate the contradiction. If this metarepresentation is a first order metarepresentation, the hearer is likely to be led to conclude that the speaker is mistaken. If it is embedded in a second order metarepresentation, the hearer will probably conclude that the speaker is lying. Embedding the contradictory proposition in a third order metarepresentation will produce the conclusion that the speaker is trying to convince the hearer or arguing against his position. It is only when the clashing proposition is embedded in a fourth order metarepresentation that a humorous/ironic interpretation may arise. This observation may shed some light on what it means to miss the point of a joke, a witticism or an ironic utterance, and why some people are completely

¹⁵ In the examples above, the proposition expressed by the utterance is embedded into a fifth order metarepresentation. This is done for simplicity so as to avoid having to change the propositional form of the utterance for its main explicature in case these two do not coincide, i.e. to avoid the step from S says that p_i to S means that p_j , where $i \neq j$.

immune to the non-seriousness of some remarks. The process one needs to follow is a complex one. First, one usually needs to entertain some form of discrepancy. However, as pointed out above, humans have been shown to have a tendency to defend themselves from the perception of the incongruous and to develop strategies aimed at avoiding it. Perhaps because of its disruptive character, in thought processes individuals tend to create the conditions that will facilitate the confirmation of their expectations, as Bruner and Postman (1949) suggest. But once the incongruity becomes accepted, it demands some manipulation. The second step requires setting in motion metarepresentational inferences that take premises of the appropriate order. Both of these processes are guided by the search for relevance. Recall also that, as noticed in the first section of this chapter, representations embedded in propositional attitudes tend to be processed in a self-conscious, non-spontaneous way (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995). If hearers need to operate with them to provide humorous interpretations, this will be another factor that increases processing costs, calling for additional effects.

I am, of course, far from suggesting that this is all that humour is about. There are the obvious issues of content, mood of participants, appropriateness of the situation, etc., and presumably, a myriad of yet further cognitive, affective, cultural and social factors -to mention just a few- contributing to the effect. However, if Morreall's suggestion that amusement is the enjoyment of incongruity is right, it opens the question of how such enjoyment becomes available to human beings. In the case of verbal humour and wit, the entertainment of the incongruous is made possible through the exploitation of the tendency to interpret utterances as consistent with the principle of relevance. The enjoyment of the incongruous, on the other hand, may derive from the cognitive satisfaction of having manipulated it in just the right way.

In the next two chapters I look at humorous cases of metaphor and irony, which leads me to take up the issue of possible targets for echoic utterances.

Chapter Eight

Metaphor and Verbal Humour

Both metaphors and humorous stimuli are seen as presenting an incongruity that requires resolution to some sort of problem-solving process in order to be comprehended

(Hillson and Martin, 1994: 9)

1. Introduction

So far I have argued that, to the extent that humour derives from the perception of the incongruous, it does so not because of the precise nature of the incongruity involved, but because of the specific inferential pattern induced by its processing, and the effect this has upon the cognitive environment of the hearer. A speaker who creates a humorous effect is, almost invariably, conveying a dissociative attitude towards some assumption(s) made suddenly strongly manifest by his utterance. As suggested at the end of the last chapter, the inferential process through which this attitude is recovered by the hearer often involves the use of metarepresentations that embed one of the contradictory propositional contents encountered. Humorous discourse achieves most of its relevance by informing the audience that the speaker has a certain aspect of the

world, thought or opinion in mind, and also that he has a particular attitude towards it¹. If there is indeed a characteristic feature of humorous effects, the specific nature of the incongruity involved does not seem to be the right candidate. First, similar or identical forms of incongruity can be found in non-humorous discourse. Second, unless the dissociative attitude I have been discussing is incorporated into the interpretation, it is difficult to explain the humorous effect. The inferential pattern a humorous utterance induces during processing, and the type of modification to the cognitive environment of the hearer that it produces, by contrast, seem more crucial for the recovery of a humorous interpretation. In general, there appears to be some pragmatic garden-path that a hearer becomes abruptly aware of as his interpretation proceeds. Often, doing this involves the manipulation of incongruous propositional forms, and the search for cognitive effects involving the implicit expression of an attitude. By looking at these aspects it may be possible to move further towards an explanation of what distinguishes a humorous interpretation.

Figurative language poses an additional challenge to any approach to verbal humour which relies solely on the idea that humour is a direct function of perceived incongruities, and hence concentrates mainly on the nature of the incongruity as a constitutive part of the stimulus. The problematic issues I have in mind arise because many views of metaphor and irony treat these as deviations from a norm of literalness,

¹ I have not been precise as to the exact nature of the attitude implicitly expressed in humorous effects. I have only claimed that it is a dissociative attitude devoid of emotional overtones that contribute to the relevance of the utterance. I take it that this suffices for the initial account of verbal humour I am proposing in this thesis, although it is, of course, possible to focus on this aspect in more detail.

with some version of the concept of incongruity frequently appearing in discussions of these deviations². Often, associated with this position are the assumptions that literal language is the ordinary mode of communication, that it communicates directly whatever it conveys, and that figurative language is disruptive, and that, as a consequence, it calls for extra cognitive machinery for its interpretation. In this perspective, what prompts the activation of the presumed principles that operate in the interpretation of figurative language is some categorial garble. If we continue to stick to Forabosco's definition, this counts as an instance of the incongruous.

If the approach to figurative language outlined above is correct, and if the incongruity view of verbal humour is also on the right track, a number of questions arise. First, what is the difference between the incongruities that produce, say, a poetic metaphor, and the incongruities that give rise to humorous effects? And, if each 'defective' utterance (a humorous one, a metaphorical one, an ironic one, etc.) demands the operation of special-purpose interpretation principles and devices, how does a hearer know which one to switch to when he recognises a case of deviation and incongruity? If one maintains the two related assumptions that there is a proliferation of (a) types of incongruity and (b) interpretive principles to deal with each of them, one needs to provide an explicit account of the variety of all possible incongruities that arise in interpretation, and the diversity of principles that are used in handling them. One also requires an explanation of how these principles operate, and, most

² I will confine the discussion here to metaphor and irony, although most arguments go through for other tropes as well.

importantly, of how hearers know when to apply each. But neither the literature on verbal humour nor the literature on figurative language addresses these points.

I have suggested so far that an adequate approach to humorous interpretations must distinguish between the fact that some incongruity arises in the process of interpretation and the effects that this has on the recovery of the intended interpretation. This point was independently motivated within the study of humorous effects alone, but it becomes even clearer as soon as we consider the interaction of humour and figurative language. How are ironic metaphors, humorous ironies, humorous metaphors and so on to be characterised?

2. Metaphor and incongruity

As in the case of humour, metaphor has also been related to the incongruous, and in some cases, in a much more systematic, structured and principled way than most authors have done for humour (see, for instance, Kittay 1987). Some have made the connection explicit. As Hillson and Martin put it,

"Metaphor theorists have debated the relative importance of similarity and dissimilarity in much the way that humor theorists have discussed incongruity and resolution" (1994: 9)

The reason underlying this comparison is not always, as one may imagine, that metaphors do not conform to the maxim of truthfulness. The sources of incongruity that have been associated with metaphor are varied. For instance, Weiner recently claimed that

"...there is an inevitable element of incongruity in metaphors since the A term (the *vehicle*) and

the B term (the *topic*) of metaphors come from incongruous domains" (1996: 112)³.

So, what is the relation between the type of incongruity arguably present in metaphorical interpretations and the one supposedly needed to experience humour? Let me begin the next section by tracing the ways in which metaphor has been linked to incongruity in the literature.

2.1 Semantic approaches to metaphor

Semantic theories of metaphor are based on the assumption that the linguistic content of the words found in a metaphor is sufficient to account for its nature, and to explain the interpretation process through which metaphorical expressions are understood. These approaches regard the process of metaphor comprehension as one consisting primarily of coding and decoding mechanisms, and they insist that in metaphor there is always an incongruity operating at the level of what is encoded.

2.1.1. *The semantic feature approach.*

Semantic feature approaches to metaphor are based on the more general idea that lexical meaning can be decomposed into a set of primitive semantic features⁴. Their

³ This terminology originated in the work of Richards (1936), who claimed that a metaphor consists of two terms and the relationship between them. The subject term has come to be called the *topic*, although Richards' original notation was *tenor*. The term used metaphorically is the *vehicle*. The relationship between the topic and the vehicle is called the *ground*. By "incongruous domains" Weiner means "categorical domain distance" (1996: 112). This is more extensively discussed below.

⁴ For objections against decompositionality see Fodor, Fodor and Garrett (1975), Fodor *et al* (1980), and Fodor (1981). Here I am interested in the form that the claim about incongruity takes, not on the broader issue of decompositionality.

specific claim about metaphor is that it arises from the syntactic combination of two lexemes whose semantic features are incompatible in some way (e.g. Weinreich 1966, Cohen 1979). Consequently, if the semantic component is taken as part of the grammar, this view identifies incongruity with grammatical deviance, and as such, it is taken to play a fundamental role in the recovery of metaphorical content. Interpreting a metaphorical expression, it is argued, involves the cancellation, transfer, combination or exchange of semantic features associated with the topic and vehicle terms, in such a way that the incongruity dissolves.

The general problems with this approach are well known. First, feature incompatibility is clearly not a necessary condition for metaphor. Consider, for example, negative statements like

- (1) American presidents have never been doves,

where the negation dissolves the incompatibility of the semantic features. Also, there are predications that involve no feature incompatibility, and which can still be used metaphorically, like

- (2) The ball is rolling

used to convey the fact that a particular event has started, or is continuing. Feature incompatibility is not a sufficient condition for metaphor either. Notice that (3), for instance, is grammatically anomalous. It is a case of a syntactic combination of two lexemes whose semantic features -assuming semantic features do exist- are

incompatible, it violates selection restrictions, but it is hardly metaphorical⁵.

(3) The film who you saw

Second, many metaphors are not construed upon lexical meaning. If someone utters

(4) He let her down, the dog,

it will probably be communicated that the man in question is unpleasant, evil, selfish, harmful, unworthy, and so on, though one would hardly assume that these attributes are semantic features inherent to the word 'dog', and part of the lexicon.

This approach leads to a view of the process of interpretation of metaphor that also runs into several difficulties. It is clear that the mere manipulation of semantic features will not produce the interpretation of most metaphorical utterances, whose effects are often far more complex than the suggested sub-processes (e.g. feature displacement and replacement) allow for. Consider, for example, the following lines of Miguel Hernández's poem "Elegy", written after the death of one of the poet's closest friends.

(5) With these hands of mine I heave a storm
made of rocks, lightning and strident axes,
a storm thirsting for catastrophes and starving⁶

⁵ It can be argued that it is possible to construct a context where the film is given such importance that one wants to personify it, and hence, a metaphorical interpretation is possible. This is true, but it does not rescue the semantic feature view. It simply provides an additional argument for treating metaphoric meaning as a property of interpretations and not of sentences, as will be argued below.

⁶En mis manos levanto una tormenta
de piedras, rayos y hachas estridentes
sedienta de catástrofes y hambrienta
(*"Elegía"* from *El rayo que no cesa*)

According to the theory, a metaphorical interpretation of a storm that is heaved, thirsting and starving would occur via the displacement of the features of *storm* that violate selection restrictions on what can be heaved, and their replacement with those features appropriate to things that can be heaved (e.g. [+solid]). Also, one would de-emphasize those features of a storm that violate selection restrictions on what can be starving and thirsting and replace them with adequate ones (e.g. [+animate]). But clearly, this is way short of what one needs in order to capture even vaguely what the metaphor conveys.

Besides, in most cases, the semantic feature incompatibility view merely pushes the problem of metaphorical interpretation to a different level. Searle's classic example in (6) shows that this is often the case.

(6) Sally is a block of ice

According to the process suggested by the semantic feature incompatibility view, a hearer would transfer some semantic features of *ice* to *Sally* in order to derive the metaphorical interpretation that she is unemotional. Presumably [+cold], [+hard] and [+frozen] would be part of the crucial set. But these in turn are related to being unemotional only metaphorically.

A further reason why this approach is not satisfactory is that it leaves unexplained a central aspect of most metaphors: their directionality. If metaphors arise

from the incompatibility of semantic features and are interpreted by their corresponding deletion, addition, exchange and transfer, then the theory wrongly predicts that nominal metaphors of the form BE (a,b) will have the same meaning as those of the form BE (b,a). This is seldom the case. Saying (7) implies something positive about the salesman, while saying (8) would normally convey something negative about the artist⁷.

(7) The salesman is an artist

(8) The artist is a salesman

These criticisms are not new. I raise them again, focusing specifically on the notion of incongruity, to show that, if one is interested in a notion of incongruity that is meaningful for the interpretation process of metaphorical language, then the notion of grammatical deviance is not the right candidate.

What about this type of incongruity and the creation of humorous effects? Consider Raskin's Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humour, discussed in Chapter 3, and the simple metaphor in (9), which, I assume, unless it is ironically used, is in itself unfunny.

⁷ There are more general problems with this approach that concern the semantic theoretic assumptions upon which it rests (see Lyons 1977: Ch. 8 and Ch.9 for discussion of Semantic Field Theory and Componential Analysis respectively)

(9) His love was a cure.

Raskin's notion of script, discussed extensively before, is a case of semantic incompatibility. Recall his description of his DOCTOR and LOVER scripts, his doctor's wife joke⁸, and his necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to be a joke. The two scripts are opposed and involve, according to Raskin, an incompatibility of semantic features. Given this framework, saying (10) should activate the same scripts and be funny.

(10) His love was a cure

The fact is it is not. At least not on its own. Place this comment in a conversation where we are discussing a story of a mutual friend and a love affair of hers which we both find ridiculous, use the utterance interpretively and attach to it an implicitly expressed dissociative, mocking attitude⁹. The utterance may still not be funny, but it certainly comes closer to being a mildly amusing piece of verbal wit. What I want to show is that focus on incongruity alone produces theories that collapse what are essentially different effects (metaphorical and humorous effects) and make the wrong predictions. The argument illustrated by this example would apply equally to any metaphor created on the basis of an incongruity of this sort. It also supports the idea

⁸ "Is the doctor at home?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. "No," the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply. "Come right in." (example (14), Chapter 3)

⁹ As argued by Sperber and Wilson (1981, 1986/95) and Wilson and Sperber (1992), these are the ingredients of ironic utterances. I will come back to this in the next chapter on irony.

that the presence of an implicitly expressed dissociative attitude is a crucial factor in the distinction between a humorous and a non-humorous metaphorical utterance of any given sentence.

Morrissey (1989) has applied Raskin's SSTVH to explore humorous metaphors.

She says,

"Metaphors may be considered humorous metaphors if they satisfy two special conditions which center around the necessity for evoking a second script which is distant from the second script. The first condition requires the breaking of the hearer's expectation and the second condition involves the hearer's production of images of opposition in the metaphoric script"

She divides humorous metaphors into (a) simple metaphors, (b) blasphemed adages, and (c) similes, illustrated by the following.

- (11) a. How was your date with Dave last night?
Well, at least now I know all men are pond scum.
- b. Cheese is milk's leap towards immortality.
- c. It was as simple as an income tax form.

According to her, in non-humorous cases two scripts will be evoked, and the hearer will overlap the evoked second script onto the first to see if the utterance is a metaphor. What makes the humorous cases funny, she argues, is that the process will not be as easily accomplished. What she doesn't explain is what exactly the difficulty in the script-overlapping amounts to in the humorous cases.

Besides, it is not clear why her example in the (c) category is classified as a metaphor. It seems to be a case of literal interpretations. The example in (b) is different and is interesting. I would argue, however, that its funniness does not arise from a difficulty in overlapping the two scripts involved. In general, this alleged difficulty is not distinctive of humour. Cases of complex poetic metaphors often involve more difficult mappings. I will return to these cases later on.

2.1.2. The elided comparison approach.

A number of authors have suggested that a metaphor is not so much a grammatically deviant utterance, as an implicit, elliptical and condensed comparison (see, for example, Black 1962, Henle 1958, Miller 1979). Their claim is that a systematic link can be established between a metaphor and an explicit comparison, and that interpreting a metaphor involves precisely the recovery of such a comparison. So, for instance, Miller (1979) argues that, as all metaphors are implicit statements of similarity, upon hearing one, a hearer must reconstruct a pattern of the form (SIMILAR (F(x)), (G(y))), where F and G are predicates and x and y their respective arguments. What varies from case to case is what the metaphor provides explicitly and what interpreters need to provide, but, arguably, the same configuration operates for all metaphors. So, for instance, ^{for}nominal or attributive metaphors such as those in (12), given these two arguments, the hearer will supply two predicates, one that applies to the vehicle and the other to the topic, such that $BE(x,y) \leftrightarrow \exists F \exists G (SIMILAR(F(x)),$

$(G(y))$ is made true. In other words, the hearer's task is to find two properties such that the topic having the first property is like the vehicle having the second.

- (12) a. Juliet is the sun
 b. John is an octopus
 c. Your laughter is the most victorious sword
 d. The Trotters are two slabs of gorgonzola

For Miller's example in (13a), the formula would be as in (13b)

- (13) a. John is an octopus
 b. BE (John, octopus) $\leftrightarrow \exists$ ABILITY TO HANDLE SEVERAL THINGS SIMULTANEOUSLY \exists HAVING MANY TENTACLES (SIMILAR (ABILITY TO HANDLE SEVERAL THINGS SIMULTANEOUSLY (John)), (HAVING MANY TENTACLES (octopus))).

In the case of predicative metaphors, those of the form $G(y)$, where G is a metaphorical predicate and y a real term, hearers must supply a real predicate F and a real argument x to which it applies in such a way that the relation of similarity $\text{SIMILAR}(F(x), (G(y)))$ holds. Take for instance (14), where hearers must supply the missing elements of the formula $G(x) \leftrightarrow \exists F \exists y(\text{SIMILAR}(F(x)), (G(y)))$.

- (14) Peter brayed all through the meeting

Possible candidates are LAUGH and DONKEY, which would render

- (15) BRAY (Peter) $\leftrightarrow \exists$ LAUGH \exists DONKEY (SIMILAR (LAUGH(Peter)), (BRAY (donkey))).

Finally, sentential metaphors consist of figurative predicates and figurative arguments, and have the form $G(y)$. Interpretation involves supplying real predicates and arguments that satisfy $G(y) \leftrightarrow \exists F \exists x$ (SIMILAR (F(x)), (G(y))). For instance, *Tigers are stalking their prey* can be used metaphorically to refer to corrupt officers ready for extortion. Hearers should supply appropriate values for F and x along the lines below.

- (16) STALK (tiger) $\leftrightarrow \exists$ EXTORT \exists (officer) (SIMILAR (EXTORT(officer)), (STALK(tiger)))

The notion of incongruity that appears to feature in Miller's approach is only categorial falsity, yet he does not rely strongly or explicitly on the idea that some form of incongruity underlies a metaphorical utterance. In any case, his view does not explain what triggers the search for the implicit comparison put forward by the metaphor. If literal falsity is what activates the search, then what makes a metaphor different from, say, a recognised lie? Why do people not engage in recovering an implicit comparison every time they face a literal falsity?¹⁰ Although Miller's view

¹⁰ In chapter seven I sketched roughly the kind of mental operations that might be involved in this.

encompasses a wide range of metaphorical utterances under a single analysis, it does not make explicit the procedure a hearer follows in recovering the elided part of the comparison. It does not indicate any principled way in which a hearer is able to choose specific values for arguments and predicates, and therefore, it does not provide any explanation as to the way in which the crucial properties are selected out of all possible arguments and predicates.

Miller's approach faces another difficulty. In most cases, there is no single literal predicate that captures the import of a metaphorical utterance. The richer and more creative the metaphor, the clearer this fact becomes. Miller's approach is mentioned here as an antecedent of the domains interaction approach, which takes up the idea that interpreting a metaphor involves a comparison procedure triggered by an incongruity, and has been specifically applied to the study of humorous effects.

Ortony (1979), another proponent of the comparison view, also claims that metaphors are statements of nonliteral similarity, but he takes a more definitely incongruity-oriented perspective. To account for the difference between metaphors and literal statements of similarity, Ortony invokes a notion of incongruity based on the concept of saliency. He also suggests that metaphorical utterances are understood by finding features and predicates that are shared by the tenor and the vehicle, and argues that the fundamental difference between a metaphor and a literal statement of similarity is the relative salience of the features shared by the terms involved. While

in literal statements of similarity the shared features are equally salient for both terms, in metaphor, the features are salient for the vehicle, but not for the tenor. For example, (17) is said to be a literal statement of similarity because both sermons and lectures are oral addresses given to an audience, and these features are highly salient for the two terms.

(17) Sermons are lectures

In the case of (18), by contrast, the attribute 'inducing drowsiness' is more salient with respect to sleeping pills than to sermons.

(18) Sermons are sleeping pills

When there are no obvious salient features shared by the two terms of a comparison, it is simply anomalous, e.g. (19)

(19) Sermons are grapefruit

For empirical evidence supporting this claim see Katz (1982), and Ortony, *et al* (1985); for evidence against it see Tourangeau and Rips (1991).

However, incongruity as salience imbalance does not shed much light on the nature of metaphor either, nor on how it is interpreted. In contrast to Miller's approach, Ortony's view should be able to explain metaphorical directionality.

According to it, it is salience imbalance which accounts for the fact that *Sermons are sleeping pills* is usually more apt as a metaphor than *Sleeping pills are sermons*. However, Katz (1992) and Shen (1989, 1992) have argued against Ortony's idea that salience imbalance determines metaphorical interpretations. They contend that both (20) and (21) are symmetric in that the similarity between snow and flour equals the similarity between flour and snow.

(20) Snow is like flour

(21) Flour is like snow

Nonetheless, they argue, they get metaphorical and not literal interpretations. The claim is not uncontroversial¹¹. But leaving aside the discussion of whether these are cases of literal or of non-literal comparisons, salience imbalance would not say much about how *Snow is flour* or *Flour is snow* get their metaphorical interpretations when they do.

With regard to the claim about salience imbalance, consider

(22) Sermons are lodges

¹¹The arguments over what is a literal statement of similarity and what is a metaphor suggest two things. First, that it is not sentences that can be metaphorical, but utterances, and therefore, without an adequate account of the context of interpretation, the difference cannot be captured. Second, and perhaps most important, that the differences between literal and non-literal interpretation may not be categorical, but only a matter of degree. This will be discussed below, but see Sperber and Wilson (1986a, 1986b) and Wilson (1995).

If the imbalance is such that the shared features on which the metaphor should play are not accessible enough, the metaphor is likely to be unsuccessful. Masonic lodges are known to be places to which women do not have access. Preaching is often the task of male members of the clergy, given that it is only recently that women have begun to be allowed as such. This restricted-to-men feature is arguably more salient for masonic lodges than for the clergy, so that (22) should count as satisfying Ortony's conditions. The metaphor, however, is not very apt.

2.1.3 The domains interaction-approach

This view, put forward by Tourangeau and Sternberg (1981, 1982), is a further variety of the comparison theory. The model has been put to use in the study of humorous metaphors and riddles (Hillson and Martin 1994, Weiner 1996), and it provides a clearly incongruity-based framework. The central idea of Tourangeau and Sternberg is that the interpretation of metaphors involves the mapping of features that apply within one conceptual domain to an object from a different domain. They assume that the "distance" (in a sense defined below) between these two domains is (a) psychologically real, (b) mentally represented, and (c) computable.

Their theory proposes that in interpreting a metaphor a hearer should perform a double comparison: one between two concepts, the topic and the vehicle, and another between the two higher-order domains or conceptual categories to which the

topic and the vehicle belong. Understanding a metaphor, they maintain, involves comparing the similarity of the two higher order domains as well as the similarity of the relative positions of the two concepts within their respective domains. In particular, the model suggests explicitly that metaphor aptness increases if the domains are discrepant from one another in semantic space (what they call high *between-domain distance*), and/or if the concepts occupy similar positions within their respective domains (what they term *low within-domain distance*).

Although Tourangeau and Sternberg also propose a comparison view, they notice that the topic and the vehicle of a metaphor need not share any features, simply because some of them may not be applicable outside a particular domain. So, how can a comparison be performed? They suggest that the crucial features for metaphorical interpretation are those that distinguish the vehicle from other things of the same kind, or, more generally, those that define the vehicle's position relative to a system of concepts. So, in interpreting a metaphor such as (23), what matters, they argue, is not what the two concepts share (e.g. being carnivorous), but rather a transformation of the characteristics of the vehicle before they are applied to the tenor.

(23) Men are wolves

Therefore, they go on, the predatory nature of wolves is mapped onto the competitive dealings of men.

A notion of incongruity is clearly present in this framework, equated to high between-domain distance between the topic and vehicle. The fact that a comparison is made between terms that belong to conceptually discrepant or unrelated semantic fields is taken as crucial for metaphor.

The first objection I want to raise against this view of metaphor is that the topic and the vehicle of a metaphor need not come from different domains. Consider the domain 'members of the clergy in the Catholic church'. Now consider a situation in which a Catholic priest is renowned in his community for his authoritarian manner. Someone says about him (24)

(24) He is the Pope.

The utterance will be interpreted as metaphorical, though both topic and vehicle come from the same domain.

Notice, besides, that the domains-interaction approach makes implausible assumptions about conceptual structure and categorisation. As mentioned before, Barsalou has shown that categories are not fixed and well-defined sets of concepts, but are instead flexible, they have moving boundaries, and change constantly (1987, 1992)¹². Additionally, more often than not the two domains involved in metaphor

¹²Barsalou puts forward a theory of ad hoc concept formation. He questions both the status of concepts as invariant structures, and their location and retrieval from long-term memory as unaltered entities. Instead, he argues for a view of concepts where they are built as temporary constructs in working memory. This is achieved by pulling out a subset of values and attributes from a *frame* that represents conceptual content.

turn out not to be scalable on the same dimensions. In fact, topic and vehicle may not, in principle, share any common dimensions at all, or may share them only at a level of abstraction that makes the claim vacuous. Moreover, there is no explicit indication as to what drives the alleged process. For instance, how do hearers know which features of the vehicle are applicable and which can be disregarded? The picture offered by this approach is likely to be far removed from real mental processes. But despite its psychological implausibility, as mentioned above, the model has been applied to the empirical study of the psychology of humorous interpretations.

2.1.3.4 An application of the DIA to verbal humour.

In an attempt to model humour processing, Hillson and Martin (1994) have used the domains-interaction approach to operationalise incongruity and incongruity resolution. Although they acknowledge the limitations of this framework, they believe that it is successful in modelling "the more basic aspects of humor" (1994: 2), given that "the definition of semantic distance or discrepancy is conceptually very similar to the way in which humour theorists have described incongruity" (1994: 8). They take for granted, however, the debatable assumption that semantic distance is psychologically real, stable, and measurable.

Hillson and Martin draw on Tourangeau and Sternberg's idea that a metaphor involves a comparison between two concepts (a topic and a vehicle) as well as

between two different higher-order domains or conceptual categories to which the concepts belong. The distance between the two domains in the semantic space is taken as a measure of incongruity (they call this *between-domain distance*), and the relative position the terms occupy in their respective semantic domains (*within-domain distance*), as a measure of resolution. So, they establish a direct connection between the domains-interaction approach to metaphor and the two-stage view of humour, which claims that a humorous experience involves perceiving an incongruity and solving it. They conducted a series of experiments to measure the extent to which incongruity and resolution correlate with ratings of humour for jokes and aptness for metaphors. As an illustration of the metaphors used in their study, they offer

(25) Saddam Hussein is the buzzard of world leaders

and argue,

"In assessing the aptness of this metaphor, one would first note the degree of discrepancy between the two domains on some domain-distinguishing dimension. For example, on the dimension of humanness, world leaders and birds may be viewed as quite discrepant. Subsequently, the domain of the vehicle (birds) is used as a template through which the domain of the topic (world leaders) is viewed. A common within-domain dimension is found that allows a comparison of the relative position of a topic and vehicle within their respective domains. In the example, a common within-domain factor might be the like-dislike (evaluative) dimension. Since buzzards tend to be disliked within the domain of birds and Saddam Hussein is similarly disliked within the domain of world leaders, the topic and vehicle tend to be close to one another on this within-domain dimension" (1994: 6)

The study Hillson and Martin conducted was as follows. They constructed structurally simple "jokes" of the form "A is the B of A's domain" such as (26) to model the

effects of incongruity and incongruity resolution on humour appreciation.

(26) John Candy is the fast food hamburger of actors

Between-domain distance, they claim, can be taken as a quantification of incongruity, because it assesses the degree to which topics and vehicles differ from one another at some level of abstraction. Within-domain distance, on the other hand, is a way of quantifying the resolution of the incongruity, given that it assesses the degree to which topics and vehicles resemble one another despite their differences¹³.

Subjects were asked to (a) rate the concepts and their domain on semantic differential scales along several dimensions, and (b) rate the supposedly jokey metaphors of the form "A is the B of A's domain" for how humorous they were.

For the first task, subjects were given 26 nouns belonging to six domains (actors, world leaders, birds, cars, foods, newspapers and magazines), each followed by 19 9-point semantic differential rating scales, selected to reflect dimensions *the authors* considered relevant to the similarities and differences between the concepts to be rated (e.g. lively/not lively, thinking/not thinking, predatory/not predatory, ugly/beautiful, likable/not likable, etc.). Notice the important point that these dimensions were fixed in advance by the experimenters, so that a specific and rigid conceptual structure was assumed, with all dimensions taken as equally salient and

¹³ The incongruity-resolution approach to humour was discussed in chapter one. See for instance Schultz (1972, 1974).

applicable to the lexical items used. I will return to this below.

For the second task, subjects were given sentences of the form "A is the B of A's domain", made from combinations of a noun from one of the two human domains (actors and world leaders), followed by one noun from any of the domains (the remaining domains were birds, cars, food and newspapers and magazines). Hillson and Martin predicted that ratings of funniness would correlate positively with between-domain distance, their measure of incongruity. No simple correlation was predicted between humour ratings and within-domain distance, given that resolution alone is not hypothesised as sufficient to produce a humorous effect. In fact, it almost makes no sense to talk about resolution without the presence of an incongruity. The study also predicted that the highest ratings of funniness would be for the jokes with highest between-domain distance (incongruity) and low within-domain distance (resolution). The confirmation of this prediction, they argue, ought to be taken as support for the incongruity-resolution theory of humour.

Their results were as predicted. Humour ratings were indeed significantly related to their between-domain distances, but not to their within-domain distances. So, "jokes" like (27) were rated as being more humorous than, say, (28), where concepts from more similar domains were compared.

(27) John Candy is the fast-food hamburger of actors

(28) Sylvester Stallone is the Pope of actors

In addition, a significant interaction was found, as predicted, between incongruity and resolution: jokes with high between-domain distance and low within-domain distance were in general rated the funniest. As an example, (29) was rated as funnier than (30). Both have high between domain distance, but in (30) within-domain distance is low, they argue.

(29) Woody Allen is the quiche of actors

(30) Woody Allen is the Pontiac Trans Am of actors

To contrast the role of incongruity in metaphor with the role of incongruity in humour, the experiment was repeated, but this time, instead of presenting the strings "A is the B of A's domain" as jokes, subjects were told these were metaphors and were asked to judge them for their aptness, and not for their funniness. This time the results showed a different pattern. As for the "joke version", a significant correlation between mean aptness ratings and between-domain distance was found. So, the more incongruous the domains from which the terms were taken, the more apt the metaphor was judged. But, in contrast with the results for the version of the experiment in which the sentences were explicitly presented as jokes, within-domain distance also correlated significantly with aptness ratings. No interaction was observed between the two measures of semantic distance on ratings of metaphor aptness, as opposed to the

interaction found when they were presented as jokes¹⁴. In sum, for metaphors, both measures of semantic distance (incongruity and resolution) correlate positively with judgements of aptness. For jokes, within-domain distance is not significant on its own, but for metaphors it is. The two dimensions interact and correlate positively with judgements of funniness when the sentences are treated as jokes, but there is no such interaction if they are presented as metaphors.

This method is, however, questionable. A good humorous metaphor is also a good metaphor. The fact that (29) or (30) could be funny does not stop them from being metaphors. It is not clear that when subjects rate the funniness of the "humorous" strings they are not also rating the aptness of the underlying metaphor. The correlation between the two ratings is not reported in their paper, and it doesn't appear to have been considered at all.

In addition, there is no guarantee that the semantic distances that Hillson and Martin are assuming from the initial ratings of their subjects should be the same that operate during interpretation. With their notion of semantic distance, Hillson and Martin are taking it for granted that conceptual structure is fixed and stable. However, *during* the process of interpretation, certain features and assumptions attached to concepts become more salient than others. Apart from Barsalou's general demonstration that categorial structure is flexible, for metaphor, specifically, Vicente

¹⁴ These results replicate similar studies on judgements of metaphor aptness carried out by Trick and Katz (1986)

(1993) has argued that the saliency of a particular conceptual feature is a result of the interpretation process, rather than a precondition for it. So, in the first place, the pre-selection of certain dimensions by the experimenters may simply not correspond to the features that become relevant during the interpretation of the sentences used. But also, as the relative saliency of each of those features probably varies during the process of interpretation, the positions that the corresponding concepts occupy in the semantic Euclidean space defined by Hillson and Martin will be prone to change as well as a result.

Notice also that the sentences were presented to the subjects with an *already* attached interpretative label ("consider the following *metaphors*", "consider the following *jokes*"). The final product of the interpretation process was given, not arrived at by subjects. What do we know from this about what role the alleged incongruity (and/or resolution) may have played in *deriving* this interpretation? Nothing. In this case, the order of the factors does affect the product. The question that arises from a theoretical framework which attributes the derivation of a metaphoric (and/or a humorous) interpretation to the presence of incongruity is how, upon encountering this incongruity, the hearer knows which amongst all possible interpretations he should choose as the one intended by the speaker. One plausible hypothesis is that some characteristic inherent to the incongruity prompts the hearer in a given direction. This could be the semantic distance relations proposed by Hillson and Martin, although, as I have argued, their psychological reality is at least

questionable. But we want to know how these differences affect what hearers *do* and what choices and guesses they make about the speaker's intentions as a result of this. What Hillson and Martin are giving us is an account of the relative position that several concepts have in an artificially created semantic-conceptual space, and then, an impeccable statistical analysis of the relation between this artificial measure and a piece of information that the subjects have been *given*. Whatever the effect of the incongruity, in terms of semantic distance, on deciding on a particular interpretation (metaphor/joke) over another potential one is lost. Hillson and Martin are conflating what are generally acknowledged to be different stages in processing: the *recognition* that something is a metaphor/joke, and the *appreciation* of it. Their results, if anything, tell us something about the later processing stage of appreciating some quality of a specific interpretation. They reveal almost nothing about the problems that arise within the incongruity approach to humour and figurative language.

The experiment has more problems. There is no reason to assume that within-domain distance amounts to a measure of the so-called resolution factor in humour. The underlying assumption in Hillson and Martin's notion of within-domain distance is that it concerns a kind of matching across two "discrepant" domains. So, the idea seems to be that Saddam Hussein occupies roughly the same position as buzzards in the domain, and so on. However, when we communicate, what we make manifest is not a set of isolated features, standing in some Euclidean semantic space, but rather a set of assumptions, that is, a set of predications involving, perhaps, the relevant

features and certain specific referents. If indeed there is an element of resolution in humour, there is no sensible reason to assume that it is the computed "semantic distance" between two concepts. What does this resolve? There is, by contrast, every reason to believe that the resolution factor, in any case, should be created by making certain explanatory assumptions for the incongruity (more) manifest to the hearer. It is only the predicating of specific concepts about specific referents that can be incongruous. In what sense is, for example, the concept YELLOW more or less distant from the concept RED than from the concept BLUE? If we computed the semantic distance of these terms à la Hillson and Martin, what would their within-domain distance tell us about *resolution*? Take, for instance, one of the dimensions used in the ratings of Hillson and Martin's experiment: likeable/not likable. The terms are, of course, antonymous, and hence will be semantically distant, but is this really a reliable dimension upon which to measure the perception and the resolution of the incongruity? Take their domain "world leaders". If I say that Mrs Thatcher is likeable to the Spice Girls¹⁵ and dislikeable to me, there is no incongruity whatsoever created merely by my having used the "discrepant" dimensions along which the domain "world leaders" is analysed in Hillson and Martin's model. But their model establishes that there is a contribution to incongruity in this case, as the distance along this dimension is as high as possible. By contrast, if I say that Mrs Thatcher is simultaneously found likeable by the Spice Girls and dislikeable by the Spice Girls,

¹⁵ Apologies for this example. It was salient at the time of writing, following the recent declarations of this group to the media.

then there is at least a first order incongruity, which can be eliminated at a second level if, for instance, different settings or hedgings for this assertion are given, or different propositional attitudes to this assumption are attached. Hillson and Martin's model merges these different cases into a single phenomenon.

To sum up, besides the problems already mentioned for each of the views discussed above, semantic approaches to metaphor make two implausible assumptions. First, they suppose that a metaphor exploits preexisting semantic associations between a topic and a vehicle. However, there is experimental evidence suggesting that the similarity relations between topic and vehicle are created by the metaphor itself, and do not exist prior to their occurrence in a metaphorical utterance (see e.g. Verbrugge and McCarrell 1977, Camac and Glucksberg 1984). A second unlikely assumption is that the similarity relations involved in a metaphor are semantic in nature, that is, that they correspond to features of meaning mentally represented in the lexicon. Nonetheless, a great number of metaphors rely not on lexical information associated with a concept, but rather on the encyclopaedic information attached to it. This provides evidence for the view that it is utterances rather than sentences that can be metaphorical, and that their interpretation cannot be reduced to coding/decoding mechanisms. These observations have led to the treatment of metaphor as a pragmatic rather than a semantic phenomenon.

Table 1 summarizes the ways in which semantic approaches to metaphor have

characterised the notion of incongruity and the role they ascribe to it in metaphoric interpretation. I hope to have provided evidence that none of them is adequate to treat metaphor nor humour.

2.2 Pragmatic approaches to metaphor.

2.2.1 *Metaphor as a case of maxim exploitation.*

Pragmatic approaches to metaphor do not assume that it can be studied in terms of encoded meaning. According to Grice (1975), metaphors arise from floutings of the first maxim of Quality.

With regard to the process of interpretation of a metaphor, Grice assumes that hearers first go through a stage where the literal meaning, which in his framework corresponds to the proposition expressed by the utterance, is recovered. Faced with a categorial falsity - incongruity again- hearers stick to the assumption that the speaker is abiding by the Cooperative Principle, and judge that the speaker has deliberately and overtly flouted the maxim of truthfulness. In the Gricean framework, floutings of the maxims lead hearers to reject the interpretation of the utterance on the level of what is said, in favour of an interpretation that is consistent with the maxims at the level of what is implicated. This consistency can only be achieved if an implicature compatible with the maxim of truthfulness or quality is derived. So, Grice argues, the most likely supposition is that the speaker is attributing to the topic of the metaphor

some features in respect of which it resembles the vehicle (1989: 34)¹⁶.

As Wilson (1995: 202-3) has stressed, Grice's notion of *saying* can be interpreted in a strong and in a weak sense. In the strong sense, *saying* involves expressing a proposition *and* committing oneself to its truth. On the weak interpretation, *saying* involves merely expressing a proposition. Metaphor and other tropes violate the first submaxim only on this last interpretation, where the first submaxim, *do not say what you believe to be false*, is understood as *do not express propositions you believe to be false*. On the stronger interpretation, it is interpreted as *do not express and commit yourself to propositions you believe to be false*. In this stronger sense, therefore, tropes do not say anything at all, and do not violate any maxim. If *saying* is interpreted in the strong sense, there seems to be no account at all. If it is interpreted in the weak sense, Grice's approach is inadequate.

¹⁶ Grice does not use this terminology.

APPROACH	NOTION OF INCONGRUITY	CLAIMS ABOUT INTERPRETATION
Semantic feature interaction	Syntactic combination of lexemes with incompatible semantic features. Violation of selection restrictions. Grammatical deviance.	Cancellation, transfer, combination or exchange of semantic features of topic and vehicle.
Elided comparison	Literal falsity (?) (Miller) Salience imbalance of shared features (Ortony)	Recovery of an implicit comparison
Domain-interaction	High between-domain distance.	Performance of a double comparison. Assessment of between-domain and within-domain distance.

Table 1: The notion of incongruity in semantic approaches to metaphor

Although the fact that metaphors result from an inference process is acknowledged in Grice's proposal, it still faces a number of problems. First, it has little to say about the nature of metaphor and it offers no way of distinguishing it from other kinds of implicature resulting from maxim exploitation. Second, metaphors can arise from violations of other maxims too, or indeed, from no maxim violation at all. Notice, moreover, that the some of the objections levelled against the semantic approaches, for instance, that negative statements and sentences that can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically are not semantically deviant, apply to the Gricean view: they also are not categorial falsities and do not flout the Quality maxim. In the third place, Grice's view does not have anything to say about *why* speakers use metaphors in the first place.

Of course, incongruity in the form of maxim flouting has an important role in Grice's approach to metaphor, but it is not particular to it, and it is not identified as such. The notion applies equally to his treatment of other tropes, to indirect speech acts, and to all other kinds of conversational implicature¹⁷. In Chapter 4, I discussed how the Gricean framework has been applied to humour.

2.2.2. *Conversational inadequacy and pragmatic construal rules.*

¹⁷ For a more detailed criticism of Grice's treatment of figurative language see Searle (1979), Levinson (1983), Sperber and Wilson (1981, 1986a, 1986b), Wilson and Sperber (1992), Wilson (1995).

One issue not addressed by the approaches discussed so far is the relation between the stage of recognising a metaphorical expression as such and the stage (for some authors, subsequent) of recovering its specific content. Searle (1979) has suggested that there is a first stage at which an utterance is recognized as conversationally inadequate. Then, in a second stage, the utterance is subjected to a number of pragmatic construal rules, focused on metaphor-specific principles of interpretation. In the third stage, the best match is selected as the speaker's intended message. Given that participants presumably expect conversationally adequate utterances, conversational inadequacy is a form of deviance, and hence, of incongruity. Searle's treatment of metaphor relies on his claim that metaphorical utterances are cases of discrepancy between sentence meaning and utterance meaning. He argues that metaphorical utterances are often, though not necessarily, defective, and that their defectiveness cues hearers to search for an utterance meaning that differs from sentence meaning. The cues in question can be obvious falsehood, semantic nonsense, violations of the rules of speech acts, or violations of conversational principles of communication. In all cases, he concludes, utterance meaning is arrived at by going through literal meaning first. This approach has not inspired much research on humorous metaphors in particular, so I will not discuss it here any further. Notice, however, the recurrence of the notion of incongruity and the suggestion that specific interpretive machinery is needed to understand metaphoric utterances. Presumably, if one were to follow this line of thought, one would need to specify parallel specific "pragmatic construal rules" for each of the cases where sentence meaning and

utterance meaning differ. For reasons that will by now be familiar, this is not the track I want to follow.

2.2.3 *The interactive view*

Given that there is little reason to believe that a metaphor captures some *preexisting* similarity between two concepts, the interaction theory of metaphor suggests that similarity is *created* in understanding a metaphor (Black 1955, 1962, 1979. See Searle (1982) for criticism against this idea). The topic and the vehicle are said to *interact* in the sense that the presence of the topic incites the listener to select some of the vehicle's properties in order to create a *parallel implication complex* that can fit the topic, which in turn induces parallel changes in the vehicle (e.g. *Society is a sea* is not about the sea but about a *system of relationships* between society and sea signalled by the word *sea* (Gibbs 1994: 233).

Proponents of this view argue that a simpler comparison theory misses the interactive process of 'seeing as' or 'conceiving as' by which an emergent meaning complex is generated (Johnson 1987, quoted in Gibbs 1994:233). Notice also that, in contrast with simple comparison theories, the interactive view talks about a "system of relationships", not of shared features. Predicating, one imagines, should be at least part of what constitutes such a system.

Burke (1944) discusses metaphor as *perspectival incongruity*. He considers

metaphor to be a form of categorisation distinguished by the distinct role *incongruity* plays in it. In understanding and producing metaphors, he argues, we categorise guided by special interests and conventions which differ from those which guide our usual classifications. Because classification and categorisation are both orderings, so the argument goes, the intrusion of an incongruity is a disordering that forces a reordering, in turn required to preserve the coherence of the structure of our conceptual organisation. The process brings about a new perspective on the issues involved in the metaphor, and this is where the cognitive value of metaphorical discourse is said to lie¹⁸.

The interactive view holds, therefore, that the cognitive force of metaphors arises from their capacity to restructure, or to induce a new structure on a given content domain. The notion of incongruity is assigned a major function in explaining such cognitive significance. Kittay (1987), one of the main proponents of this approach, claims:

"The irreducibility of metaphor is importantly tied to the incongruity between the domains of the topic and vehicle. That incongruity guarantees that a metaphorical predication cannot easily accommodate itself in the conceptual scheme which lies behind literal and conventional language (...) Such conflict and accommodation is again the source of their cognitive power". (1987: 37).

¹⁸ It is not clear what Burke means when he says that we normally categorise guided by conventional principles. He seems to suggest that conventionalisation guides standard categorisation, and general cognition metaphoric categorisation. An account that provides general principles and a unitary explanation of the interaction between cognition and categorisation is to be preferred.

2.2.4. *The perspectival view*

The perspectival view is in fact a philosophical development of the interactional view. This is perhaps the approach that has explicitly attached most importance to the notion of incongruity in metaphor. Its main exponent, Kittay (1987), has also formalised the theory to a great extent.

She suggests that Black's idea of an *implication system* should be replaced by the notion of *semantic field*, where a semantic field consists of the dependencies holding between concepts of a particular domain¹⁹. The theory rests on a sharp distinction between literal and metaphorical meaning. *Literal meaning*, Kittay claims, has three components: (a) a set of *semantic features* or *semantic descriptors*, representing the conceptual (informative) content of the term along with syntactic markers indicating a syntactic category; (b) a *set of conditions and restrictions on the semantic combinations of utterances*, which are called *semantic combination rules* (*sr-rules*); and (c) a *semantic field indicator*, which includes relations of contrast and affinity by which the conceptual content in (a) is related to other concepts within a content domain. The literal meaning of an utterance, it is argued, can be fixed by the role that the utterance plays in some contextually determined semantic field.

¹⁹ It is not easy to classify this approach on the basis of a semantics/pragmatics distinction. On the one hand, Kittay talks of 'semantic fields', 'semantic features', 'semantic descriptors' and so on. On the other, she distinguishes between sentence meaning and utterance meaning. My main concern in discussing her views, however, is her attempt to formalise a significant notion of incongruity in cognitive terms.

Metaphorical meaning (or *second order meaning*) arises from the introduction of relations from one domain or semantic field (the domain of the vehicle) into another semantic field (the topic domain). An example of this is Plato's analogy of Socrates as a midwife. The semantic field of child delivery in this model is, according to Kittay, as follows (1987: 33):

child delivery

MAIN VERB: help

AGENT: midwife

RESULTING STATE OF AFFAIRS:

VERB: create or deliver

AGENT: mother

RESULT: child

INSTRUMENT: potions and incantations

In the metaphor, this structure is mapped onto the semantic field of philosophical instruction in the following manner:

philosophical instruction

MAIN VERB: help

AGENT: Socrates

RESULTING STATE OF AFFAIRS:

VERB: create or deliver

AGENT: student

RESULT: ideas

INSTRUMENT: dialectic

Kittay maintains that metaphors are deviant in that they necessarily break some semantic rules,

"but only to be subject to a new set of conditions whereby they are metaphors as opposed to mistakes or other deviant language. The semantic rules which metaphors break are the ones governing first order discourse. These are rules governing discourse in which we are to assume that the applied timeless meanings are coincident with the utterance-type's occasion meaning. Where there is an indication (...) that there is a divergence between the two, we no longer have first-order discourse, for second-order meaning emerges just when there is a divergence between some applied timeless meaning and an utterance occasion meaning. The utterance is then governed by second-order rules" (1987: 49)²⁰

Notice the striking similarity between this mode of argumentation and the reasoning of Mulkey and Raskin about humour. Unquestionably, Kittay is more sophisticated and has taken the trouble to formalise her views, but the essence of their premises and conclusions are not that far apart from one another. Kittay seems to need to insist on the existence of second order meaning to preserve her view that incongruity is fundamental to metaphor. Maintaining that a metaphor is semantically anomalous leads to the conclusion that it cannot be subject to linguistic rules.

²⁰ Notice that in the framework of relevance theory and most current pragmatic theories, 'rules governing discourse' are not semantic in nature.

Critics of the anomaly view have repeatedly pointed out the following contradiction inherent in all versions of this position. Because meaningful utterances are produced and interpreted in a rule-governed fashion, if metaphors break basic linguistic rules in the way proposed, it becomes impossible to talk about metaphorical *meaning*. And in the absence of a distinct metaphorical meaning, it would seem impossible to hold that metaphors have an irreducible cognitive content, as Kittay, for instance, wishes to maintain. Trapped in this dilemma, she goes on to develop and formalise a notion of incongruity which will dissolve this conflict.

Her first step is to argue that the unit of metaphor is not always a word, a constituent, or a whole utterance. Non-semantically deviant complete sentences used metaphorically are not complete metaphorical utterances without a setting that renders them such. This setting, she claims, always yields what she calls *first-order incongruity* of a conceptual sort. Expanding the unit of metaphor to include its setting also explains why utterances such as (27), which are not semantically deviant, can be used metaphorically (for instance, when it is known that Jones is a (bad) dentist).

(27) Jones is a carpenter

In a metaphor, Kittay claims, there is some constituent of the utterance which is incongruous when that utterance is given an interpretation $_{LC}$, equivalent to the literal meaning. The incongruent constituent is called the *focus* and the remaining constituents will be part of what is called the *frame*. She says,

"The focus alone is incomplete as a metaphorical utterance, whereas the frame and focus together indicate the incongruity which appears requisite for a complete metaphorical utterance" (1987: 65).

Still, she notices that the frame/focus distinction can be problematic:

"First, the incongruity may be concealed in implications of the linguistic or situational context, so that a linguistically expanded frame is necessary to capture the particular violation in question (...) Furthermore, sometimes it is difficult to identify a frame and a focus because a given utterance is not simply composed of one part which is to be understood metaphorically while the remaining terms will be understood literally: we have constructions in which the metaphors are far more complex, in which two or more metaphors, or figures other than metaphor, are operative in a single utterance" (1987: 65).

Also, she accepts, frame and focus do not necessarily remain constant in discourse.

I have discussed Kittay's long winded argument in some detail to show the lengths to which proponents of an incongruity view of metaphor are prepared to go with the sole purpose of building into their explanations a notion that, after all, does not appear to have a predominant role in metaphoric interpretation. Let us go return to the person who has just been to see his dentist, a man by the name of Jones, who has conducted a most unskilled dental surgery. This persons utters: "Jones is a carpenter". What is the setting? What is the focus? What is the frame? Even this simple example is problematic, for consider a context in which it is known that Jones' favourite pastime is indeed, carpentry. Where is the incongruity? What is important in order to retrieve the intended interpretation is not the hearer's noticing of a categorial falsity, but rather his operating under the assumption that mentioning Jones' skills as a carpenter in the context of his capacity as a dentist is relevant. I will go

back to this example later on, but let us return to the issue of incongruity. Along the lines suggested above, Kittay proposes a formalised Incongruity Principle:

The Incongruity Principle: Consider a complete metaphorical utterance u_C with a focus u_A and a frame u_B . Let us say that one tries to give an interpretation_{LC} of u_C . Once the projection rules²¹ have operated on the lowest-level constituents of u_C , bracketing them according to their syntactic (for intra-sentential) and cohesive (for inter-sentential) relations, there will be at least some u_a and some u_b , constituents of u_A and u_B respectively, such that u_a has been bracketed with u_b . However, given some preferred sense_{LC} of u_b ²²: (a) there is no sense_{LC} of u_a which would not violate some sc-rule governing u_a and u_b , and (b) the (a)-component of the preferred sense_{LC} of u_b is incompatible with each sense_{LC} of u_a . In the case that there is some sentence in which u_a and u_b are both constituents, there would be no first-order interpretation of that sentence. In the case that u_a and u_b belong to two different sentences, both of which are constituents of u_C , there is a conversion sentence formable through the cohesive projection rule which would not have a first order interpretation (1987: 70).

The position adopted by Kittay with all these definitions and their articulation in the *Incongruity Principle* is that it is a necessary condition for the identification of an utterance as metaphorical that it should violate first-order linguistic rules, and not merely that the propositional content of utterance should be implausible as a description of a state of affairs in the world. She would not take an empirical unlikelihood, or a pragmatic inadequacy as the kind of incongruity needed for a

²¹Kittay postulates a series of projection rules which function intrasententially and whose object is to bracket together the elements of the sentences which enter into cohesive relations with one another, so she has rules to capture what she calls *cohesive substitutive relations*, and *cohesive collocative relations*.

²²A preferred sense would be determined by some utterance of which u_b is a constituent.

metaphorical interpretation, or she would classify these as violation of first-order linguistic rules. Metaphoric interpretations and their cognitive importance are said to stem from what Kittay calls *conceptual incongruity*, the only form of the incongruous, she claims explicitly, that is able to produce the conceptual reorganisation she takes to be distinctive of metaphor, as the following quote indicates:

"(...) if metaphors are cognitive it is not because they add to our store of factual data. It is because a metaphor causes us to think about something in a new way, to reorganize the concepts we already have, and to form new conceptualizations. For it to accomplish this conceptual task, it seems reasonable to expect that a conceptual incongruity be inherent in anything which is indeed a metaphor" (1987: 75)²³

It is true that metaphors induce new conceptualisations, and that they force us to adopt new unexplored perspectives. It does not follow, though, that this can only be achieved through the presence of an incongruous element. How could the incongruity principle explain that we can interpret literal truths metaphorically, such as the dentist Jones case? The answer, as I have suggested, has much to do with the relevance of the assumption that Jones is a carpenter, and that this is relevant in talk about how he behaves in his dental surgery, and how he manipulates his patients' teeth. It seems, however, to have very little to do with the presence of some incongruity, however formally defined. And still, if there is an ever present element of incongruity attached

²³ As Kittay herself recognizes, it is difficult to maintain, as she does, that a conceptual incongruity requires conceptual resolution, by which she means an at least tentative conceptual reorganisation, while empirical novelty calls for empirical resolution, which she defines as the acceptance or rejection of some unexpected empirical information. Empirical novelty may cause a conceptual reform or revolution. Nonetheless, she wants to keep the distinction "within relativized contexts" (op.cit. p.75-76)

to every metaphoric interpretation²⁴, this account remains very vague about the principles that guide our reconceptualisation. Kittay's work is nonetheless worth discussing in this detail because it also provides a clear illustration that formalisation in itself, desirable as it may be, does not necessarily equip a theory with rigour.

Kittay says nothing about humorous effects. If we look, however, at non-formalised incongruity approaches to verbal humour, we can see that, in essence, the incongruity principle captures the same notion that these views in general put forward as responsible for humorous effects. So, why is it that not every metaphor is funny? And, once in the "second order mode of processing" how do hearers know which amongst the several types of "second order interpretation" the speaker intends them to derive? It becomes more and more apparent that the variety of ways of approaching the problem of finding an adequate notion of incongruity for metaphorical interpretation invariably lead to the same unresolved puzzles. This offers yet more evidence that concentrating on the nature of this concept will not take us much further.

2.2.5 *Metaphor as loose talk*

The view of metaphor proposed in the relevance theoretic framework does not place much emphasis on an idea of incongruity. Sperber and Wilson (1985, 1986/1995) have

²⁴ In fact, some conceptual incongruity of this sort is to be expected in the interpretation of *every* utterance, not only in metaphoric interpretation, if, as Fodor (1996) stresses, even syntactic garden-path phenomena are much more frequent than we are aware of.

suggested that metaphor is a form of loose talk, rather than a natural class of its own²⁵. Recall the notion of interpretive resemblance discussed in chapter five. The more shared implications two utterances have in a given context, the greater their interpretive resemblance. On this view, a literal interpretation is one in which two propositions, the proposition expressed by the utterance and the thought the speaker wants to communicate, share all their implications in all contexts. In a less than literal interpretation, the propositions involved have some implications in common in some contexts. Notice that in this framework, literalness is just a limiting case of interpretive resemblance, one in which a representation is interpretively used to represent another, all of whose implications it shares.

In contrast with most other pragmatic theories, in the relevance theoretic framework there is no need to postulate an independent truth maxim, so that any ensuing norm of literalness simply vanishes. Consequently, when a speaker produces an utterance u with a propositional form p , there is no presumption that the speaker is committed to the truth of p , but only to the assumption that p resembles the thought of the speaker represented by u to some degree.

An immediate consequence of this is that what hearers expect in processing an utterance is that it will interpretively resemble a thought of the speaker's, not that it will be a literal interpretation of it. Often, a less than literal interpretation will be

²⁵ Understatements, overstatements, and approximations are other instances of loose talk.

enough. Indeed, it might be the most economical way of conveying the speaker's intended effects. This is what happens in cases of rough approximation and loose talk (e.g. *Holland is flat, Jane's face was an oval, The lecture started at 8.00*, all taken from Wilson 1995: 204). Ease of processing is a clear motivation to use an utterance in this way. Hearers, therefore, do not automatically expect literal interpretations, since this is often not compatible with a deeper expectation: adequacy of effects for no unjustified processing effort.

It is often the case that a hearer will want to communicate a wide number of propositions, all of which are easily derivable as logical or contextual implications of a proposition *q*, whose truth, however, the speaker does not want to communicate. As long as the hearer has some way of selecting those implications that the speaker does want to convey, the best and most economical way to put them across might be to utter *q*, even when the speaker does not endorse the truth of the proposition *q* itself expresses. And the hearer does have a way of selecting those implications that the speaker wants to convey: his relevance-oriented cognitive resources.

Sperber and Wilson's claim is that there is no discontinuity between loose talk (e.g. saying that one lives 400 yards from Russell Square Station, instead of 389.63 yards, when asked by a friend) and metaphor (e.g., uttering (31) to portray the character as defenceless, abandoned and frail).

(31) Tereza was a child put in a pitch-daubed bulrush basket and sent

downstream.

(Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*)

So, Sperber and Wilson's proposal is that, if a speaker says of someone

(32) She is a monster,

the audience will not recover the propositional form expressed by the utterance and take it to express literally a thought of the speaker, find it to be false and then proceed to reinterpret it as metaphorical, as most approaches to metaphor suggest. Instead, hearers will look for relevant implications of the proposition expressed by the utterance of (30), which in this case may include

(33) She is big
 She is ugly
 She is cruel

As a metaphor, (32) is highly standardised. It gives access to a number of stereotypical assumptions which are strongly implicated by the speaker. But more creative metaphors involve the derivation of a wider array of strong and weak implicatures. Frequently, this process involves several extensions of the context, as most implications in the first accessible context will be irrelevant. If the metaphor is successful, the additional effort will be offset by an increase in contextual effects.

Seeing metaphor as a form of loose talk suggests that incongruity is not that feature of metaphorical utterances to which its cognitive force should be attributed. Rather, the cognitive force of metaphor seems to arise from the condensation with which it produces a wide number of cognitive effects. In the relevance theoretic framework, it is acknowledged that there is usually a certain degree of indeterminacy regarding which particular range of implicatures is intended. Besides, some of them are more strongly communicated than others.

I now want to turn to the way conceptual structure is viewed in relevance theory. Notice that in most approaches discussed so far, a concept is not clearly distinguished from its lexical representation. Concepts are treated as definite points in a semantic space, definable by their cartesian coordinates along the dimensions that compose them. Relevance theory, by contrast, conceives concepts as abstract psychological objects that function as labels under which various types of information can be stored in memory. The information stored in a given conceptual address falls into three distinct types: logical, encyclopaedic and lexical. Each concept then has a *logical entry*, containing a set of deductive rules which apply to logical forms of which that concept is a constituent, an *encyclopaedic entry*, containing information about the denotation and extension of the concept, and a *lexical entry*, containing information about the natural language counterpart of the concept (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 86/1995). Whenever we access a concept, we do not access *all* the assumptions available in its encyclopaedic entry, that is, we do not retrieve all the information

about objects, events and properties that instantiate that particular concept. Notice that, in this perspective it makes no sense to talk about a precise semantic distance between concepts or lexical items. The question is rather what determines the precise subset of assumptions in the encyclopaedic entry of a concept that we retrieve in processing an utterance²⁶. Certain assumptions become more salient in certain contexts; others will become more highly salient in other contexts. If one insisted on considering semantic distance a plausible notion, and as a measure of incongruity, it is clear that it wouldn't have any reality until interpretation is underway. This brings me again to the issues of relative salience and manifestness that, I have argued in previous chapters, play an important role in the creation of humorous effects. To illustrate this, let me use an example provided by Pilkington (1994: 123) in his discussion of metaphor.

A person is queuing to buy a ticket for an exhibition. When he reaches the ticket window he asks for a ticket and adds

(34) I'm a student.

Pilkington argues that under TICKET PRICE FOR EXHIBITION and STUDENT we have the same encyclopaedic assumption that

²⁶ Within a different framework, of course, this point has been made by Searle, who remarks that in processing *Juliet is the sun* we do not consider the possibilities that Juliet is millions of miles away or that she is gaseous. See also Pilkington (1994), who elaborates the relevance-theoretic perspective.

(35) Students are entitled to a discount on an entrance ticket,

which will become a salient contextual assumption for the person selling tickets. Pilkington points out that at the encyclopaedic entry attached to the concept **STUDENT** we have other assumptions that will not become salient in the same way, for instance, those in (36), amongst many others.

- (36)
- a. Students attend lectures
 - b. Students are dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge
 - c. Students can withdraw books from university libraries
 - d. Students can withdraw books from university libraries for three weeks

Pilkington does not discuss the possibility of having a humorous effect here, but suppose now that instead of saying

(37) It's three pounds then,

the person at the ticket window says

(38) Oh is that so? How long have you been dedicated to the pursuit of truth?

There are several ways in which this can be interpreted. The result is, of course, not uproarious, but different things would get communicated in this case. In particular,

that what has been taken for granted, shouldn't have been assumed (i.e. the saliency of the assumption that the speaker is entitled to a concession). There may be several reasons for this. The attendant is incompetent, or he is communicating that it is unjustified to take for granted the assumption that the speaker is entitled to a concession, and hence he dissociates himself from this assumption, and so on. All these possibilities have a potential to be interpreted as mildly amusing. The point is that in the creation of humorous effects it is often the case that relevance is attached to assumptions that are, so far, not very salient in the context of interpretation, or taken for granted, and that an implicit expression of a dissociative attitude is often at work. Let me consider another example to stress the role of saliency of assumptions and the implicit expression of a dissociative attitude. In their recent book *Have I got 1997 for you*, Angus Deayton, Ian Hislop and Paul Merton, report that after the LA police arrested Hugh Grant for paying for oral sex on Sunset Boulevard, Elizabeth Hurley told the press,

- (39) My dad's initial reaction , like any good father, was that Hugh should have been horsewhipped,

to which Angus Deayton added,

- (40) Not a bad idea, though it would probably have cost an extra \$50

In this context, most hearers would initially narrow the propositional content

embedded in (37) ('Hugh should have been horsewhipped') to something like

(41) In punishment for that, he should have been horsewhipped

What Deayton does is to assume that the hearers have retrieved the less accessible narrowing along the lines of (42)

(42) In addition to the services provided by the prostitute, he should have been horsewhipped to satisfy his (presumed) masochist sexual urges.²⁷

Now notice that (40) strongly encourages the hearer to supply a set of implicated premises along the lines of (43)

(43) There is nothing wrong/embarrassing about what Hugh Grant did and he should have made the best out of it.

But (43) contradicts the assumptions represented by (44), which are the ones most hearers are likely to select

(44) What Hugh Grant did is wrong/embarrassing

Also, in uttering (40) Angus Deayton is mocking the hearers who have wrongly selected (44) as part of the context of interpretation, and he is also implicitly

²⁷ Notice also that the utterance represents a potential and desirable state of affairs. Deayton is playing on the underdetermination of the person for whom the thought represented by the utterance is assumed to be desirable, which is pragmatically determined. He chooses to exploit the less accessible option.

expressing his attitude of dissociation from it.

At this point it is possible to argue that a notion of incongruity could be constructed in terms of the attributed relative saliency of relevant assumptions for hearer and speaker. Perhaps, but I will not pursue this line here. The reason is that I do not believe that doing so would improve the approach I am trying to develop significantly. The relative saliency of the relevant contextual assumptions is indeed an important notion in an explanatory account of how humorous effects are created, but it is not a fixed and steady property of either concepts or beliefs. It seems true, however, that a discrepancy between the relative relevance and saliency that the speaker and the hearer attribute to an assumption at some point during the production of an utterance and its interpretation is important in the derivation of a humorous effect.

Table 2 summarises the role of incongruity in pragmatic approaches to metaphor I have discussed.

THEORY	THE NOTION OF INCONGRUITY	CLAIMS ABOUT INTERPRETATION
Maxim exploitation	Maxim flouting	Perceived incongruity (categorical falsity) leads to the calculation of implicatures
Conversational inadequacy and pragmatic construal rules	Discrepancy between sentence meaning and utterance meaning	Perceived incongruity leads to the recognition that an utterance is not intended literally. Set of specific strategies used to arrive at a metaphorical interpretation
Metaphor without meaning		Intimation of meaning
Interactive view	Introduction of relations from the vehicle semantic field into the topic semantic field.	Creation of a parallel implication complex through the interaction of incompatibles
Perspectival view	Conceptual incongruity, induced by the introduction of relations from the vehicle semantic field into the topic semantic field	Perception of incongruity in the recovered first order meaning leads to the recovery of second order (metaphorical meaning)
Loose talk		The search for relevance leads to the saliency of certain concepts and assumptions, and to the recovery of implicated assumptions intended by the speaker

Table 2: The notion of incongruity in pragmatic approaches to metaphor

I have been trying to show that the notion of incongruity is not particularly useful in either an account of metaphor nor an account of humour, neither from a semantic nor from a pragmatic perspective. For metaphor, the concept of interpretive use seems more adequate. For humour, in general, the relative change in the mutual manifestness of certain contextual assumptions and the expression of a dissociative attitude seem again, as for non-metaphorical cases, more central. Humorous metaphors very often play on relatively inaccessible assumptions. Let me make a few last points about humorous metaphors and how they contrast with poetic metaphors.

3. Metaphor: humorous and poetic effects

3.1 *Saliency*

While irony is often associated with humour, metaphor seldom is. In a recent paper, Weiner says,

"Metaphors and riddles are characterized by incongruous elements. Yet, riddles are funny and metaphors (often) are not" (1996: 111)

As the discussion above suggests, what little research there is on the relation between humour and metaphors works under the assumption that in both there is an element of incongruity that features importantly.

Weiner (1996) suggests that although both riddles and metaphors involve an element of incongruity, there is a crucial difference in the speaker's intentions in each case.

"...like many types of humour, they (metaphors) are also based on incongruity and its resolution (...) Metaphors are used in an attempt to improve communication, to make something that is difficult to express easier to express (...) Riddles, on the other hand, are an attempt to prevent communication (...) But whereas metaphors function by helping the hearer comprehend the inexpressible, the function of riddles is to confuse and prevent the hearer from understanding" (1996: 111-112)

Weiner also appeals to the notion of domain distance incongruity, although she acknowledges that it is not sufficient for humour. She recognises "saliency violations" as a factor in humour. The difference between metaphors and riddles is then, in her view, that riddles embody an additional form of incongruity. Both metaphors and riddles are constructed on the basis of domain distance, but while metaphors work on the basis of salient attributes, riddles rest on the lack of saliency of the crucial features. Weiner's approach does not develop this point, and rather makes intensive use of the notion of prototypicality in meaning in order to capture what she believes to be the further incongruities involved.

I would argue that it is not exactly that humorous metaphors play on the lack of saliency of the crucial features, as Weiner argues is the case for riddles. Riddles, of course, work because our relevance-oriented cognitive machinery guarantees that we will automatically access the most salient assumptions first, hence the ones upon which the riddle is constructed will be automatically blocked, calling for a conscious further search. But humorous metaphors are quickly understood. Consider again Morrissey's example above, repeated here for convenience

(45) b. Cheese is milk's leap towards immortality.

What is striking is not the difficulty we find in making the mapping of one script upon the other, as Morrissey suggests, but how easily and quickly we do it. We realise that someone who is immortal is famous and likely to be remembered for a long time,

while cheese is a way of preserving milk and can be stored for longer, and we draw a parallel. We notice that people are famous and likely to be remembered for a long time because of great achievements they have, and that cheese is a valued food. We also notice the form of the sentence and its resemblance to the form which is standard for comments made of celebrities, important scientists or artists and their achievements. I would suggest that the speaker is expressing an attitude of dissociation towards the linking of the content and the form of his utterance, in a way that is characteristic of parody, and that this combination of factors, which is also present in other forms of humour, is what most contributes to the humorous effect of (45).

3.2 Emotion and attitude

Dead and standardised metaphors achieve relevance in a way different from poetic metaphors. The first typically communicate a few implicatures strongly and their import is relatively determinate. This is the case of *She is a monster* above. By contrast, poetic metaphors achieve relevance by communicating many implicatures weakly. The greater the range of implicatures it communicates, the richer and more poetic a metaphor is (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995, Pilkington 1992, 1994).

Pilkington (1992, 1994) has suggested that what a poetic metaphor does is to promote an extensive exploration of contexts through a search that must avoid or go beyond social stereotypes, or obviously metarepresented assumptions. Stereotypical characterisations shortcircuit the search, thereby reducing a metaphor's potential. Note

that (45) above fails to be poetic on this account. What it produces is precisely a stereotypical characterisation of the *form* of the utterance, and the combination of this with its propositional contents shortcircuits the search and conveys a mocking attitude. This does not mean that every metaphor which fails as a poetic metaphor will be humorous.

There is something else that distinguishes a poetic metaphor from a humorous metaphor. Pilkington has shown that in most successful cases of poetic effects context is suitably built up to encourage exploration in the appropriate direction. I will suggest that the contexts are explored in characteristically different ways for humorous and poetic metaphors. While a poetic metaphor stresses an emotion, a humorous metaphor doesn't, and rather interferes with it.

In order to account for the poetic effect of some utterances, Pilkington makes use of a characterisation of emotions based on an approach suggested by Sloman (1987), and explores how the weak implicatures of an utterance interact with it. According to Sloman, emotions can be partly described in terms of an interaction of beliefs and desires. What happens when a poetic effect is achieved, Pilkington suggests, is that every implicature contributes its own conditions for the particular emotion evoked by a context, and thus intensifies it in the reader as part of the interpretive process.

The following analysis of ANGER (Sloman 1987) and SADNESS (Pilkington

1992) are illustrations of how emotions can be characterised in Sloman's terms.

(45) ANGER - 'X is angry with Y'

Y did/failed to do something

This doing/failure to do violated one of X's motives

X desires to hurt/harm Y

(46) SADNESS 'X is sad about losing Y'

A state of affairs Y is believed/experienced to be good, valuable, pleasurable by X

The state of affairs is no longer accessible/obtainable by X

X desires to experience the state of affairs Y

I will not discuss the adequacy of this approach in detail, but will simply assume it to illustrate my point. Take now the utterance in (47), discussed by Pilkington. The emotion evoked here is one of grief, which, he argues, is an extreme form of sadness.

(47) Oh Absalom, my son, my son

His argument is that epizeuxis provokes a second activation of the assumptions attached to SON. Pilkington's suggestion is that where many implicatures are communicated, if every implicature contributes its own conditions for sadness, that intensifies the feeling of sadness already evoked in the reader as part of the interpretive process (1992: 48).

Now, although perhaps this is not necessarily the case, and there might be exceptions, poetic and humorous types of metaphor do not tend to overlap. A poetic metaphor is not funny; a funny metaphor hardly gives rise to poetic effects²⁸. This intuition can be further explored if we return to the relation between amusement and emotion, which I discussed extensively in chapter one.

Recall that Morreall has provided a number of reasons against considering the kind of amusement characteristic of humour as a type of emotion. One amongst his several arguments is based on the opposite ways in which emotions and amusement orient us to the world. Whereas an emotion involves our practical concern for the object of our emotion, what is characteristic of amusement is that it involves a non-practical attitude towards the situation that amuses us.

I have suggested that most humorous effects involve the implicit expression of an attitude of dissociation. Dissociation may arise from any amongst several factors, many of which are indeed emotions: anger, disagreement, fear, repulsion, scorn, contempt. Dissociation is also expressed for a variety of reasons and purposes: to avoid trouble or blame, or simply to show any of the above.

Because of the diversity of reasons that can produce dissociation from an object, and because these may crucially involve the expression of emotions, not every expression of an attitude of dissociation will be perceived as humorous. Whenever a

²⁸ Of course, this tendency is rather clear for verbal humour, though not so much for verbal wit.

speaker expresses an attitude of dissociation towards a set of assumptions, but at the same time conveys some practical orientation towards them, and this is part of the main relevance of the utterance, a humorous interpretation is likely to be precluded. This is because although dissociation and disengagement are similar, they are not the same. Often a practical orientation will involve the strengthening of an emotion, as Pilkington suggests is the case for poetic communication. The concern may simply be intellectual though, but unless an element of disengagement (either on the speaker's or the narrator's side) is conveyed, or felt by the interpreter, a humorous experience is prone to be hindered.

Consider the following example from P.G. Wodehouse's *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*. In the opening pages, Bertie Wooster regrets having been asked by his aunt Dahlia to take the Trotters, some acquaintances of hers, out to dinner. He can't refuse. The couple, we learn, are said to be dead boring. When Jeeves asks Bertie whether he will be dining in, Wooster replies,

(48) No, out, blast it! A blind date with some slabs of gorgonzola sponsored by Aunt Dahlia.

The effect here is not created only by metaphorically referring to the Trotters as "slabs of gorgonzola", although this, of course, plays an important role. Notice the implicitly expressed attitudes of dissociation from the idea that this will be, as asserted, a blind date, and from all the implicatures this may give rise to. Calling the Trotters "slabs

of gorgonzola" amongst other things, suggests that they are flat, dull, unsophisticated, etc. The effect is created by a few assumptions strongly communicated, and, although the hearer can go on searching for further effects, the humour arises even if this more extensive search is not performed. The element of disparagement contributes to the distancing of the speaker, and, the main relevance of the utterance lies here. Imagine that some emotion we can term UPSET is defined along Sloman's terms as in (49).

(49) UPSET 'X is upset about Y'

A state of affairs Y has arisen

X believes Y to be undesirable

X desires to eliminate the state of affairs Y

It is true that the utterance has implications that contribute their conditions to (47) However, the attitude of dissociation implicitly expressed places the main relevance of the utterance somewhere else.

To sum up, three of the aspects that distinguish a humorous metaphor from a poetic one are, in the first place, whether the metaphor achieves most of its relevance through a wide range of weak implicatures, or rather through a more determined set of strongly communicated implicatures. As an example, consider (45) again. Once we recover a strongly communicated assumption that cheese is a great achievement, we are near the interpretation intended by the speaker. The remaining crucial ingredient

is an implicitly expressed dissociative attitude, but not the recovery of an indeterminate set of weak implicatures. Let us consider a case where (50) is used with humorous effects.

(50) Juliet is the Sun

Someone says metaphorically, in an irritated tone

(51) I'm so annoyed with Juliet. Whenever you need her solid presence, she is always miles away.

As a reply, someone utters (50). In this case, it is precisely the assumptions that the Sun is millions of miles away from the Earth and that it is gaseous that would become relevant. The utterance will achieve its main relevance by making them strongly manifest. No further extensive search of the context is required, and although the humorous effects may increase if such search is performed, they will not mount up as more and weaker implicatures get computed.

A second difference is whether the speaker is implicitly expressing a dissociative attitude from any of the assumptions conveyed by his utterance or not. In (45) there is an implicitly expressed dissociative attitude from the connection the utterance makes between its form and its content of the utterance, which gives it its parodic tone. When Shakespeare makes Romeo utter (50), he also has him endorse all the implicatures conveyed by it. Imagine, by contrast, that a friend of mine has been

on and on telling me how wonderful a girl, whom he knows I dislike profoundly, is. She happens to be called Juliet and I, ironically, utter (50). In this case, I will not be endorsing all the assumptions made manifest by my uttering (50). Rather, I will be conveying a dissociative attitude from them.

The third important factor is whether the attitude of dissociation the speaker implicitly expresses contains any emotional overtones that contribute to the main relevance of the utterance. In Pilkington's terms, this is represented by the communication of implicatures that contribute to the conditions of some emotion, described in the terms Sloman suggests. In (48) we recognise that Wooster is upset, but this is not where the main relevance of the utterance lies. Also, and crucially, although we recognise that *Wooster* is upset, none of the implicatures of (48) contributes its conditions to the *hearer/reader's* potential mental state of being UPSET.

In the next chapter I turn to consider the relation between irony and humour.

Irony and Verbal Humour

1. Introduction

Throughout the previous chapters I have provided arguments in favour of a shift from the emphasis that most theories of verbal humour place on the notion of incongruity to the effects that this incongruity has on the process of interpretation. I have suggested that no notion of incongruity is, on its own, able to account for how humorous effects are created, and that verbal humour and wit are tightly linked to the implicit expression of dissociative attitudes, and to sudden shifts of background assumptions into the foreground. In this chapter I discuss these issues further with specific reference to verbal irony.

2. Irony and incongruity

2.1 Traditional approaches

Classical rhetoric viewed tropes as involving the substitution of a figurative meaning for a literal one. Irony was no exception. Traditionally, irony is defined as the figure of speech in which the figurative meaning is the opposite of the literal meaning. So, an ironist's primary intention, in this perspective, is to communicate the opposite of what he says. Modern Gricean pragmatic theory has not departed abruptly from this view. It has provided an account of how the speaker's intended meaning can be

recognised, but it has adhered to the view that the speaker's intended meaning is the opposite of what his utterance says. Grice views irony as one amongst several cases in which the first maxim of truthfulness is flouted. So, discussing an example where X has betrayed A and A says of X

(1) X is a fine friend,

Grice points out that if

"...it is perfectly obvious to A and his audience that what A has said or has made as if to say is something he does not believe, and the audience knows that A knows that this is obvious to the audience, (...). unless A's utterance is entirely pointless, A must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward. This must be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward" (1989: 34).

In this way, what in classical rhetoric was treated as figurative meaning is, in Gricean pragmatics, an implicature. Both views retain the assumption that an ironic utterance conveys the opposite of what it says.

Irony, if we adopt any of these perspectives, provides us with two sources of incongruity. The first is parallel to that discussed for metaphor in the last chapter, and is not exclusive to it. Much as someone who uses an expression metaphorically, an ironist does not communicate what his utterance encodes, says the classical rhetorician, and thereby, he violates the maxim of quality, says the Gricean pragmatist. Alternative views, such as speech act theory, have argued that irony involves a violation of the sincerity condition (e.g. Haverkate 1990). Although all these views take irony to be a case of a violation of a presumed expectation of literalness and a norm of truthfulness, this is not specific to irony. The second source of incongruity is often treated as more distinctive of this figure, and it arises when it is accepted that

an ironic speaker attempts to communicate the opposite of what his utterance asserts. Here, as with several examples of humorous effects, the crucial notion for incongruity is contradictory propositional content.

Some authors have suggested that irony conveys a meaning different from, though not necessarily opposed to, what is said (e.g. Groeben and Scheele 1981, Myers Roy 1978, both quoted in Haverkate 1990). Wilson and Sperber (1992) provide an extensive list of counterexamples to the claim that irony invariably communicates the opposite of what is literally said. These include understatements, ironical quotations, and ironical interjections, as illustrated in (2)

- (2) a. You can tell he is upset
(said about someone blind with rage and making a public exhibition of himself)
- b. When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life
(said in a rainy rush-hour traffic jam in London)
- c. Ah, Tuscany in May! (said in a freak cold spell in Tuscany)
(all examples from Wilson and Sperber 1992)

As argued by Sperber and Wilson, none of (2a-c) communicates the opposite of what is literally expressed. In some cases, moreover, it is not even easy to see what this would be. Besides, as will be discussed below, on many occasions a speaker means what he says (i.e., he endorses the proposition expressed by his utterance), but still he is ironic. Where does this leave the definition of irony whereby we invariably communicate the opposite of what we say? What is the status of the second type of incongruity mentioned above in irony understanding?

In what follows I will argue that there is a sense in which verbal irony does rely on the accessing of two contradictory propositional forms and the recognition of

their incompatibility. It needs to be stressed that this is not a move back to the claims of traditional approaches to verbal irony. I will not argue, as in classical rhetoric, that irony involves the *replacement* of a literal meaning with a figurative meaning, where the figurative meaning in question is the opposite of the literal meaning¹. The calculability requirement for implicatures introduced by Grice provides some motivation for such an otherwise unnatural process. As Grice (1975) reanalysed what was classically treated as figurative meaning as a figurative implicature, derived by the hearer from the recognition of the speaker's deliberate flouting of the maxim of truthfulness, it became easier to see a principled motivation for performing the rather awkward operation of interpreting the propositions expressed by a speaker as their negations. Still, according to Grice, the ironist implicates the opposite of the proposition expressed by her utterance, or what is literally said. I will not argue for this view either.

When I discussed humorous effects, I showed how the process of interpretation whereby humorous effects are created is often one that leads the hearer to entertain two contradictory propositional forms. Most approaches to ironical utterances assume this is the case for irony as well, but only at the extreme ends of the process: the speaker utters a sentence with a propositional content *p* and the hearer knows (in

¹ Notice, besides, that it is very counter-intuitive to suggest that the operation of recovering a propositional form and then transforming it into its opposite should play a natural role in interpretation. It doesn't seem to have a parallel in any other cognitive process. Viewing this operation as resulting from the *calculation* of an implicature provides a more principled account of why and how this could happen. What Gricean approaches do not shed much light on is *why* a speaker should choose to convey meaning in this way. Also, the Gricean framework offers only a limited explicit account of how the search for consistency with the Co-operative principle should produce the precise interpretation that is characteristic of irony.

traditional rhetoric) or concludes (in modern pragmatics) that the speaker means $\neg p$ and with this the process of interpretation concludes².

As mentioned above, it is not always clear that in producing an ironical utterance what the speaker does is to deliberately violate Grice's maxim of truthfulness. As I have just pointed out, speakers may mean what they literally say and still intend to be ironic. Imagine, for instance, a mother whose children are still around by midnight, concocting all sorts of excuses to avoid going to bed. After a while she turns to a visiting friend and says

(3) I love children who go to bed early³

She might indeed mean what she says, she does not implicate that she does not, and yet she is ironic. In what sense is the incongruous involved in such cases then? What I explore below is the possibility of a different role for inconsistent propositional forms in the perception of irony. In this perspective, these do not arise as a consequence of the hearer performing some shift to an opposite meaning at the end of the interpretation process, but instead are entertained and play a central part during the process of interpretation a hearer must go through prior to the complete recovery of the ironic interpretation of an utterance. It is not about *replacing* one meaning with its opposite, it is not about *deriving* as an implicature a meaning opposite to the proposition expressed by the utterance, but about being forced by the search for

² More recently, Giora (1995) has suggested that irony is a form of indirect negation, and I will discuss her approach below.

³ Gibbs and O'Brien (1991) provide a similar example.

relevance to entertain the incongruous, as *a stage* in processing, required to identify an ironic utterance as such. It is not something unnatural that a hearer should do for no principled reason, but instead something that arises as a necessary consequence of his search for relevance, and which introduces additional cognitive effects. After all, incongruity does seem to play a role in irony, but not quite in the way the classical and Gricean approaches have suggested.

3. Irony, relevance and negation

3.1 Irony as implicit echoic use

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

According to Sperber and Wilson (1986) all utterances are more or less literal interpretations of a thought of the speaker. An utterance is *descriptively used* when

that thought is entertained as a description of a state of affairs. It is *interpretively used* when that thought is itself an interpretation of some further thought or utterance it resembles. Ironical utterances are cases of interpretive use, in which a speaker attributes a thought to someone other than herself, or to herself at another time.

Sperber and Wilson also argue that a crucial element for the interpretation of ironic utterances is the recognition that they are *echoic* (i.e. they simultaneously report an attributed thought and express the speaker's attitude to it), and the identification of the speaker's attitude of dissociation from what is echoed⁴. This approach can handle many of the examples which are problematic for the classical and Gricean approaches, it sheds light on the issue of why irony arises, why it emerges spontaneously and does not have to be learned, and it also shows that it is not a deviation from a norm, and that it does not need to follow specific rhetorical conventions.

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

⁴ An *echoic* utterance simultaneously reports what someone has or might have said or thought, and expresses the attitude of the speaker to it.

by her utterance, or she can dissociate herself from something else that the utterance evokes.

What I want to explore here is whether the recognition of irony as echoic and as involving the expression of a dissociative attitude requires the entertainment of two conflicting propositional forms. Notice that the question of whether conflicting propositional forms are entertained does not, in principle, depend on the approach one takes about the final interpretation of irony. It refers to what goes on during the processing of an utterance when it is understood as ironic. It does not necessarily have any bearing on the traditional view that an ironic speaker says something and means or implicates the opposite of the proposition expressed by his utterance. It does not imply that the two contradictory propositional forms in question should be the proposition expressed by an utterance (what is *said* in Gricean terms) and what the speaker intends to communicate.

The best way to illustrate the point I want to make is to concentrate on cases where the speaker means what he says and yet is still ironic. Consider again the example of the mother who says *I love children who go to bed early*. She does not mean (4) or (5).

(4) I do not love children who go to bed early

(5) I love children who do not go to bed early

If the relevance-theoretic account of irony is right, there is a thought that the mother is echoing and dissociating herself from, and the question is what this thought is. Recall that the notion of echo allows that the speaker may echo any attributable actual

or potential thought or utterance, which leaves us with at least four possible cases. Recall also that Sperber and Wilson's view of irony claims that it is a case of interpretive use, where the speaker attributes a thought to someone else or *to herself at a different time*. In saying *I love children who go to bed early*, what the mother seems to be echoing is a potential utterance she might have expected to be able to produce in a different situation, for instance, one in which her own children would be in bed early. Let us call this different situation S_1 . S_1 is a situation in which p would be true.

$p =$ It is early and the speaker's children are in bed

To be able to recognise the echo, a hearer has to notice that the actual utterance produced in (3) should be processed using the contextual assumption $\neg p$. Notice that the utterance in (3) suddenly makes $\neg p$ strongly mutually manifest.

In S_1 , the speaker would be in a position to utter (3) descriptively, *and*, crucially, to endorse all its potential implicatures. In S_1 , her utterance would logically imply that she loves her own children and that one of the reasons she loves them is because they have gone to bed early. When this situation fails to materialise, she ironically echoes the utterance she had earlier hoped to be able to produce. In the actual circumstances, let us call them S_0 , her utterance does not have the implication that she loves her children, at least, not because they go to bed early. So, the mother is implicitly expressing her attitude of dissociation from the potential implicature in (6)

(6) I love my own children because they go to bed early

Notice that unless the discrepancy between p and $\neg p$ is accessed, there is no way, other than perhaps an ironic tone of voice, in which the speaker can be taken to be echoic and expressing an attitude of dissociation. To sum up, the speaker of (3) is echoing a potential utterance that she could have produced in a situation S_1 , different from S_0 , when the utterance is in fact produced. She dissociates from some of the potential implicatures that the utterance would have if uttered in S_1 . To recognise these facts, a hearer has to notice that while S_0 , the actual context, contains $\neg p$, the non-actual but stereotypically desirable S_1 , contains p . Part of the relevance of (3) when uttered in S_0 is to make strongly mutually manifest $\neg p$.

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

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

Clearly, q is being used to represent

p = Our friends are always there when we need them

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

s_1 = Our friends are always somewhere in some circumstances

s_2 = Our friends are always there in some circumstances of someone's need

s_3 = Our friends are always there when something is the case.

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

v_1 = We need our friends

v_2 = Our friends need us

w = Our friends are always there

we can think of q and p as

q = $v_2 \rightarrow w$

p = $v_1 \rightarrow w$

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

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

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

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

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

This echoes the popular saying

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

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

s_1 = Never leave until tomorrow what you can possibly do *sometime*

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

q can be perceived as ironic only if it is recognized as echoic, and the attitude expressed towards the thought echoed as one of dissociation. It is possible to dissociate oneself from a thought for a variety of reasons. The exhausted mother of the example discussed above finds that it would be ridiculous to maintain her hopes in the circumstances; Oscar Wilde may find it absurd that efficiency should be an outstanding value at the expense of other, say, more emotional or sensual experiences. In any case, the point is that unless the two conflicting propositional forms are entertained, it is not possible to interpret the utterance as echoic, with the attitude expressed being one of dissociation.

In all the cases discussed above, the utterances are only potentially ironic if the proposition they express makes manifest an assumption that contradicts some other assumption in the context of interpretation, which corresponds to some actual state of affairs. As Sperber and Wilson put it, irony

"rests on the perception of a discrepancy between a representation and the state of affairs that it purports to represent" (1990: 152)

What I want to stress is that this propositional clashing (hence, incongruity) does not occur at the end of processing, with the final interpretation resulting in the negation of the proposition expressed by the utterance, but rather takes place during the process

and, crucially, is a cue for the recovery of a dissociative attitude. Again, what seems to be of importance, is not the precise form of incongruity one encounters, but the fact that it facilitates the recognition of a dissociative attitude. By reducing processing costs in this way, this variety of incongruity can be said to contribute to the relevance of the utterance. This, rather than its structural nature, is what makes it significant in verbal humour and wit (see also Curc6 1995, 1996a, 1996b).

3.2 Irony as negation

Recently, Giora has put forward the view that irony is a form of indirect negation. This proposal, she claims, refutes several theories of verbal irony, in particular, the one suggested by the relevance-theoretic framework. In this section I discuss her ideas, and show that the relevance-theoretic approach to verbal irony remains intact.

In the past years, Giora has been developing a framework to account for people's intuitions of well-formedness of texts (e.g. Giora 1985, 1988, 1996)⁵. She has proposed general conditions for discourse well-formedness, based on which she has attempted to characterise specific types of texts, for instance, jokes⁶, metaphor, and irony and to provide a description of what she calls their "grammar" (1995: 244). Her approach to both humorous texts and figurative language is decidedly within the tradition that regards them as deviations from a norm. All jokes, irony and metaphors,

⁵ For critical discussion of her views on this see Wilson (forthcoming).

⁶ See chapter four for a discussion of her work on this issue.

on her account, are texts that violate one of the general requirements she sets on the well-formedness of discourse. About irony in particular, she herself says,

"The view that irony is a form of indirect negation is partly compatible with the traditional theories (e.g., Grice 1975) which hold that irony involves a breach of a communicative norm and triggers the generation of an implicature" (1995: 241)

Let me now explain her view of irony. Her main claim is that irony is a form of negation that does not make use of an explicit negation marker. Apparently, she assumes that what is indirectly negated is the proposition expressed by an ironic utterance. The main difference between her approach and traditional views, she argues, is that she suggests that

"irony does not cancel the indirectly negated message as suggested by the traditional and pretense accounts. Nor does it necessarily implicate its opposite, as contended by the traditional view" (1995: 241)

Giora aims to provide an account of irony appropriateness and also a processing explanation of irony (1995: 244). She is not satisfied with Sperber and Wilson's account for two main reasons. She, unjustifiably, assumes that the relevance-theoretic view of irony is committed to the claim that processing ironic utterances is a "one-stage" process, and that, consequently, ironic interpretations should not pose more complex tasks on the hearer than literal interpretations. About this point she explains that her position

"assumes a two-stage deciphering procedure whereby both the literal and the ironic meanings are computed. However, it departs from the traditional view in that it further assumes that the literal meaning is not dismissed, having been processed"

But, at least as I understand it, Sperber and Wilson's view of irony does not make either of these two claims. I will return to this point shortly, but notice, in passing,

that Giora does not seem to find distinctions standardly made in pragmatics, such as those between proposition, meaning and interpretation, of any importance.

Secondly, Giora attempts to show that the relevance-theoretic view of irony is inadequate because irony is not necessarily echoic, and so, she thinks, Sperber and Wilson provide an account too narrow to deal with all types of irony. I will show that her arguments are based on several misconceptions and misrepresentations of the relevance-theoretic account of verbal irony. However, I will suggest a slight modification to the conditions on ironic utterances proposed by Sperber and Wilson. This modification is in line with the extension to the notion of echoic use that I proposed in previous chapters, which was independently motivated by my treatment of humorous effects.

To begin my discussion, let me reproduce Giora's conditions for discourse and irony well-formedness.

3.2.1 Conditions for discourse well-formedness

According to Giora, a discourse is well-formed if and only if it meets the following conditions:

1. It conforms to the relevance requirement in that all its messages are conceived of as related to a discourse topic. The discourse topic is a generalization preferably made explicit and placed at the beginning of the discourse. It functions as a reference point relative to which all incoming messages are assessed and stored.

2. It conforms to the graded informativeness condition which requires that each proposition be more (or at least not less) informative than the one that precedes it. A message is considered informative to the extent that it has properties unshared by the previous message which in turn allow it to reduce possibilities by half.
3. It marks any deviation from relevance and graded informativeness with an explicit semantic connector such as "by the way" or "after all" (Giora 1996)

I will not consider the general adequacy of this approach to discourse coherence here. For a detailed discussion of Giora's general approach to discourse coherence see Wilson (forthcoming). Instead, I want to concentrate on her conditions for irony well-formedness.

1.2.2. Conditions for irony well-formedness

As for irony in particular, Giora proposes the following "grammar"

Given the conditions for text well-formedness, an ironic text is well-formed if and only if it meets the following conditions:

1. It conforms to the relevance requirement in that it introduces information about an accessible discourse topic.
2. It violates the graded informativeness requirement by introducing a least-probable message, either too or less informative than required in the given context (the marked informativeness requirement).
3. It makes the addressee evoke an unmarked interpretation (i.e., the implicature)

comparable with the marked message whereby the difference between them becomes perceivable (the incancellability condition)

Giora goes on to argue that the echoic view of irony is inadequate on two counts. First, she says, it is too narrow to account for all types of irony. In other words, not all irony is echoic, and so being echoic is not a necessary condition for utterances to be ironic. Second, echoes where a dissociative attitude is expressed, she argues, are not necessarily ironic. Therefore, this is not sufficient condition for an utterance to be ironic either, and so, she concludes, Sperber and Wilson's account is not satisfactory. Let me take each of her points in turn.

As examples of "nonechoic" ironies, Giora offers the following (1996: 246).

- (7) I think the washing hasn't dried (said on a very rainy day)
- (8) "Do you know any G.M.?" my friend asks.
"Rings a bell," I reply (when the person in question is well known to the speakers)

To show that (7) meets her grammar of irony, she argues,

"When said on a very rainy day, (...(7)) is highly improbable (in accordance with the marked informativeness condition) and invokes a stronger *more than* interpretation in the form of "I am sure the washing hasn't dried". This serves to highlight the difference between a more desirable state of affairs, in which there is some doubt about the washing (expressed by the explicit statement), and the more unfortunate state of affairs, in which "the washing must be soaked through" (in accordance to the incancellability condition)" (1996: 246).

In addition, she claims that neither (7) nor (8) are echoic because they "need not be attributed to another speaker" (ibid)

Now Giora's points are made on the basis of two points in need of clarification. One concerns, as I pointed out above, a general distinction between meaning and interpretation in pragmatics, and I will leave this for later. The other concerns an

inadequate representation of the relevance theoretic notions of interpretive and echoic use, and a misrepresentation of Sperber and Wilson's characterisation of irony. These two should be addressed at this point.

Giora says

"Recall that for Wilson and Sperber (1992) irony is a 'variety of echoic interpretative (sic) use, in which the communicator dissociates herself from the opinion echoed with accompanying ridicule or scorn. However, that irony need not necessarily be echoic (...) can be seen from Examples 10 and 11 ((7-8) in my numbering CC), which need not be attributed to another speaker" (1996: 248)

So, Giora believes that (7-8) are not echoic because they need not be attributed to another speaker. But nothing in the definition of echoic use imposes the requirement that an echoic utterance should be attributed to *another* speaker. Echoic utterances are those that achieve relevance by informing the hearer that the speaker has^a certain attributable thought and simultaneously holds an attitude to it. An echoic utterance can be one where the speaker attributes a thought or an utterance to herself at a time different from the time of utterance. Nothing in the definition of echoic, nor of interpretive use, rules out this possibility. A different issue is whether (7) and (8) actually are echoic, or under what conditions they would be echoic.

Let us take the example in (7). In circumstances where the speaker may legitimately and reasonably wonder whether the washing has dried (e.g., the washing is drying in a partially covered shelter, the rain has just started), and uses (7) to indicate this, (7) will be descriptively used, given that it is used to represent a state of affairs in the world in virtue of its propositional form being true of that state of affairs⁷. In this

⁷ The state of affairs here being a mental state of limited conviction 'I think'

case, the utterance may be naive, but not ironic. Interpretive and descriptive use are mutually exclusive categories, and an utterance that is descriptively used cannot, by definition, be a case of irony. In this case, (7) is not a counterexample.

(7) can be ironic if it is not put forward as a description of a state of affairs, but as an interpretation of an attributed thought or utterance, and the speaker simultaneously and implicitly expresses a dissociative attitude. In this case, the speaker may attribute the thought or utterance to someone else, or to herself/himself at another time. For instance, imagine that the speaker is just coming back home. Before leaving, he instructed his son to get the washing in when it dried, or before, if it started to rain. As he returns, it is raining, and he notices the washing hanging outside. He utters (7), attributing it to his son or to himself in a different situation (one in which it is not raining), with an implicit attitude of dissociation. In these circumstances, (7) can only be ironic. In Giora's example, as it stands, it can still be ironic, but only if a dissociative attitude is simultaneously implicitly expressed. The assumption that *p* is strongly mutually manifest to both speaker and hearers

p= It has been raining all day

All that is needed is to view the utterance as echoing a potential utterance that the speaker could have produced in a situation where *p* was not part of the context of interpretation, or not manifest. In this sense, the case resembles (3) above.

The example in (8) works in a similar way. If the speaker uses it interpretively, he must be attributing it to someone other than himself at the time of utterance. This leaves two possibilities: he attributes it to someone else, or to himself at a different

time. Giora says the first is impossible, let us consider the second. Under which different circumstances could the speaker descriptively use (8)? In circumstances where the contextual assumption (9), which Giora points out, was not part of the context.

- (9) $p =$ It is mutually known that the person in question is well known to the speakers.

In a context where $\neg p$ was part of the accessible context of interpretation, (8) would have the implicature in (10)

- (10) The speaker is not sure he knows G.M. well

It is this potential implicature that the speaker of (9) dissociates from in uttering (9) when p is mutually manifest⁸.

Let me now turn to Giora's claim that the conditions on irony suggested by Sperber and Wilson (e.g. 1981, 1986/1995, 1990, Wilson and Sperber 1992) are not sufficient either.

Giora suggests that the requirement that an echoic utterance be accompanied by ridicule is not sufficient for it to be ironic. Her example is reproduced in (11) below:

- (11) Dina: I missed the last news broadcast. What did the Prime Minister say about the Palestinians?

Mira: (with ridiculing aversion) That we should deport them.

She argues that Mira's utterance in (11) is echoic in that it simultaneously reports a

⁸ Note that (7) and (8) are both understatements and so bear a clearer relationship of violation to the graded informativeness requirement than would many other ironic utterances where the proposition expressed isn't more or less informative than required, but is simply quite different from "what is required".

content and expresses the speaker attitude to what is reported, but nonetheless, it doesn't come across as ironic. Her point is that the difference between (11) and (12), which does seem ironic, is that (12) conforms to her proposed marked informativeness condition of well-formed irony, while (11) does not.

(12) Dina: I missed the last news broadcast. What did the Prime Minister say about the Palestinians?

Mira: That we should host them in 5 star hotels in Lebanon.

Consider (11) first. Mira's reply is elliptical, so that the proposition expressed by her utterance can be represented by (13)

(13) The Prime Minister said that we should deport them

If this is indeed what the Prime Minister said, she is putting forward (13) as a description and is not using it interpretively. If Mira believes -as seems to be the case in the example- that (13) is true of a state of affairs in the world and has used (11) in virtue of this, to represent such state of affairs, (11) is, by definition, *descriptively* used. But Sperber and Wilson explicitly say that ironies are cases of *interpretive* use. The utterance in (11) *contains* an interpretation of the Prime Minister's discourse, but it is not an interpretation itself. Moreover, the attitude of dissociation expressed by the speaker is directed to this embedded interpretation. Mira is not dissociating herself from the proposition expressed by her utterance, but on the contrary, she is endorsing it.

Let us now consider (12). In standard circumstances, a strongly manifest assumption in the context of interpretation of both (11) and (12) is that the comfort of Palestinians

will not be one of the Israeli Prime Minister's main concerns. Adequate contextual effects can be derived from combining the proposition expressed by Mira's utterance in (12) with current contextual assumptions, amongst which is (14).

- (14) $p =$ The comfort of Palestinians is not one of the Israeli Prime Minister's main concerns.

In these circumstances, a propositional form along the lines of (15) cannot be put forward by Mira as a representation of a state of affairs in the world in virtue of its being true of such^a state of affairs.

(15) The Prime Minister said that we should host them in 5 star hotels in Lebanon. Hence, the utterance is recognised as an interpretation of the attributed thought of the Prime Minister. When could this be uttered as a description? In a situation where $\neg p$, the negation of (14), would be an implicature of the content of the Prime Minister's discourse. But (14) happens to be strongly mutually manifest, and hence, the possibility that the speaker be expressing implicitly an attitude of dissociation from both (15) and the potential implicature that $\neg p$ becomes highly accessible. If incorporated into the interpretation it is consistent with the principle of relevance, so it is and the utterance receives an ironic interpretation.

In (11) Dina asks a question to which Mira's utterance replies with adequate relevance. Notice that no mutually manifest assumptions in the context of interpretation are strongly challenged by the production of (11).

The interpretation of (12), by contrast, calls for an implicated premise that the comfort of Palestinians is a priority of the Israeli Prime Minister, thus contradicting

(14). A naive hearer who does not hold (14) with enough strength might take its negation on board and miss the irony. Because of the strength with which (14) will probably be held by Dina, she will need to look for contextual effects that do not derive directly from the content of the proposition expressed by Mira's utterance, given that it does not provide her with a relevant answer to her question. As the contradiction has arisen from an ostensive stimulus, and (14) is probably mutually manifest, the hearer of (12) will continue to search for cognitive effects, and in particular, for cognitive effects that can be derived from the encountered contradiction. A dissociative attitude implicitly expressed yields adequate contextual effects. What is crucial is that missing the dissociative attitude in interpreting (12) drastically detracts from an optimally relevant interpretation (if (14) is mutually manifest, though not necessarily otherwise). This contradiction of a mutually manifest assumption needs not be entertained in interpreting (11). The contradiction derived in interpreting (12) makes the possibility that the proposition expressed by the utterance does not correspond to the contents of the Prime Minister's statement manifest to the hearer. This case matches the humorous examples discussed above in that the interpretation of (12) forces the introduction of a premise that contradicts a manifest assumption in the context of interpretation.

So, the main relevance of (11) lies in the propositional content it expresses, as it answers relevantly the question posed by the speaker. The expression of a dissociative attitude is, as it were, secondary and additional. Most cognitive effects are derived from the report of the content represented by the proposition expressed alone. The

main relevance of (12), on the other hand, lies precisely in the expression of the dissociative attitude, as it should be clear to the hearer with the relevant knowledge of the world that the propositional content of the utterance will resemble very little that of the thought attributed to the Prime Minister.

So, Giora's attack on the relevance-theoretic view of irony is unfounded.

To finish this section, let me now discuss briefly her view that her account offers a more plausible view of the *process* of interpretation of irony than the relevance theoretic approach.

Giora mentions that her proposal suggests a two-stage processing whereby "processing irony must be more effort consuming than processing non-ironic language" (1996: 241) This she takes to be in opposition to research within the relevance-theoretic framework which tries to show that "irony does not involve a double (literal and figurative) deciphering procedure"

It seems to me that these claims are based on a confusion between the proposition expressed by an utterance and the final interpretation the addressee selects. In my view, nothing in the relevance-theoretic approach to irony denies that the proposition expressed by the utterance is computed during the processing of an ironic utterance. Not only that, but I have shown how a number of related propositions that are part of the context of interpretation, notably, contradictory ones, need to be *entertained* roughly simultaneously during processing in order to derive an ironic interpretation. Moreover, the relevance-theoretic approach to irony certainly does not predict that processing irony will be a "simpler task" than that of understanding non-ironic

language. Quite the opposite. Understanding irony requires from a hearer that he should be able to distinguish between descriptive and interpretive uses of language. In deciding that an utterance is used interpretively, the hearer must be able to attribute thoughts and intentions to others. Often, this will specifically mean the attribution of false beliefs. The ability that underlies this capacity is usually referred to as a "theory of mind", and I have alluded to it repeatedly throughout this thesis. Happé (1993) has shown how individuals whose theory of mind is seriously impaired, such as autists, have trouble understanding irony. Whether the operation of this indispensable capacity in interpreting figurative language is reflected in real processing-time is a different issue, but there is no question that the cognitive demands that figurative language imposes on individuals are higher than those demanded by non-figurative interpretations.

3. Understanding dissociation

Recall that Sperber and Wilson have rejected the view that irony is the figure of speech whereby a speaker says something and means or implicates the opposite. Instead, they have analysed irony as a particular case of implicit echoic use where the attitude expressed is one of dissociation (Wilson and Sperber 1992). The claim of relevance theory then is that verbal irony has three characteristic features (Wilson 1995):

(a) it is a variety of interpretive use in which the *proposition expressed by the*

utterance (my emphasis) represents a belief implicitly attributed by the speaker to someone else or to herself at another time;

(b) it is echoic (i.e. it implicitly expresses the attitude to the beliefs being represented);

and

(c) the attitude involved is one of dissociation from the opinions echoed.

It is important to note that echoes do not necessarily involve literal reproduction of an attributed utterance or thought. Often irony involves an element of exaggeration of the opinions being echoed. Also, what is echoed need not be what someone has said, but something they have assumed or implicated, or the thoughts and expectations of a group. Hence, the notion of echoic utterance is not restricted to the echoing of actual words.

As mentioned above, one type of irony that has not been much discussed concerns cases where the speaker means what she says, (i.e. she endorses the content of the proposition expressed by her utterance), while still being ironic. Consider for instance (16) uttered in a context where the speaker is trying to say something to the hearer and the hearer's attention is clearly somewhere else:

(16) I love it when you pay attention to me

Although the utterance is ironic, it just does not seem to be the case that the speaker is implicitly dissociating herself from the belief represented by *the proposition expressed* by her utterance. In (16) the proposition expressed represents a belief the speaker endorses. Because of this, some have argued that similar cases cannot be accounted for by the echoic view "because the speaker does not dissociate herself

from the opinion echoed" (Giora 1995: 247).

I don't think that this type of example (also considered by Gibbs & O'Brien 1991 and Curcó 1995, 1996a) proves the echoic view of irony wrong, but such cases certainly show that it needs some reformulation so that its claims are made clearer and more specific.

Imagine that it is a habit of the hearer to get distracted when the speaker addresses him, or to dismiss her opinions. Suppose as well that, to the speaker's surprise, on this specific occasion the hearer has been particularly attentive to what the speaker had to say and has even replied 'I think you're right. Let's do as you suggest' In such a scenario, a speaker uttering (16) endorses the proposition expressed by her utterance and *also* all the strong implicatures to which it gives rise, for instance, the implicated conclusion that she is now pleased that the hearer has paid attention to her, represented by (17).

(17) The speaker is now pleased by the attention the hearer has paid her.

Normally, (17) would be derived from the utterance and the contextual assumption in (18).

(18) The hearer is paying attention to what the speaker is saying

Imagine however a different scenario: one where the speaker is trying to get a point across and the hearer is overtly concentrating on something else. She utters (16). In this case, the utterance does not carry the implicature that she is now pleased that the hearer has paid attention to her. For one thing, (18) is not manifest in the context of interpretation.

The difference between situations where (16) is ironic and situations where it is not hinges on two related factors: a) whether the speaker dissociates herself not from the content of the proposition expressed by the utterance, but from the implicatures to which the utterance would normally give rise, and b) the kind of contextual assumptions that are at stake in interpreting the utterance.

The view of irony where the target of the echo is taken to be the opinion represented by the proposition expressed by the utterance is too narrow. But this is not what the first requirement on irony necessarily demands. The first requirement of irony is not that the target of the echo (that from which the speaker dissociates) should be the proposition expressed, but only that the proposition expressed by the utterance should *interpretively resemble a thought of someone other than the speaker at the time of utterance*. From this it does not follow that *the target* of the implicitly expressed dissociation characteristic of irony should be *the content of the proposition expressed* itself, as the requirement is often interpreted. As I will show, an ironic speaker who uses an utterance interpretively can be expressing an attitude of dissociation from any of the range of the assumptions that the utterance makes strongly mutually manifest, not only -and not necessarily- from the proposition expressed by his utterance. Whether a hearer will search for the implicit expression of such an attitude depends crucially on the type of assumptions that are mutually manifest to the speaker and the audience, which hinges on the factor mentioned in (b) above. In particular, it is crucial whether a hearer finds some contradiction like the ones I have described above.

In cases where (16) is not ironic, its main relevance lies in the proposition it

expresses, given that adequate contextual effects can be derived from merely combining it with the context. When (16) is ironic, it does not carry the implicature that the speaker is now pleased that the hearer has paid attention to her. For one thing, (18), from which it is normally derived, is not mutually manifest in the context of interpretation. Not only this, but the context is not, as it were, neutral in this respect. The negation of (18), represented by (19), is (maybe only weakly) mutually manifest.

(19) The hearer is not paying attention to what the speaker is saying

In producing (16), the speaker increases suddenly the relative mutual manifestness of (19). What an ironic speaker would be dissociating from in ironic cases is the assumption in (18) and, consequently, the otherwise potential implicature in (17).

It is worth remarking that without the retrieval of the dissociative attitude, the hearer will not recover the optimally relevant interpretation intended by the speaker. But what indicators of the expression of such attitude are available to the hearer?

Speakers addressing an audience normally expect to receive attention. That is, (18) should standardly be mutually manifest, if only weakly, as it is a generally taken for granted assumption. (18) functions as the equivalent of the target assumption in the humorous cases. By uttering (16), the speaker manages to increase the mutual manifestness of (19), which works as the equivalent of the key assumption in the examples discussed in chapter seven. The mutual manifestness of (19) before (16) is uttered is most likely not strong. A great deal of the relevance of the utterance lies in its suddenly increasing the relative mutual manifestness of (19) and communicating that it is relevant in its own right. Consequently, the retrieval of the attitude of

dissociation towards both (18) and the associated implicature in (19) is made possible.

The main relevance of the utterance lies therefore in two aspects: the sudden increase in the manifestness of a contextual assumption, and the implicit expression of a dissociative attitude. The first feature provides a clue for retrieving the second.

So, we need to modify slightly the echoic view to acknowledge that the opinions echoed by the utterance need not be those represented by the content of the proposition it expresses. One of the points I want to make in this chapter is that the target of an echoic utterance does not always lie within the content or the linguistic properties of the proposition it expresses. I am arguing that an echoic utterance can have as its target the semantic content of one or more of its implicatures, and even the semantic content of an assumption that the utterance makes suddenly strongly mutually manifest, as the humorous cases I discussed above reveal.

It also seems that the issue of the degree of manifestness of contextual assumptions needs to be addressed in more detail, as it clearly plays a key role in interpretation, in particular, in the recovery of the implicitly expressed dissociative attitude.

I believe that the source of the main relevance of an utterance, as well as the sudden changes in the relative mutual manifestness of contextual assumptions of the kind I have discussed, are central features of verbal humour and wit.

4. Dissociation, irony and humour

Before drawing this chapter to a close, let me make a few last remarks about the

relation between irony and humour.

I have argued that humour is to a large extent a matter of implicitly questioning some aspect in the world -often an attributable thought- through the implicit expression of a dissociative attitude to it. The thought in question is often weakly mutually manifest in the context ^{of} interpretation, and hearers usually get sudden access to it as a consequence of some propositional clash they encounter in the process of interpretation. Sometimes, as in the cases of irony, this thought is represented by either the proposition expressed by the utterance, or one of its potential or actual implicatures. The dissociative attitude the speaker expresses implicitly may refer to any of these. I have looked in detail at some of the specific mechanisms involved in generating humorous effects, and I have made specific reference to cases of metaphor and irony.

In the previous chapter I made an attempt to outline one of the aspects along which poetic and humorous metaphors probably differ: the extent to which the implicatures of a metaphoric utterance contribute their own conditions to the description of certain emotions in terms of beliefs and desires. Irony, of course, is not always humorous. It seems to me that at least a partial account of what distinguishes the humorous cases from the non-humorous ones can be sought along similar lines. What is common to all cases of irony is the implicit expression of the speaker's dissociative attitude from some attributed thought, represented by the proposition expressed by the utterance, or by any of its implicatures. Now the reasons for dissociating oneself from a thought or an utterance, actual or potential, are numerous. The more emotional these reasons are,

and the more they contribute to the main relevance of the utterance, the less likely the possibility of a humorous interpretation will be. This seems to be a more general point about humorous interpretations at large.

Conclusions

In this thesis I have advocated an approach to the study of verbal humour based on cognitive pragmatics. I argued that humour is not a property either of the linguistic code or of texts. Although some verbal humour may arise strictly from the playful manipulation of accidental characteristics of the linguistic code, verbal humour is not, in general, inherent in the features of the language system, but is created by exploiting the inferential mechanisms we employ in interpreting utterances. And although texts that people tend to consider humorous may exhibit certain distinctive structural features, humorous effects are not to be found *in* this structure. Rather, they result *from* the type of mental representations an audience is led to entertain during the interpretation of such texts and discourses, together with the specific ways in which these mental representations are manipulated during utterance processing.

Uncontroversial as the above observation might appear, it is not one standardly made in the contemporary literature on verbal humour. I have shown how most current accounts are oriented precisely in the opposite direction from that adopted here. In Chapter 2 I considered Greimas's attempt to account for interpretation options as deriving fully from distinctive units of signification present *in* the text and its co-text, and I looked at the ways in which several authors have tried to apply his model to the analysis of verbal humour. In Chapters 3 and 4 I showed how this idea is also present in approaches that regard themselves as pragmatic. For some, the code-nature of the linguistic system can be extended to communication, and the distinction

between semantics and pragmatics blurs (e.g. the tradition in humour studies initiated by Victor Raskin). For others, the central task of a theory of verbal humour is to find the 'grammar' of humorous texts (e.g. Giora 1991, 1996, Raskin 1985). All of them are led to conclude that verbal humour is deviant in nature, and that it is regulated by the operation of rules and principles that are essentially different from those that apply to non-humorous discourse. I hope to have exposed both the limitations of these views, and their unwarranted conclusions.

I have argued that the process that guides humorous discourse is also guided by the search for consistency with the principle of relevance. Not only are humorous utterances interpreted according to the same principles as non-humorous ones, but it is precisely because of this that certain combinations of mental representations and inferential patterns, which seem to be quite distinctive of the creation of humorous effects, can arise in the minds of hearers. So, there is no special humour competence, as some have suggested. All there is in the minds of speakers and hearers when it comes to verbal humour is the certainty of communicators that their addressees will try to interpret utterances as consistent with the principle of relevance. This in turn guarantees that certain representations will be accessed, that particular inferential patterns will be instantiated, and that the hearer will retrieve the intended humorous effects.

With regard to these representations and 'patterns', I began this thesis by drawing attention to the various currents in the philosophy and psychology of humour, and I pointed out the very salient role that several variations on a general notion of "incongruity" play in most current accounts. Throughout this thesis I have argued that most studies of verbal humour in this tradition have taken incongruity to be the core

and essence of humour (recall Mooreall's assertion that 'amusement is the enjoyment of incongruity'), while in fact, leading a hearer to entertain the incongruous is often a device exploited to convey implicitly certain attitudes towards specific contextual assumptions. It is thus a means and not an end in itself, a mechanism used to generate a humorous effect, but not the object of the humorous experience.

Much humour, I suggested, involves implicitly calling into question particular taken for granted assumptions. Leading the hearer to entertain two contradictory propositional forms, for instance, is a device to help him recover the speaker's dissociative attitude, implicitly communicated. Whenever the search for an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance leads a hearer to entertain incongruous propositional forms, and he is unable to reject either of them, he will recognise the incongruity as arising from ostension, and will hence search for additional cognitive effects. To eliminate the contradiction, his capability to attribute (false) beliefs and intentions to others needs to be set in motion. He can thus embed the contradictory propositional forms in metarepresentations of different orders. The derivation of humorous effects most likely involves carrying out inferences that take as premises metarepresentations embedding the clashing propositions, where the metarepresentations involved are of a relatively high order. Lower metarepresentational orders presumably produce non-humorous interpretations, as argued in Chapter 7. This thesis, however, only outlines this view. If it is on the right track, then further research along these lines should be able to provide more explicit and detailed accounts of the precise ways in which this process operates, and why it is that human beings alone possess the capacity to experience humour.

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