

## On the Echoic Nature of Irony

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*This paper deals with the analysis of irony in advertising slogans. Compared with the interest aroused by punning and its derivatives, this figure of speech has received little attention in the domain of advertising. However, the expressive power of irony is a highly useful tool in helping advertisers to change the audience's attitude towards the product or service. The study examines irony from a twofold perspective. On the one hand, it follows classical rhetoric, an approach which finds its justification in the persuasive aim of advertising language. Yet, this traditional trend suffers from some deficiencies. In order to overcome them, a broader perspective will be adopted. The option chosen is Sperber & Wilson's Relevance Theory, a framework which provides the appropriate tools to characterise irony and to reflect on its consequences for communication.*

## 1. Introduction

Consider the following quotation taken from, to my knowledge, the most recent publication on the language of advertising:

Make no mistake: advertising works. However, as a culture, we tend to be aloof and not a little snooty about advertisements, pretending that, while they may work on some people, they don't work on us, and dismissing advertising language as trite discourse written for the uneducated. (Goddard 1998:2)

These are the words with which Angela Goddard opens up the introduction to her book. Her wish is to alert readers on the big influence that adverts have on our daily lives. Precisely because advertising is all around us we do not pause to think about its nature as a form of discourse, as a system of language use. But I venture to go even further and claim that while many books have looked at advertising, fewer have paid any detailed attention to how messages are constructed from language.

It is undeniable that images are powerful attention-seeking devices, nevertheless, advertisers also want to make their texts capture our attention. Bearing all these conditions in mind it is not difficult to see why written advertisements have to compete not only with

each other but also with audiovisual messages. And it is precisely this that makes it interesting to have a look at how copywriters find ways to shout at us from the page.

Most of the scholars (Cook 1992; Tanaka 1994) who have devoted their work to the study of the language of advertising have concentrated on punning and its derivatives. I consider, however, that the language of advertising is supported on a wide persuasive system within which plays on words are only one of its possible manifestations.

Both the concepts of persuasion and rhetoric are not gratuitous choices. I firmly believe that advertising's first aim is to change the audience's attitude toward the product or service on offer, as a consequence the writer of the message needs to adopt a linguistic strategy that bears some ponderable results.

This paper leaves punning aside to deal instead with the persuasive power of irony, a figure of speech that is far from common in the linguistic analysis of this particular field of communication. Perhaps the reason for this lack of interest lies in its somewhat poor manifestation: examples of ironic slogans are not easy to find. However, it is my opinion that in this case, the expressive power and hence the value of irony as a persuasive strategy very much depend on the limited use of this figure.

## 2. Methodological issues

### 2.1. *Evaluating approaches to irony*

Irony may be regarded as one of the biggest issues in traditional rhetoric. In his manual of classical rhetoric, Lausberg (1966: 582) makes two considerations when he comes to the study of irony. Firstly, this figure could be defined as the expression of one thing by means of a word that means its opposite. Hence, the author establishes a relationship between irony and opposition or contradiction. Secondly, Lausberg is also concerned with the way in which the

choice of this particular form of expression affects both speaker and listener, in that the former seems to be specially aware of its persuasive power, and the latter would be impressed by an orator who is so sure of himself.

For the time being I would like to concentrate on point one, that is, on Lausberg's definition of irony and some of its consequences. Following Blakemore (1993: 165), this traditional account of irony presents certain difficulties. On the one hand, it fails to capture the indeterminacy that surrounds ironic utterances. The speaker of (1) will not be understood to be conveying the proposition in (2):

- (1) (Peter has just made an obvious, thus unnecessary, remark)  
John: Peter's always so witty!  
(2) Peter is not a witty fellow.

Rather we would like to argue that in uttering (1), John intends to communicate a wide array of implicatures that go well beyond the proposition shown in (2). This line of reasoning, however, cannot be pursued within the limited scope of the classical approach.

On the other hand, there exist a good number of ironic utterances that do not conform to this analysis. Let us take an example from Blakemore (1993: 163) to make the point clearer.

- (3) Did you remember to water the garden?

The question in (3) cannot be taken as meaning the opposite of what it literally means, and yet, the author remarks, produced on a very rainy day, it would be interpreted as ironic.

An attempt at overcoming these problems consists in analysing irony in terms of the notion of «interpretive resemblance», and specially in the notion of echoic use. To Sperber & Wilson (1990), every utterance is an interpretation of the thought that the speaker wishes to communicate. But a thought is a representation too, and as

such it may be presented as an interpretation of another speaker's thought. Again as these authors have shown, an utterance which is intended as an interpretation is not simply relevant in virtue of the fact that it informs that someone said or thought something, rather in reporting someone's thoughts a speaker may indicate his own attitude towards them. Sperber & Wilson call an utterance that is relevant in this way echoic.

In this new context it seems clear that the relevant factor to analyse irony is not opposition but the echoic use. We are now in a good position to examine Sperber & Wilson's (1990: 240) proposal for the study of irony:

First, on a recognition of the utterance as echoic; second, on an identification of the source of the opinion echoed; and third, on a recognition that the speaker's attitude to the opinion echoed is one of rejection or disapproval.

My view of irony endorses Sperber & Wilson's, thus I am going to devote some time to examine the specifics of this definition, a prior step to analyse its use in the language of advertising.

1) Echoic nature.

The relevance of the echoic utterance lies in the information it gives about the speaker's attitude towards the attributed thought. This is important since the speaker informs the hearer that he has in his mind someone else's thoughts, and in expressing them he shows his attitude.

2) Identifying the source of the opinion echoed.

An ironic utterance is not necessarily an interpretation of a thought that can be attributed to any specific person, but rather an interpretation of the kind of thought that the speaker believes some people might have.

3) Reprobatory or disapproving nature.

As Sperber & Wilson note, irony is related to rejection. By dissociating himself from the opinion echoed, the speaker indicates that he does not hold it himself. Indeed, it may be obvious in the circumstances that he believes the opposite of the opinion echoed.

These three characteristics acquire special features within the language of advertising. It is my suggestion that the addressee acknowledges an advertising message as ironic when:

a) The set of the propositions activated by such a message belongs to the common ground of the receiver's pragmatic competence.

b) This set of activated propositions clashes with some of the presuppositions that belong to the common ground of his advertising competence.

The interpretation of advertising irony comprises two steps. The first one, what I have called «a», is represented by the confirmation of a belief in which the reader can find both the echoic nature of the message and the identification of the source of opinion. Generally, in my examples the opinion echoed is not an individual thought, rather it is a belief held by a community. During this initial stage, the addresser appears to endorse the proposition contained in the message, a belief that, nevertheless, reflects the consumer's experience about the real worth of the products (i.e. washing powder does not wash that clean; what banks are really interested in is our money, in spite of their emphasis on personal attention, etc.). The reader then feels that the advertiser agrees with him, when in fact the proposition only shows a partial truth.

Parallely, the reader knows that this is not the way advertising works. The aim of advertising is to persuade in order to make the addressee change his attitude and buy the product on offer. But when the ad echoes a commonly held opinion that usually goes against the advertiser's interest, it is obvious that the slogan is not complying with the requirements it should.

There is then a clash. The addressee's experience as receiver of advertising messages indicates him that an addresser does not pay a considerable amount of money for a slogan that damages his image. This fact makes the reader uneasy, raises his suspicion and puts him on alert. This is what I mean by part «b» in my definition.

I would like to put forward the hypothesis that advertising irony includes a last characteristic. The disconfirmation effect takes place when the reader comes across a word or an expression that belongs either to the slogan itself or to the bodytext. This element usually discloses a garden-path effect, i.e., gives way to a reconsideration of a slogan that initially was assigned a wrong interpretation. In this sense, I claim that the concept of garden-path has a wider application than the one originally due to Bever (1970). Thus meanings of lexical items and not only constituent grouping can be responsible for a garden-path effect. Ultimately then, the correct interpretation of the initially echoic utterance will be as the addresser's own opinion.

This regression effect has its origin in the presence of information which is not available from the beginning. On the contrary, what was initially relevant (what the reader identifies as his opinion and that the addresser seems to endorse) turns out to be irrelevant when it is processed in the light of the new circumstances. If we assume this explanation of ironic slogans, it is obvious that the reader must invest a great deal of processing effort. However, this effort is rewarded by extra contextual effects.

The notion of contextual effect is deeply imbricated in Sperber & Wilson's theory, as such it represents a key feature of indirect communication. In agreement with the authors, contextual effects can be obtained in three different ways: i) contextual implication: further information that cannot be deduced from either existing assumptions or the new information alone; ii) strengthening of existing assumptions; contradiction and elimination of old assumptions.

The processing effort needed to derive contextual effects is crucial. This leads to the idea that relevance is a matter of degree: the

greater the contextual effects of a newly presented item of information, the more relevant it is.

## *2.2. Irony, indirect communication and politeness*

I would like to start this section with an aspect which has been left behind, namely, the connection Lausberg established between the use of irony and the effect it has in both speaker and listener. The author remarks that this figure of speech is likely to impress the listener since it is considered as a demonstration of self confidence by the orator. Simultaneously, the speaker's intention is to reject a third party's beliefs. Unfortunately, the author does not develop these ideas any further, however, I think that the framework adopted in this paper offers the possibility of dealing with these points in some depth.

The speaker of an ironic utterance does not simply reject the opinion that his utterance echoes, but he usually rejects it with scorn or makes fun of it. Therefore, it can arguably be said that the addresser adopts an attitude of superiority. Parallely, Sperber & Wilson's theory predicts that most ironies will have victims, at least in the sense that an implicit victim is whoever (mistakenly) believes the echoed proposition (or holds the expectation).

Given these premises one would be tempted to conclude that irony is offensive, or either that it involves aggression. Nevertheless, this is not the case for the existent connection between irony and indirect communication on the one hand, and irony and politeness on the other.

Since there is always more than one way to say or write something, we cannot view the writer's choice of style independently of the message he wishes to convey, thus his decision to express his attitude implicitly by means of an echoic utterance contributes to the interpretation of such utterance. As Blakemore (1993: 171), notes the notion of interpretation is not equivalent to a specific set of propositions that the speaker intended to communicate, it may well in-



clude a whole range of propositions no single one of which is particularly meant. Thus while it may be going too far to characterise irony as an attempt to ridicule the reader (or a third party) for entertaining such a thought —given that the notion of ridicule is a very vague one, it does seem reasonable to view irony at least as an attempt to produce as much impact on the reader as possible (Chen & Houlette 1990).

The impact (psychological, rhetorical or otherwise) is the result of relying on implicatures to communicate. Irony strikes a fine balance between strong and weak communication because the addresser manages to strongly communicate some assumptions, but at the same time he weakly implicates a range of contextual effects than can be derived from these assumptions. The immediate consequence is that the addressee is encouraged to think along certain lines without necessarily coming to any specific conclusion; to put it differently, the advertiser places on the reader a great deal of responsibility for deriving certain implicatures.

As irony relies so much on implicatures it can be regarded as an indirect form of communication. Further, an addresser who leaves his attitude implicit knows that he shares with the addressee certain assumptions (common beliefs) which will be accessible without being made explicit. In other words, using Jorgensen's (1996) terminology, the writer of an ironic utterance transmits a level of complicity. For such communication to be successful, the addresser has to estimate the reader's contextual resources. That is, he will leave his attitude implicit only if he believes that the reader has access to a context in which it can be identified with less effort than would be needed to process an explicit statement. The writer needs to help his reader in obtaining contextual effects.

Once the link between irony and indirect communication has been examined, I would like to turn to the relationship between irony and politeness. Leech (1983), possibly following Lakoff (1977), was one of the first authors to relate irony and politeness. In

fact, he makes his principle of irony depend on the politeness principle. I will use Brown & Levinson's (1987) model of politeness in my subsequent analysis, as it is generally believed to be more fully-fledged than its competitors, such as Lakoff (1977) and Leech (1983).

The need to be polite has been assumed to be a central social and very often institutionalised force governing people's linguistic behaviour. Brown & Levinson propose that adult members of societies wish to maintain their face, which is characterised as either negative or positive. A distinction can be drawn about not being polite and being ironic in that when a speaker goes against politeness he breaks the friendly relationship with the hearer, whereas the choice of irony exploits politeness. Brown & Levinson insist that irony has a positive face in that it permits aggression to manifest itself in a less dangerous form than direct criticism, insults, threats, and so on. While an insult may lead to counter-insult and hence to conflict, an ironic remark combines the art of attack with a form of self-defence. In Leech's (1983: 144) words «irony is a friendly way of being offensive».

In advertising, the relationship between advertiser/consumer can be looked at in the following way: the advertiser may be regarded as the one holding power in communication, since he is the one who decides to issue a certain message and its terms (he chooses to be ironic, for instance). At the other end, we find a consumer weary of so many campaigns with the sole aim of selling products or services (in fact Bex (1996) notes that the receiver of an advertising message will recognise it for its goal, that is, selling). Moreover, the consumer is upset about the content of advertising slogans, in that the promise of a wonderful world, ever lasting beauty or happiness is far from real.

This archetypical consumer has plenty of reasons to complain, but it happens that given the characteristics of advertising communication he cannot express himself. Ironically enough, it is the adverti-

ser, making use of the power referred to above, who uses his messages to complain about the consumer's attitude. His complaint is a kind of threat but since it is hidden in irony, the feelings of unfriendliness are highly reduced. The reader is not scorned, on the contrary criticism is mollified. The choice of this particular form of style is rewarding for the writer because it has the effect of presenting him as someone positive, that is, irony implies that he is complaining in a trivial way, he is not being too serious about what he says, thus he does not mean to be too severe.

If we agree that is so, irony in advertising would contribute to overcome the sometimes hostile relation between advertiser and consumer.

### 3. The analysis

Although I have already made clear that my approach to the study of irony dissents from tradition, I would like to begin with the analysis of an example that fits perfectly into the classical definition. I hope that such a decision will help to illustrate the difference between the two types of irony, at the same time that permits to appreciate the reasons why the echoic approach is advertisers' preferred option.

(3) Tight capital Shrinking resources. Growing competition.

What a great business climate. <Honeywell> *The Economist* 29th February 1992.

In classical rhetoric an expression such as this is regarded as ironic owing to the existing contradiction between the situation the reader is presented with (*tight capital, shrinking resources, growing competition*) and the consequence which derives from it (*a great business climate*). Logically, that conclusion cannot be drawn from the premises given, unless the item *great* is sarcastically understood, that is, the writer means the opposite of what he says.

Most importantly we must think about the advertiser's motivation in deciding on such a message. In fact, it heavily relies on the reader's deriving weak implicatures. What we can consider the first part of the slogan is made up of three parallel phrases with two words each, whose accentuation pattern follows this schema:

´            ´ — —  
´ —        — ´ —  
´ —        — — ´ —

Observe how rhythm is achieved by displacement of the accent from the first syllable (*capital*), to the second (*resources*) and finally to the third (*competition*). Moreover, the qualities denoted by the adjectives could symbolise the pressures businessmen work under. Each of these pressures refers to a different spatial situation: while *tight* acts around something, *shrinking* does so from top to bottom, and finally *growing* bears pressure from bottom to top.

The spatial tension together with the formal disposition of the items in the slogan give way to an unfavourable atmosphere and emphasise a feeling of uneasiness and despair. In the middle of so desperate a situation *Honeywell* (note the name!) comes up to restore order. The message that the writer intends the reader to recover is this: with so many difficulties help is absolutely necessary to succeed.

This slogan clearly shows the advantages that can derive from covert communication (see Tanaka (1994) for a full treatment of covert communication in advertising), the reader's responsibility for recovering the meaning intended by the addresser, the importance of the structure, as well as the careful disposition of lexical items. However, these characteristics are not private of irony as a linguistic resource but something inherent to what we can rightfully call the rhetoric of advertising.

Thus the examples that come next will also participate of these features to a greater or lesser extent, but they will differ from this

particular slogan in one important respect, namely, in that they do show a clash between those propositions that conform the reader's pragmatic competence and those others that make up his advertising competence (his knowledge as receiver of advertising messages). Irony conceived in these terms turns out to be much more persuasive than the possibilities just put forward by the example with which we started this section.

Let us examine the following slogan:

(4) Raising environmental standards is not part of our job.

It's our whole business. <Waste Management International plc.> *The Economist* 10th September 1994.

The slogan appears neatly divided into two parts each of which is represented by a sentence. The first sentence can be regarded as echoing most companies' true beliefs about environmental care: they are deeply concerned with making money even though that means not protecting our forests, rivers, and so on. But obviously, nobody would openly admit such a fact. When a reader finds this claim he feels as if the writer has finally surrendered, at the same time that he knows that the claim is suspicious.

Indeed suspicion is confirmed in the second sentence where the addressee discovers a company completely committed to the environmental cause.

Consider next:

(5) «Menopause is something that women shouldn't talk about». <Estraderm> *Family Circle* 28th June 1994.

This sentence between inverted commas is in fact a quotation, it echoes an attitude about a physiological process that has been considered taboo. However, nowadays it is strange to find a slogan sup-

porting such a belief because being looked at from a new perspective many of the old taboos no longer exist.

This clash compels the reader to move to the bodytext where more information is available. The very beginning of this part of the advertisement admits that «maybe this was true in our mother's time. But today all kinds of women are learning everything they can about menopause. And, yes, talking about it». The purpose of the advertiser then is not to endorse the opinion stated in the ad but rather to move women to action, to make them talk with their doctors in order to find out whether *Estraderm* treatment can help them cope with this natural change in their lives.

In the two examples so far examined, the reader goes through a first moment of confirmation of a belief, immediately followed by a disconfirmation step. It is this second stage that I regard as having a garden-path effect, since the first interpretation needs to be abandoned in favour of a more suitable one. As previously indicated, my consideration of this parsing effect differs from usual practice, but I think its justification lies in that the reader initially interprets something that requires a second interpretation necessarily disqualifying the first one.

The analysis of new examples will permit a better appreciation of this claim:

(6) Most people think that osteoporosis is something that happens to your mother.

They're right. <PPP healthcare> *She* November 1997.

Again the slogan appears splitted up into two parts. The first echoes «most people's thought», an opinion that according to the second part of the advert seems to be endorsed by the advertiser. There is a slight complication, though. The noun phrase *your mother* is generically understood as «one's mother», by extension, the average reader's mother. But as the slogan is accompanied by a picture of a

young woman holding a baby, it is her the most immediate referent of the noun phrase. The problem is that osteoporosis is not usually associated with such young women. Logically, the reader guided by a search for coherence reads the bodytext only to discover that

Most people only know two things about osteoporosis —and they're both wrong. They think that it only affects older women. And that they don't need to worry about it. (...) At PPP healthcare we know that osteoporosis is a condition that matters to all women.

Given this new information, the reader is able to interpret the slogan correctly, that is, to discover the writer's intention, which is far from perpetuating a wrong common belief.

Let us examine the next example:

(7) Debbie Warden doesn't care if your system is made up of HP, IBM, Microsoft, Novell or whatever.  
She'll make it work. <Hewlett Packard> *The Economist* 1st October 1994.

Once more the slogan contains two parts represented by two sentences, the first can be considered to have echoic nature, while the second may be regarded as being responsible for a disconfirmation effect.

The proper noun, Debbie Warden, picks up as referent the woman shown in the picture that completes the advertisement. She is the one who *doesn't care*, a rather negative expression showing lack of interest about something highly complex (software, hardware or network) but that is very important for *you* (reader of *The Economist*, for instance). In fact, it could be argued that 'consumers' of technology are familiar with this lack of interest when it comes to solve some of the great many difficulties they have to face with their systems.

Yet it sounds strange that an advert echoes the consumer's feelings, since it often comes in the form of solution. Because of this

clash between what the reader finds and his knowledge about what he should find, he is moved to proceed in his reading, and thus he comes across the second part of the ad. The second sentence disconfirms the initial interpretation thus creating a garden-path effect.

The slogans that follow obey the same structural pattern:

(8) If you want to stay warm this winter, spend it around Rio. <Glen> *She* November 1997.

(9) If you thought sugar was made in manufacturing plants, you were right. *She* April 1991.

In (8), the beginning of the conditional sentence opens up expectations about what is to follow: to keep warm one needs heat, comfortable clothes, etc. But instead of this solution it is suggested that the reader should «spend winter around Rio», which is interpreted as going over to Brazil (where instead of the European winter one can find summer). Obviously, this solution is many people's dream, hence its echoic nature; the thing is that the ad is not signed by a travel agency or an airliner but by *Glen*, a trademark for electric heating, being *Rio* the name of its latest model of radiators.

The trademark has been responsible for the garden-path effect of the ironic utterance, which in this particular example made use of punning. We can wonder whether the processing effort is worth while. It is very useful indeed because the weak implicatures activated by the Brazilian summer (happy days, enjoyable weather, etc.) are associated now with the electric radiator. The easily bought product inherits the characteristics of a place reserved to a privileged few.

Double meaning is also the key to the slogan in (9). Its beginning (*If you thought ...*) makes quite clear its echoic status: in a modern world invaded by technology it may be thought that sugar is obtained from industrial companies. However, this echoic interpretation does not fit in with the drawings of flowers, bears, bees, etc.



that illustrate the page. To solve the inconsistency, the reader will move to the bodytext where he is informed that sugar is one hundred per cent a natural product. Therefore the echoic interpretation (based on the ambiguity of the term *plants*) has to be discarded. The addresser is softly scorned for entertaining such a thought.

The example that follows does equally make use of conditional sentences:

(10) If you're looking for fluff, try your dryer.  
If you want something to put you to sleep, get some warm milk.  
If you want something tame, visit a pet store.  
Harlequin. Not the same old story. *Family Circle* 28th June 1994.

The advertisement can be regarded as containing four sentences which in the source quoted appear in four different pages. The first three can be considered echoic in that they reflect common knowledge or beliefs (i.e. popular tradition has it that some warm milk helps put one to sleep, etc.). These opinions that the writer seems to endorse do not fit well within the advertising framework, since it is difficult to see how they fulfill the ultimate function of selling, on the contrary, the addressee (*you*) is treated carelessly.

Given this state of affairs, the reader comes to the last part of the ad where he finds the expression *not the same old story*, which implies that the writer rejects the opinions stated, provoking a garden-path effect. The product on offer, *Harlequin*, supposedly has fluff, helps you to go to sleep and is something tame; but the addresser wants that these qualities be understood in a new context (that of romantic novels), which no doubt makes the reader wring many other weak inferences.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

In this paper, Sperber & Wilson's concept of echoic irony has been adapted to the language of advertising. The echoic dimension

is particularly relevant in this specific field of expression since it produces a propositional clash between the propositions that conform the addressee's pragmatic competence and those that make up his competence as receiver of advertisements. The expressive impact of such a clash has a slightly negative consequence for the analyser, because it very much lies in a scarcity of examples. Despite this drawback, I hope to have made clear that irony's persuasive power rests on its connection with politeness on the one hand, and its characterisation as indirect communication on the other. Irony is not offensive, on the contrary, it suggests criticism mollified by an understanding and reasonable addresser.

Another important aspect that has been highlighted is the processing effort involved in the interpretation of these slogans. Initially, the reader goes through a confirmation stage, but the propositional clash impels him to look for more information, which in fact provokes a garden-path effect. This additional information can be contained in the slogan itself (it has been observed how most slogans appear neatly divided into two parts) or in the bodytext, which implies directing the reader to a section of the advert not directly appealing.

The effort the reader invests is doubly rewarding. Firstly for the reader himself, because it yields extra contextual effects; secondly for the copywriter, since it guarantees the addressee's attention and involvement in a message that will not pass unnoticed.

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