

# IRONY IN LINGUISTICS AND LITERARY THEORY: TOWARDS A SYNTHETIC APPROACH

## IRONÍA EN LINGÜÍSTICA Y EN TEORÍA LITERARIA: HACIA UN ACERCAMIENTO SINTÉTICO

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### **Abstract**

Irony has been approached by different disciplines concerned with language. The more socio-historical approach taken by literary theorists contrasts with the more analytical bias of linguistic accounts. A comparative study of both perspectives reveals the need to enhance mutual cross-disciplinary dialogue with a view to producing a constructive integrated perspective. Following this premise, this paper puts forward an approach that combines insights from inferential pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, and literary theory. It acknowledges the centrality of the relevance-theoretic notion of echo, taken as a cognitive mechanism rather than just as a pragmatic phenomenon. In this view, irony arises from the clash between an echoed and an observed scenario, which reveals the speaker's attitude. The construction of the former is constrained by socio-cultural, communicative, and personal factors. This view allows for a distinction between different types of ironist (communicator) and interpreter (addressee), a study of their roles in the ironic event, and a classification of echoed scenarios from the standpoint of their grounding in an array of personal and presumed interpersonal beliefs, and in socio-cultural stereotypes. It also allows for a correlation between irony types and echoed scenario types and reveals the gradable character of the pragmatic felicity of the ironic act.

**Keywords:** irony, cognitive linguistics, literary theory, pragmatics, synthetic approach.

## Resumen

Muchas disciplinas relacionadas con el lenguaje han abordado la ironía. El abordaje literario, de corte más socio-histórico, contrasta con los estudios lingüísticos, más analíticos. Un estudio comparado revela la necesidad de que se fomente un diálogo interdisciplinar para elaborar una perspectiva integrada y constructiva. Partiendo de esta premisa, el presente artículo presenta un enfoque que combina elementos de la pragmática inferencial, la lingüística cognitiva y la teoría literaria. Reconoce el eco como una noción relevante y lo estudia como un mecanismo cognitivo en vez de como un simple fenómeno pragmático. Desde esta perspectiva, el componente actitudinal de la ironía emerge de un choque entre un escenario observado y otro ecoico, este último condicionado por factores socioculturales, comunicativos y personales. Esta perspectiva permite diferenciar varios tipos de ironista (comunicador) e intérprete (receptor) y sus distintos roles dentro del acto irónico, así como establecer una clasificación de escenarios ecoicos basada en la variedad de creencias personales, presunciones interpersonales y estereotipos culturales. También genera una correlación entre tipos de ironía y tipos de escenarios ecoicos y revela el carácter graduable de felicidad pragmática que produce el acto irónico.

**Palabras clave:** ironía, lingüística cognitiva, teoría literaria, pragmática, enfoque sintético.

## 1. Introduction

One morning, a man says to his wife: *Darling, I think tomorrow is going to be sunny.* However, they wake up the next morning and the wife looks through the window and observes it is raining. She then says: *Yes, darling, you were right, it is such a sunny day.* The situation here described constitutes a basic example of irony.

Since ancient times, the study of irony has been one of the concerns of rhetoric and philosophy (Preminger and Brogan 1993; see also Booth 1974; Kaufer 1977; Grimwood 2008). Other disciplines such as literary theory or linguistics have also shown interest in its study, with literature offering a more socio-historical perspective that contrasts with the more strongly analytical approach provided by linguistics.

Within linguistics, irony has received considerably less attention than metaphor or metonymy. It is only recently, with the advent of inferential pragmatics in the wake of Grice's Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975), that irony has become an object of interest in linguistics (see Section 2 below). By contrast, literary theorists have recurrently shown interest in the often-sophisticated use of irony commonly as a

tool to subvert and question the *status quo*. Unfortunately, linguistic theory, including inferential pragmatics, has benefited little from literary studies on irony, perhaps because of the traditional lack of dialogue between linguistics and literary theory (Hussein 2015). This is also the case with literary theory. As a result, there are gaps in each approach.

The present paper claims that these gaps can be mostly filled in by enhancing mutual cross-disciplinary analyses with a view to producing a constructive integrated perspective. Following this premise, this study puts forward an integrated approach to irony that combines insights from pragmatics, such as Pretense Theory (Clark and Gerrig 1984; Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995; Camp 2012; cf. Popa-Wyatt 2014; Barnden 2017) and Relevance Theory (e.g. Wilson 2006, 2009, 2013; Wilson and Sperber 2012; cf. Yus Ramos 2000, 2016a), Cognitive Linguistics and related psycholinguistic approaches (e.g. Colston and O'Brien 2000; Gibbs 2000; Coulson 2005; Pálincás 2014; Ruiz de Mendoza 2017) and literary theory (e.g. Muecke 1970; Booth 1974; Hutcheon 1994; Colebrook 2004; Goff 2007). This approach takes irony as a heavily context-based phenomenon, while acknowledging the centrality of the relevance-theoretic notion of echo, taken as a cognitive mechanism (cf. Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera 2014; Ruiz de Mendoza 2017), rather than just as a pragmatic phenomenon. This approach further postulates a taxonomy of ironists and interpreters that results in an analysis of irony according to the degree of felicity (or perceived success) of its outcome. In view of the analytical needs stated above, the main aim of this study is to propose an integrated account of irony that exploits the symbiotic potential of literary and linguistic studies of irony to provide a richer, more complete account of the phenomenon. The power of this integrated approach will become evident in its application to a selection of examples from every-day and literary uses. Restrictions of space do not allow for the integrated treatment of other aspects of irony, such as its relation to humor (Dynel 2014; Yus Ramos 2016b), politeness (Alba Juez 1995), or its evaluative character (Alba Juez and Attardo 2014). However, the reader will be aware that these aspects of irony are either present in the analysis provided in this paper or at least are consistent with it.

## **2. Literature Overview**

Interest in irony has been uneven throughout history. After the initial interest in Ancient Greece, we have to wait until the Renaissance to witness a new flourishing of the use of irony, epitomized by Elizabethan drama. Then, it is not until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when satire and romantic irony hold sway of the literary panorama, that we find a clear interest on the part of romantic poets such as the Schlegel

brothers, Tieck, Solger, Novalis, satirists such as Lawrence Sterne, and later philosophers such as Kierkegaard. Finally, Postmodernism made of irony its insignia, an omnipresent aura to protest against post-war reality (Hutcheon 1994).

Many literary theorists have endeavored to define irony (e.g. Sedgewick 1935; Thomson 1948; Frye 1957; Muecke 1970; Myers 1977), but the various accounts mostly focus on socio-historical and related contextual issues (e.g. Kierkegaard 1841; Colebrook 2004) rather than break the phenomenon down into components, as linguists have done. Three exceptions are the studies by Muecke (1969, 1970), Booth (1976), and Hutcheon (1994), which provide in-depth literary-oriented theoretical analyses of irony. Muecke (1970) explains irony as a process of coding and decoding inscribed in a context and a co-text that provides the interpreter with the necessary clues for finding the real meaning underlying the ironist's words. On the other hand, Booth (1976) distinguishes between *stable* and *unstable* irony, the former being the type of irony that provides the interpreter with a straightforward answer, while the latter includes those ironies that imply the rejection of the literal meaning but provide no clear answer. This distinction, which seems to run parallel to the one between coded and inferred meaning in linguistics (cf. Givón 2002: 7-16; Panther 2016), is of special importance. While linguists tend to work with simple, clear-cut examples of stable irony, the more sophisticated (unstable) use of irony in literature multiplies its semantic possibilities. Finally, to the previous studies of irony, Hutcheon's (1994) approach adds the premise that the interpretation of irony depends on the context of the interpreter and its interpretive community (see Hutcheon 1994: 18).

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In contrast to the case of literature, linguistic studies of irony, especially in the field of pragmatics, have a much shorter trajectory. The interest of linguistics in figurative language comes hand in hand with the development of the field of pragmatics. Nevertheless, the explanations of irony given by pragmatists diverge. Initially, Grice (1975: 53) explained irony as a "flouting" (i.e. an ostentatious breach) of the conversational maxim of truthfulness (or first maxim of quality) ("do not say that which you believe to be false") within his well-known Cooperative Principle. One weakness of this approach is that figurative language in general breaks the same conversational maxim in the same way. Within pragmatics too, Clark and Gerrig's (1984) Pretense Theory looked at irony from the point of view of the speaker's attitude. Based on Grice's claim that "to be ironical is, among other things, to pretend", these authors argued that irony is a type of pretense (Clark and Gerrig 1984: 121) where the ironist openly feigns an attitude (Clark and Gerrig 1984: 122). Thus, in talking to H (the hearer) ironically, S (the speaker) pretends to be S' speaking to H'. H' is expected to take S' seriously while H is

supposed to understand all the elements in the ironic scene. By contrast, Sperber and Wilson (1995) related irony to the use-mention distinction, drawn from the philosophy of language. To these scholars, the main point of irony is to convey an attitude of dissociation towards a tacitly attributed utterance or thought, which is based on a perceived discrepancy between the way it represents the world and the way things are (Sperber and Wilson 1981, 1990; Wilson and Sperber 1992). Sperber and Wilson (1995) further explained irony as an echoic use of language, that is, an interpretive use of language that requires the hearer to recognize that the speaker is thinking not directly about a state of affairs, but about another utterance or thought.

Grice's explanation of irony has been revised by scholars such as Giora (1995, 1997) and Giora et al. (2007) through the GSH (Graded Salience Hypothesis), which is focused on the processing aspects of the phenomenon (salient meaning is processed first independently of its literal or non-literal status) but no special mention is made of how to distinguish between different figurative uses of language. Contributions to the connection between irony and Speech Act Theory (Brown 1980; Amante 1981; Haverkate 1990; Glucksberg 1995), which remain largely Gricean, are affected by similar problems. Grice's theory has also been challenged by other scholars (e.g. Kaufer 1981; Holdcroft 1983; Mizau 1984). Since then, studies on figurative language have flourished within the cognitive-linguistic approach (Lakoff 1987; Lakoff and Turner 1989; Croft and Cruse 2004; Kövecses 2005; Evans and Green 2006) with some of them devoting attention to irony (e.g. Gibbs 1994, 2012; Ruiz de Mendoza 2014, 2017).

Within Cognitive Linguistics, Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) approach to metaphor as not being exclusive to art but as an integral part of everyday language, has served as the basis for the analysis of other figurative uses of language, including irony (cf. Gibbs 1994). The explanation of irony proposed by Ruiz de Mendoza (2017), which is framed within Cognitive Linguistics, is complementary to Relevance Theory. Ruiz de Mendoza takes the notion of *echo* from Relevance Theory and Sperber and Wilson's emphasis on the speaker's attitude and inserts them into a general account of cognitive modelling. According to Ruiz de Mendoza (2017), irony arises from a clash of scenarios in the mind of the ironist. The ironist builds an echoed scenario that clashes with the observed scenario. The interpreter, in reconstructing such a clash, derives the intended meaning, and the ironist's attitude. We will come back to this approach in 3.1.2, since, as will be shown there, it integrates enough elements from pragmatics and cognition to make it an adequate candidate for an initial exploration of the convergence areas between the literary and linguistic treatments of irony.

### 3. The Synthetic Approach to Irony

One of the areas of convergence between linguistics and literary theory is their common interest in figurative language. The present account brings together compatible ingredients from the linguistic and literary perspectives. On the literary side, this account explores the main uses of irony in literature (Socratic, rhetoric, satirical, dramatic, romantic and postmodern irony). The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century —more particularly the decade of the 1970s onwards— witnessed an increase in the scholarly interest in irony both in linguistics and literary theory. Besides the emergence and consolidation of pragmatics the 70s saw the flourishing of cultural studies in the literary academia. The synthetic approach is derived mainly from accounts of irony that were produced from that period onwards, namely Relevance Theory, Pretense Theory, the cognitive modelling approach, and culture-based studies of this figurative use of language such as Hutcheon's (1994) or Colebrook's (2004), all of them mentioned in the introduction.

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The analyses produced by pragmatics are generally phenomenon-focused. Although they provide highly detailed examinations, their treatment of contextual variation —with some exceptions (e.g. Alba Juez 2001)— is often rather limited. By contrast, literary studies of irony usually give prominence to the ideological and historical underpinnings of the context to the detriment of the internal composition of the phenomenon. The two perspectives can obviously be complemented.

#### 3.1. Theoretical Principles

As noted above, the synthetic approach should benefit from bringing together the more broadly contextual and receiver-oriented nature of literary analysis and the finer-grained analysis provided by linguistics usually characterized by the formulation of high-level generalizations (cf. Goldberg 2002: 327; Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera 2014: 18-19). The following sections build a bridge between the literary and linguistic camps by examining the role of the context and the notion of ironic echo. Then, it enriches the resulting integrated approach by introducing into it an account of ironist and interpreter types and an examination of ironic felicity. The decision to integrate perspectives brings with it a unified approach to irony that levels out the traditional distinction between verbal and situational irony (the latter being characteristic of literature, especially drama). This theoretical move is consistent with the fact that the central ingredients of irony (its echoic nature, its attitudinal ingredient, and the contrast between the echoed and observable situations) are present in all kinds of irony, as will be evidenced in more detail in Section 3.2.

### 3.1.1. *The Context*

In practice, linguistics and literary theory have approached the notion of context in somewhat different ways. Whilst the former has acknowledged its role, especially when dealing with the various strategies to perform ironic acts (cf. the discourse perspective taken by Alba Juez 2001), the studies carried out by the latter have invariably framed irony within cultural and socio-historical parameters. For this reason, the literary analysis of the ironic context may well enrich the comparatively less detailed study carried out by linguistics in this respect.

Linguistics has traditionally viewed the context as an objective external reality that conditions the communicative act. Let us imagine a situation where Mary goes to a party wearing a very short dress. Strongly disliking Mary's appearance, A, one of the attendees, tells B, another attendee, *I just love Mary's dress!* A traditional linguistic study of irony would claim that the context consists of A, B and Mary, and that Mary's ostentatiously short, and thus inappropriate dress, triggers the ironic interpretation. Of course, this view of the context leaves aside the subjectivity implicit in, for instance, the notion of appropriateness and its connection to Mary's appearance. If A has been raised in a culture where short dresses are considered inappropriate, then he will be more likely to dislike Mary's dress. Only if B shares such assumptions will the ironic meaning arise. More recently, inferential pragmatics has developed a broader concept of context as a combination of world knowledge, cultural values, the observable situation, and previous discourse (what Sperber and Wilson (1995) call the interpreter's *cognitive environment*; see also Yus Ramos 2016b for its implications for irony). Still, theorists in this field rarely devote much effort to the systematization of contextual parameters, and when they do (e.g. Alba Juez 2001; Yus 2016a, 2016b) the socio-historical context is not emphasized, as opposed to literary theory.

Cognitive Linguistics has analyzed the context by paying attention to perceptual and cognitive processes. This discipline bases the analysis of the context on the so-called *frames* and *knowledge schemas* (cf. Fillmore 1977, 1982, 1985), whose study enables a systematic analysis of the world-knowledge aspects of communicative acts. Through cognitive modelling, the context is no longer objective and external but a reality that is modelled by our brain. Within Cognitive Linguistics, the ironic context is assumed to include both the observable situation and the ironic remark itself (Ruiz de Mendoza 2017). In other words, irony arises from the differences between what is said and what is real (or thought to be real). Ironists calculate the impact of their ironic utterances by making assumptions about the type of audience. This can be communicatively risky since the interpreters' circumstances and their own conceptualization of the world (including socio-cultural and ideological assumptions) can be hidden from the ironist and only revealed once the irony has

been produced. The Cognitive Linguistic notion of context differs from other linguistic accounts in that it shows interest in how the ironist and the interpreter conceptualize the reality that surrounds the ironic act. However, despite the promising potential of Cognitive Linguistics to explore and incorporate the socio-historical variables of the ironic context, the cognitive approach has not yet developed such a study.

Literary theorists, by contrast, have taken a broad notion of context as an essential element when analyzing irony, as evidenced by the well-known studies carried out by Muecke (1970), Hutcheon (1994), and Colebrook (2004). These literary critics take the notion of context as a set of conventions and individual perceptions. Muecke (1969: 40-41) claims that the interpreter will only achieve the ironic meaning through textual *and* contextual signals and further explains that the ironic act is at all times framed in a socio-cultural context that comprises the communicative act (ironist, interpreter, and text). This author acknowledges the evolution of the concept of irony according to its historical and artistic context, which determines its usage. For instance, the use of irony in Romanticism is marked by the emergence of Germany as the intellectual leader in Europe, which caused a shift in the understanding of irony as an active phenomenon focused on the ironist rather than a passive one, centered on the “victim” of irony (Muecke 1969: 19). An analysis of a romantic poem such as Byron’s *Don Juan* without taking the context into account would fail to explain the motivation and intentions of the ironist or the degree of shared knowledge the interpreter needs. Following this line, Colebrook (2004) carries out a chronological study of irony according to its usage from Plato and Socrates to Postmodernism in an attempt to highlight the extent to which irony is a context-based phenomenon.

In greater depth, Hutcheon (1994: 17) states that the semantic and syntactic dimensions of irony cannot be considered separately from the historical, social or cultural aspects of their context. She further uses the notion of discursive community (Hutcheon 1994: 89) to explain that conventions and cultural perceptions are largely dependent on the cultural and social grouping of people. The cohesion of the discursive community lies in their shared knowledge on certain cultural or social aspects that have direct correlation with the interpretation of ironies as such. In terms of Jauss’s (1982) Theory of Reception, the discursive community would share a similar horizon of expectations. The acknowledgement and consideration of a discursive community is essential to understand the irony in any literary text, from Juvenal to Salman Rushdie. One need only imagine what a contemporary reader of each of the two authors might interpret if put in the place of the other. Obviously, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. Roman reader would be very unlikely to interpret the irony in the Pakistan-inspired magic realism in



*Shame* just as a late 20<sup>th</sup> century or 21<sup>st</sup> century reader will have difficulties detecting irony in Juvenal's satires against social behaviors present in the Roman Empire of his time unless he has previous knowledge about the author and his context.

In spite of the recurrent contextualization of irony in literary studies, the present approach goes one step further by acknowledging the individual context of the interpreter. Literature and linguistics have both emphasized the social character of irony. Nevertheless, literary critics have not yet dealt with the individual contexts both the ironist and the interpreter inevitably bring to the ironic act. The claim made by Reception Theory (Jauss 1982; Iser 1987) about the incompleteness of texts until they are read highlights the individual character of textual interpretation. As a largely contextual figurative use of language, irony relies not only on the cultural and social tenets shared by a certain community, but also on the set of beliefs, values and experiences of each individual, which are not to be dissociated from the notion of discursive community but analyzed within it. The notion of individual context adds a third layer to the ironic context. For instance, if we go back to the example of Mary's dress, A's remark might not be considered ironic if B's personal preference is for ostentatiously short dresses, or if B has been raised in a family where the standards of appropriateness are more flexible in terms of the length of garments. Similarly, a young reader of Sterne's *The Life and Adventures of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* will find it hard to understand the irony that lies at the core of the novel, and a male-chauvinist reader will find it harder to understand the feminist meaning in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

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### 3.1.2. *The Echo*

Secondly, the integrated approach takes irony as based on the notion of echo, initially put forward by Wilson (2009) and Wilson and Sperber (2012) and later built into Cognitive Linguistics by Ruiz de Mendoza (2017). Such scholars as Clark and Gerrig (1984), Currie (2006), Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995, 2007), Recanati (2007), Popa-Wyatt (2014), and more recently Barnden (2017), have defended the view that irony is best explained if viewed as an act of pretense. On the other hand, according to Wilson and Sperber (2012: 125), "irony consists in echoing a thought (e.g. a belief, an intention, a norm-based expectation) attributed to an individual, a group or to people in general, and expressing a mocking, sceptical or critical attitude towards this thought" (see also Wilson 2006, 2009; Yus Ramos 2016b). Ruiz de Mendoza (2017) further points out that irony involves a clash between an echoic scenario and an observable scenario in the mind of the speaker. Out of this collision arises the attitudinal component of irony. Ruiz de Mendoza (2017) further notes that the act of pretense is in fact grounded in an

echo and that therefore, the postulates of Pretense Theory are epiphenomenal and must be integrated within the broader, scenario-based accounts of irony. *I just love Mary's dress!* is ironic not only because it contradicts A's real opinion, but because what A says echoes an attributed thought or belief about what A (and other people) believes. Perhaps A thought he was going to like A's dress and then feels disappointed, or A could have had no previous thoughts about Mary's dress, but in the face of reality he echoes what he would have ideally thought that clashes with such reality. At the same time, A's uttering the opposite of what is the case is an act of overt (i.e. recognizable) pretense about his liking Mary's dress. But the nature of the utterance as a pretense act can only be discovered if the echo and the clash with observable reality are likewise discovered. This makes the notion of pretense subsidiary to the notion of echo.

This analysis evidences the need to take into account not only the ironist's construction of an echoic utterance but also the interpreter's ability to recognize the echo. Contrary to what is the case with metaphor and metonymy, irony requires a highly complex reconstruction of the figurative meaning on the part of the interpreter. If we take once more the example of Mary's short dress, A echoes a belief that he thinks he shares with B about short dresses being inappropriate. Only if B shares such assumptions and detects A's echo and the clash between the two scenarios, can the ironic meaning arise. B's participation in the analysis of the above-mentioned ironic situation is central. No matter how well-built A's ironic utterance might be, unless it is correctly interpreted by B, there will be no irony at all.

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### 3.1.3. *A Taxonomy of Ironists and Interpreters*

Classifications abound in studies of irony, mainly in those carried out within literary theory. Theorists such as Muecke (1970), Booth (1974), and Colebrook (2004) have classified irony according to different historical and artistic periods explaining its usage in context. However, little has been done to classify other components of irony. The approach proposed in this paper claims that ironist and interpreter are variable categories. Hence, when analyzing instances of irony, we may encounter different types of ironist and interpreter. The following classification does not intend to be an exhaustive analysis of all possible types of ironist and interpreter, but a first approximation to the subcategories we may find in both figurative uses.

We can distinguish two basic kinds of ironist: *solidary* and *hierarchical*. The solidary ironist's remark is aimed at being understood by the interpreter and does not aim at humiliating the interpreter. In the classic example where the wife is ironic about her husband's poor prediction on the weather (*Yeah, right. Nice*

*weather!*), the wife acts as a solidary ironist and uses irony to convey an attitude of skepticism about her husband's guess. In contrast, one aim of hierarchical ironists is to maintain their economic, social, intellectual, political, or social status, by pointing to a difference in hierarchy between the interpreter and themselves. The result is the humiliation of the hearer, when he or she is the ironic target, as a way to reinforce the higher status of the ironist, or even as a way to humiliate the hearer for humiliation's sake. This situation might occur, for instance, in a company where the boss uses irony to maintain his professional status by looking down on workers who are hierarchically inferior to him. In this situation irony may turn into sarcasm, which is derogatory, but may not. A hierarchical ironist may simply use the sophistication of irony to confuse the hearer or to show off. Note that the existence of hierarchical ironists provides only a partial motivation for the often-noted exclusive nature of irony (Colebrook 2004). Irony, as noted by relevance theorists (e.g. Sperber and Wilson 1995) and cognitive linguists (e.g. Herrero 2009; Athanasiadou 2017; Gibbs and Samermit 2017), is an everyday language phenomenon. It is not particularly elitist in hierarchical terms. But, in the absence of hierarchical elitism, irony is still potentially elitist in virtue of its cognitive complexity, which divides interpreters up into those that can identify the ironic intent of utterances and those that cannot.

We can also find two basic kinds of interpreter: naïve and non-naïve, respectively depending on whether the interpreter shares the necessary knowledge with the ironist or not. Naïve interpreters are less likely to detect the clash between the observable and the echoed scenarios, which may affect their ability to derive ironic meaning in some situations.

As shown in Fig. 1, combinations of the different types of ironists and interpreters yield several possible situations. When we have a naïve interpreter, ironic efforts are meaningless, whether we have a solidary or a hierarchical ironist. However, the hierarchical ironist's purposes are more highly marked, which underscores the sense of absurdity of the ironic effort in a third-party observer such as the audience in a theatre play. When we have a non-naïve interpreter, irony will be successful and more markedly so if the ironist has a well-delineated ironic target (e.g. a character with whom the third-party observer might or might not feel identified). If the purpose of irony is simply to express a personal attitude in the face of a breach of expectations (usually the case with solidary ironists), the role of the non-naïve interpreter boils down to becoming aware of such a situation and taking a stance on it. The combination of a hierarchical ironist and a non-naïve interpreter is the most relevant type of irony, intended to highlight the status of social relations.

TYPES OF IRONIST	TYPES OF INTERPRETER	COMBINATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>SOLIDARY:</b> the ironist's remark is aimed at being understood by the interpreter without a purpose of humiliation.</li>   <li>• <b>HIERARCHICAL:</b> the ironist aims at pointing out a difference in hierarchy between the interpreter and himself.</li>   <li>A) <i>Maintain status</i> (economic, social, intellectual, political or cultural)</li>   <li>B) <i>Mere humiliation of the hearer</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Humiliation to maintain status</li> <li>- Humiliation for humiliation's sake</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>NAÏVE:</b> the interpreter does not share the necessary knowledge with the ironist.</li>   <li>• <b>NON-NAÏVE:</b> the ironist shares the necessary knowledge with the ironist.</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) <b>SOLIDARY IRONIST + NAÏVE INTERPRETER</b> = ironist's efforts to be understood might not always be successful.</li>   <li>2) <b>SOLIDARY IRONIST + NON-NAÏVE INTERPRETER</b>= no need of solidarity, since the interpreter already shares the necessary knowledge to understand irony.</li>   <li>3) <b>HIERARCHICAL IRONIST + NAÏVE INTERPRETER</b>= there is no use in building irony, since it will not be interpreted as such.</li>   <li>4) <b>HIERARCHICAL IRONIST + NON-NAÏVE INTERPRETER</b>= most relevant type of irony, intended to highlight the status of social relations.</li> </ol>

Fig. 1. A typology of ironists and interpreters

### 3.1.4. *The Felicity of Ironic Acts*

This proposed approach also allows for a study of the different outcomes of the ironic act based on the combination of the elements of irony, which can be assessed in terms of degrees of pragmatic adequateness or felicity. Felicity is a largely interpreter-reliant task. No matter how well the ironist builds the irony, ironic meaning will not arise unless the interpreter recognizes the clash and the echo. In the example where the wife ironizes about the husband's misled weather prediction, the ironic effect will be felicitous only to the extent that the husband, as either a naïve or a non-naïve interpreter, recognizes the echo and the clash. However, far from being black or white, recognition and its impact in terms of felicity is subject to gradation. Wilson and Sperber's (2012) echo theory postulates the existence of an echoed thought in the mind of the ironist. Ruiz de Mendoza (2017) adds to this premise that a distinction between echoes is needed in order to accurately account for how they are processed. He further claims that echoes can be either full or partial. The synthetic approach takes this distinction under the labels *exact*

and *approximate* echoes. The former type involves the complete recognition and identification of the echo; the latter, a partial recognition of the echoed thought. A similar situation occurs with the interpreter’s detection of the clash of scenarios (see Fig. 2.).

ECHO	CLASH	DEGREE OF FELICITY
+ RECOGNITION OF THE ECHO	+ RECOGNITION OF THE CLASH	++
+ RECOGNITION OF THE ECHO	-RECOGNITION OF THE CLASH	+
-RECOGNITION OF THE ECHO	+ RECOGNITION OF THE CLASH	-
-RECOGNITION OF THE ECHO	-RECOGNITION OF THE CLASH	--

Fig. 2. Degrees of felicity in irony

The degree of recognition has an impact on the degree of felicity resulting from the irony since the higher the degree of recognition of the clash and the echo, the more felicitous the irony. The combination of the typology of ironists and interpreters explained above and the classification of the outcomes of irony yields a wide array of possibilities that allow for a detailed analysis of irony based on variables that have not been previously taken into account when studying this use of language. If we take one of the best-known instances of irony, Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, the ironist (the author) acts as a *hierarchical* ironist who uses the analogy between animals and certain political behaviors to convey his own beliefs about the Russian Revolution. In *Animal Farm*, the ironist echoes the communist propaganda and makes it clash with real outcome of the Revolution (Ruiz de Mendoza and Lozano-Palacio 2019). In the well-known statement “all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (Orwell 1952: 114), Orwell sums up the irony implicit in his work. The interpretation of *Animal Farm* as an ironic text lies in the interpreter’s knowledge about the Russian Revolution and Orwell’s opinions. Hence, a naïve interpreter might read the text as a fairy story (as originally subtitled by the author), while a non-naïve interpreter will go one step further and interpret the text as political criticism. The felicity of the irony relies on the interpreter’s detection of the clash and/or the echo. For example, a reader with basic knowledge about the Russian Revolution might detect that the author is echoing this historical event through animal metaphors but might not understand Orwell’s ideas about the application of communism to the USSR and might not detect the clash of scenarios.

### 3.2. The Synthetic Approach to Irony in Practice

The previous section, which has laid out the theoretical underpinnings of our proposed synthetic approach to irony, has related the basic types or ironist and interpreter and the distinction between exact and approximate echoes to felicity degrees in the recognition of irony. It has also proposed to take into account the broader notion of context studied by literary theorists. The present section further applies these notions to the understanding of traditional types of irony as discussed in literary theory.

Let us start with Socratic irony, the oldest known form of irony. In Socratic irony, the philosopher's feigned ignorance, as part of the maieutic method, is used to get his pupil to realize that the philosopher has superior wisdom. In other words, Socrates adopts an attitude of pretense that echoes his own ignorance and the interlocutor's wisdom, which clash with the observable situation where the opposite is precisely the case. For instance, in the dialogue where Socrates discusses the concept of justice with sophists Polemarchus and Thrasymachus, the philosopher praises the two sophists' knowledge about such matter:

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Nay, it is more reasonable that you should be the speaker. For you do affirm that you know and are able to tell. Don't be obstinate but do me a favour to reply and don't be chary of your wisdom, and instruct Glaucon here and the rest of us. (Plato 1963: 587-8 [337e-338a])

The dialogue ends with Polemarchus and Thrasymachus realizing that Socrates has the answer to what they thought they knew. Socratic irony is largely based on the element of pretense. Rather than rely on a set of culturally loaded ideas, the interpreter is expected to identify Socrates' feigned ignorance through contextual cues. Irony is used as an instrument of enlightenment intended to make the pupil aware of the clash between common beliefs and the truth that the philosopher has. The philosopher acts as a solidary ironist guiding a naïve interpreter in the process that culminates in the discovery of truth. Socratic irony is thus characterized by a didactic purpose.

In dramatic irony the ironist (the playwright) also teaches a lesson. This is the case of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. The author of this tragedy is again a solidary ironist who echoes his own belief that no matter how hard Oedipus tries to avoid the auspices, he will not be able to fool divine providence. The echoed thought clashes with what is observably the case (which is being shown on stage, that is, Oedipus' recurrent failure to avoid the prophecy) (Ruiz de Mendoza and Lozano-Palacio 2019). Pretense in the case of dramatic irony is lessened in favor of the contextual element. The audience of *Oedipus the King* in Ancient Greece would be acquainted with the notion of fate and the playwright's ideas about divine justice,

that is, the audience in Ancient Greece would normally be non-naïve. However, since texts are read and interpreted differently throughout history, untrained 21<sup>st</sup> century readers are more likely to be naïve interpreters unable to detect the contextual cues that facilitate the identification of the echo and the clash. Socratic irony is always felicitous. It is explicitly recognized as such when the pupil acknowledges the philosopher's wisdom. In dramatic irony an interpreter might remain naïve if he does not detect the clash of scenarios and the content of the echoed scenario. Hence, dramatic irony is more prone to have a lesser degree of felicity than Socratic irony.

Even less likely to be felicitous is rhetoric irony, whose aim is to convince, attack or punish certain people or their actions. In this third type of irony, the speaker often acts as a hierarchical ironist. For instance, in Cicero's speech *Against Verres*, the orator, who lays the blame on the military leader, utters the following words:

One of [Verres'] followers was a certain Rubrius, a man tailor-made for the lusts of this man here, who was wont to track all of this down with *wonderful* skill wherever he went. (Gildenhard 2011: 179 [64], emphasis added)

Cicero's description of Verres' henchman is ironic. Rhetoric irony is often used as a political tool, which makes its contextual element even more necessary when deriving ironic meaning. The echoed scenario (in Cicero's speech, the belief held by those who believed Rubrius' behavior was not to be punished) clashes with the observable scenario (in Cicero's speech, Rubrius' atrocities). The echo in Cicero's irony, as well as in other instances of rhetoric irony, is especially bound to its context. In the case of Cicero's words, unless the interpreter knows about the orator's opinion of Rubrius, "wonderful" might seem a legitimate adjective to describe Verres' henchman. The ironist in rhetoric irony is more often hierarchical than in Socratic and dramatic irony because of their different purposes: the former are didactic while the latter aim to persuade and also to attack. Only a non-naïve interpreter will detect the echo and the clash, and any naïve interpreters will be excluded from the ironic meaning. There is no effort on the part of the rhetoric ironist to help naïve interpreters to attain the ironic meaning, thus making irony less likely to be felicitous.

The hierarchical ironist is kept in satirical irony, which is directed to a reduced audience, only those that qualify to be part of the ironist's game. Take the following statement in Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*:

I therefore humbly offer it to public consideration that of the 120,000 children already computed, 20,000 may be served for breed. (Swift 1729: 54)

This is elitist irony in the sense that it is aimed at non-naïve interpreters only. Like rhetoric irony, satirical irony is exclusive; however, while in rhetoric irony there is

a lack of effort on the part of the ironist to be understood by those who ignore the context, in satirical irony, the intention is to exclude certain potential interpreters. In the excerpt from *A Modest Proposal*, Swift impersonates a high-class Englishman who echoes the English high-class belief that Irish people are worthless. The Englishman thus proposes that Irish children (who stand for Irish people) be served as food for the English ruling class. This echoed thought clashes with Swift's real belief about the intrinsic worth of human beings of whatever origin. Only non-naïve interpreters, who are aware of the context (Swift's beliefs and the political situation he makes reference to), will recognize the echo and the clash. Once more, we see that felicity depends on the degree of naivety of the interpreter. In this case, greater naivety correlates with a more reduced audience.

In romantic irony we find a hierarchical ironist who expresses an attitude of dissociation from his own creative processes. We observe that, similarly to Socratic irony, in romantic irony there is a predominance of the pretense element. In dramatic, rhetoric, and satirical irony, the pose of the ironist is lessened in favor of the interpretation of the ironist's utterance. The romantic creator uses irony to express his detachment from reality. Let us take Byron's *Don Juan* as an example.

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In the poem, the author utters the following words:

Our friend the storyteller, at some distance with a small elderly audience, is supposed to tell his story without being much moved by the musical hilarity at the other end of the village green. The reader is further requested to suppose him (to account for his knowledge of English) either an Englishman settled in Spain, or a Spaniard who had travelled in England. (Byron 1996: 39)

Byron echoes what the reader and storyteller should do when reading his work as a means of separating himself from reality and showing skepticism towards what he writes. Only a reader who is aware of the socio-historical context will understand the irony. The romantic ironist is blatantly hierarchical but does not show any special interest in the interpreter's understanding of the irony. On the contrary, the romantic ironist seems to give priority to showing his attitude towards his ideological context. Hence, romantic irony seems to exploit the type of irony most elitist and least likely to be felicitous.

Finally, the postmodern use of irony is grounded in its power to subvert the ideas of the *status quo* and revisit them critically (see papers in Nicol 2010). Postmodern irony fuses the didactic purpose of dramatic and Socratic irony with the critical element of satirical irony. Postmodern irony is elitist in the sense that it is often aimed at a learned type of audience. However, the purpose of postmodern ironists is not to maintain their status; they are solidary ironists who address a non-naïve audience only. Let us take Angela Carter's short story "The Bloody Chamber", one of her feminist retellings of fairy tales. In the story, the protagonist narrates:



“And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain” (Carter 2007: 11). In this instance, the author echoes the belief that women should be treated respectfully and makes it clash with the Marquis’s objectification of the protagonist. Such an objectification stands for the traditional male domination of the artistic canon and the diminishing treatment received by women throughout history. Carter acts as a solidary ironist because she is keen on being understood by the widest possible audience. However, the interpreter of postmodern irony is a non-naïve one, because the critical, sophisticated use of irony in Postmodernism presupposes a certain cultural level of the interpreter. The ideological nature of postmodern irony is highly contextual because it often echoes a previous socio-cultural context and makes it clash with present-day ideas. In terms of felicity, for their intended audiences, postmodern irony is more likely to be felicitous than romantic irony. However, because of its somewhat elitist nature, it is less felicitous than Socratic irony (for Socrates’ intended audience), where the interpreter is assumed to be a naïve one.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This paper has argued for an integrated approach to irony that takes into account theoretical aspects of both literary and linguistic studies on the topic. The symbiotic potential of the studies of irony carried out by these two disciplines allows for a synthetic approach to irony that merges the fine-grained, phenomenon-centered explanations given by linguistics, especially pragmatics, and the focus on the socio-cultural and ideological context typical of literary studies. Irony is a complex case of figurative language use that plays with the shared knowledge between the ironist and the interpreter. Its use in literary texts as a tool for persuasion, teaching, and subversion multiplies the semantic possibilities of irony beyond what is generally recognized in the inferential pragmatics literature and in cognitive-linguistic analyses.

The synthetic approach to irony proposes a set of theoretical postulates that allow for a complete study of this phenomenon based on the central notion of echo without forgetting the importance of the context and the interpreter for the ironic act. The strength of this account has been tested against a range of examples of literary and non-literary irony of which this paper has offered a small selection for the sake of illustration. The analysis has reinforced the idea that irony operates similarly in all contexts, while acknowledging the existence of a multiplicity of variables that have to be taken into consideration, especially the intentions and behaviour of the ironist, the amount of knowledge shared by ironist and the interpreter, and the reliance of irony on the detection of the echo and the clash.

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