

A análise da ironia por meio da teoria da relevância na comédia de situação *The Big Bang Theory*

The analysis of irony through relevance theory in *The Big Bang Theory* sitcom

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Resumo: Neste trabalho, será analisada a teoria da relevância proposta por Sperber e Wilson. Adicionalmente, a figura de linguagem ironia será descrita. Esse referencial teórico será utilizado para analisar um episódio da comédia de situação intitulado "*The Big Bang Theory*", em um esforço para demonstrar como enunciados são compreendidos entre os personagens e o público e como ironia é largamente utilizada como recurso humorístico.

Palavras-chave: pragmática, teoria da relevância, ironia, comédia de situação, princípio de cooperação.

Abstract: In this paper the relevance theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson will be reviewed. Additionally, the figure of speech irony will be described. This theoretical background will be used to analyze an episode from the sitcom called '*The Big Bang Theory*' in an effort to demonstrate how utterances are understood between characters and audience and how irony is largely used as humorous framework.

Key words: pragmatics, relevance theory, irony, sitcom, cooperative principle.

1. Introduction

Pragmatics is the science that is concerned with speaker's meaning and how utterances are interpreted by listeners. Depending on how the communication between two people is stated it can be effective or it can create misunderstandings. In a conversation, speakers can express their unclear opinions by using figures of speech, such as irony. Irony deals with the idea of what is said from the unsaid and it is often showed in sitcoms, whenever a character is trying to depreciate another character's opinion about a certain topic of the conversation. The employment of irony in the utterances represents that the character is being mocked at a certain point in the conversation, which makes it rather humorous.

Researches adopt different overviews concerning the usage of irony as an important pragmatic means of communication (Sperber and Wilson, 2004). Communication is effectively achieved when the hearer recognizes, linguistically and pragmatically, the meaning of the utterance that the speaker wants to convey. Consequently, the speaker's intention is as important as the interpretation of the utterances. Relevance Theory, proposed by Sperber and Wilson, claim that for an utterance to be relevant it should not expend too much cognitive processing effort to be efficiently understood. Thus, the concept of relevance is a function or measure of the relationship between contextual effects and processing effort as defined by Sperber and Wilson (1995).

The Cooperative Principle and the Maxims of Conversation will be briefly discussed, as proposed by Grice in 1975. The study of the maxims will be mainly explanatory as Grice focus on speaker meaning where the implicature constitutes a proper secondary part. On the other hand, the Cooperative Principle is not

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regarded as necessary for achieving a successful communication because one can achieve optimal relevance without needing any underlying principle (Yus, 2002).

An important aspect of the communication process is the utterance and the speaker's meaning while embedded in a conversation. There are many different types of irony but, in this paper, only three will be cited for being considered the most important ones for the purpose of this analysis. The types of irony to be described are: verbal irony, dramatic irony and irony of situation.

The utterance of an ironic speaker is a mask that one wears in order to be opaque or least evident to the interlocutor. Dramatic irony occurs when the audience knows more than one or several of characters on screen. It could also be used in suspense in order to create fear in the audience or in humor to create misunderstandings when some information is given to the audience without being said to the character and, at sudden, this piece of information is revealed to the character. In situational irony it is generally linked to a situation where the character does something totally different from the expected. For example, it plays with the fragility of the human being and the inevitable.

In order to exemplify the Relevance theory by Sperber and Wilson, the cooperative principle by Grice and the types of irony in *The Big Bang Theory* will be used as the guideline for this paper.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Implicature Theory and the Cooperative Principle

Implicature can be defined as the difference between what the words in an utterance mean according to the rules of semantics and grammar, and what the speaker's intended meaning is. Paul Grice, in his theory of conversational implicature, suggested communication is a human interaction which is goal orientated, and that it is not possible to violate this principle, naming it the Cooperative Principle. Grice, who coined the term "implicature," and classified the phenomenon, developed a theory to explain and predict conversational implicatures, and describe how they arise and are understood.

Specifically, Paul Grice is mostly concerned with the distinction between what is being said and the violation of the maxims in the utterance in order to make communication more appropriate. His aim was to discover the mechanism behind this process. Grice posits the cooperative principle and its four maxims as a way of explaining this implication process (Wenting, 2007).

The Cooperative Principle describes how people interact with each other. Grice says to "make your contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1975:45). It analyses the behavior and the patterns people use while making utterances. When a person contributes meaningfully in a conversation, he or she follows the principle the conversation effectively meeting its purpose.

In order to make the conversation more effective the speaker has to follow these rules developed by Grice. These maxims are divided into four sub-principles: quantity, quality, relation and manner.

The quantity maxim states that a speaker should not say more than necessary to be understood.

- Make your contribution as informative as is required.
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The quality maxim states that the speaker should avoid saying something they are not sure about.

- Do not say what you believe to be false.
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The relation maxim states that speaker's should say only what is relevant to the conversation.

- Be relevant

The manner maxim states that the speaker should be as clear and orderly as possible in the utterance avoiding ambiguities.

- Avoid obscurity of expression and ambiguity.
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
- Be orderly

It is important to state that these maxims are usually used by speakers without being recognized by themselves throughout the conversation. It is also considered part of a normal interaction between speakers. Grice's maxims are intentionally violated in a conversation whenever a speaker tries to achieve humorous effect in his/her utterances. The most violated maxims are the maxim of quantity and the maxim of relation (Attardo, 1990). However, differently from Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, which speakers voluntarily follow or disobey, Sperber and Wilson's principle of relevance (the fact that utterances communicate a presumption of being relevant to the hearer) is spontaneous and biologically rooted in human cognition (Yus, 2002:1296).

2.2. The Relevance Theory

The Relevance Theory has been proposed by Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson with the intention of understanding how speakers understand information in communicative contexts. Differently from Grice's main pragmatic interest, which is based on the role of inferences in implicit communication, Sperber and Wilson argued that both the explicit and the implicit side of communication are worthy of pragmatic attention. Consequently, they developed a study based on a definition of relevance and two principles: a Cognitive Principle, "which states that human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance"; and a Communicative Principle, "the claim that every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance" (Sperber and Wilson, 2004:278). For Sperber and Wilson, the word "relevance" should be treated as a technical term restricted to relationships between utterances and interpretations, but as cognitive process to be achieved.

Relevance theorists have claimed that a relevance-oriented inferential process takes into consideration the relevance of the input of the individual in a context. A relevant input is not only a matter of achieving the hearer cognitively, but connecting it with hearer's background information. The processing of the input is to the individual's background the greater its relevance will be. This is a feature, which is commonly observed

in human cognition. The amount of attention spent in a conversation will depend on the interest in the context and in the hearer's momentary situation. (Sperber and Wilson, 2004:250).

In relevance theoretic terms, an input is relevant to an individual when it coincides with the assumptions about the hearer's personal background information resulting in another assumption. This is called a Positive Cognitive Effect by Sperber and Wilson, but this is not the most important type. The most important type of cognitive effect achieved by processing an input in a context is a Contextual Implication, a conclusion deducible from the input and the context together, but from neither input nor context alone (Sperber and Wilson, 2004:251).

The relevance theory claims that the choice of selecting an input upon another is because we rate potential inputs as we are not able to deal with them all and the availability of the circumstances at that time. Another important matter is that the same input is viewed in different degrees of achievement depending on the contextual assumption and the availability of the cognitive effects. The more processing effort is required to achieve a goal, the less relevant the input will be considered (Sperber and Wilson, 2004:252).

2.2. Definition of irony

Irony will be the main focus having as guideline the Relevance Theory. Irony, from the Ancient Greek εἰρωνεία *eirōneía*, meaning “frustrated” or “feigned ignorance”, is a literary or rhetoric device used as an incongruity or discordance between what is said or what is meant or is generally understood. It is called a trope because the figurative meaning is opposite of the literal. It shows the difference of what is said from what is meant, conveying a different idea from the literal one. Irony is a type of pretence in which the speaker "makes as if" to perform a certain speech act, expecting her/his audience to see through the pretence and recognize the mocking or critical attitude behind it (Wilson, 2006:1722). Its usage may be found in fictional or non-fictional communicative situations as a refusal to say something directly as a mode of expression that calls attention to the character's knowledge and that of the audience.

Ironic utterances are an attribution to someone or something to show disapproval or to ridicule the object or person while dissociating the speaker's image from the opinion. According to Grice, verbal irony is a violation of the cooperative principle and the maxim of quality (“do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence”) which can lead to misunderstandings from the hearers' interpretation of the utterance. So, ironic utterances implicate the opposite of what it literally says. There are cases when an ironic utterance is meant to be the opposite of what has been uttered, but in other cases the speaker communicates more than needed and this violates the maxim of quantity (“do not make your contribution more informative than is required”). In the relevance theory, an utterance does not need to follow Grice's maxims because, according to Grice, the violation of its maxims would endanger the communication between the speaker and hearer. To Sperber and Wilson, an utterance is interpreted by the hearer if it is optimally relevant and if it has enough contextual information given by the speaker.

2.2.1. Types of irony

The usage of irony has an important role in our communication because it gives human beings the opportunity to sharpen or highlight certain incongruity features of reality. Among the types of irony, this paper will focus on three of them: verbal irony, dramatic irony and irony of situation, as described below.

2.2.1.1. Verbal irony

Verbal irony is when an author says one thing and means something else. This type of irony indicates elements of caricature, sarcasm, humor, stereotypes, etc. in utterances. For example, in the Prologue in Act I of *Romeo and Juliet*, which opens with "Two households, both alike in dignity, ...". This phrase presents the idea that the two households are dignified or respectable. Along the plot, the reader discovers that each family is violently competitive, even devious, so they are actually similarly undignified. (Khan, 2010)

So, whenever the hearer has to access his or her background knowledge and encounters minimal effort the joke will be easily understood by the individual. On the other hand, the relevance theory states that a context cannot be understood without effort, only if it presents a minimal processing effort against context.

2.2.1.2. Dramatic irony

Dramatic irony is when an audience perceives something that a character does not know. The expectation and the anticipation of the truth are its characteristics, which focus on the fact that the audience knows more than the characters involved in a certain situation. For example:

"In *Othello*, the audience knows that Desdemona has been faithful to Othello, but Othello does not. The audience also knows that Iago is scheming to bring about Othello's downfall, a fact hidden from Othello, Desdemona, Cassio and Roderigo".

2.2.1.3. Situational Irony

Irony of situation is a discrepancy between the expected result and actual results. It deals with the unexpected and the incoherent situations. This situational irony is embedded in an environment where the universe seems to be against you, in other words, when the unexpected happens. For example:

"A man who takes a step aside in order to avoid getting sprinkled by a wet dog and falls into a swimming pool." (Ellstrom, *Divine Maddness*, 2002)

2.2.2. Different views of irony

According to Attardo (1999), there is no consensus on whether sarcasm and irony are essentially the same thing, with superficial differences, or if they differ significantly. It is believed that sarcasm² is an aggressive mocking expressed against an individual and it is not considered situational as irony. It is also claimed that sarcasm is something that is expressed intentionally whereas irony is not, see Attardo. Differently from Attardo, Sperber and Wilson distinguish irony between 'use' and 'mention'. The use-

² Sarcasm will only be presented as a kind of irony, but it will not be focus of the analysis in this paper.

mention distinction is referred as word-as-word distinction and it is a concept of analytical philosophy. According to the analytical philosophy, it is necessary to make the distinction between a word as use and a word as mention. Normally, in written English the quotation marks are used to distinguish mention from use. Unfortunately, in spoken English quotations are not available, and the context will make the hearer know if it has been uttered as use or mention. To illustrate this topic I chose two examples from Sperber and Wilson (1992):

(A) Natasha is a beautiful child.

(B) 'Natasha' is a beautiful name.

In example (A) the word Natasha illustrates 'use' because it simply refers to a child, whereas example (B) the word 'Natasha' between quotation marks represents 'mention' referring solely to the noun itself. This pair of distinction is very important because it shows the difference between a word or phrase or sentence (use) and an expression in English (mention). Another important characteristic of the verbal irony is the 'echoic'. The echoic use of language, speakers merely repeat utterances made by other speakers in order to achieve a specific communicative effect, typically to convey a specific attitude towards the relevant utterance such as surprise, pleasure, scepticism, mockery, disbelief, etc. (Wilson, 2006). Echoic use of language has been claimed to be a key concept in the ironical use of language, especially in the work done by Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber (Sperber & Wilson, 1981 and Wilson, 2006). Alternatively, verbal irony is often regarded as primarily resulting from pretence.

3. The Big Bang Theory list of characters

The Big Bang theory is situation comedy created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady that airs on the american television network CBS. The show aired for first time in 2007 and since this date it has been broadcasted worldwide, becoming a huge success. The plot is centered on five characters in which four of them are cientists working in Caltech and the fifth is a waitress/actress wannabe, who is their neighbour. The Wikipedia article about the show describes it and the main characters as follows:

The geekiness and intellect of the four guys is contrasted for comic effect with Penny's social skills and common sense. A brief introduction of the main characters of the show is made below:

Dr. Leonard Leakey Hofstadter is an experimental physicist with an IQ of 173 who received his Ph.D. when he was 24 years old. He shares an apartment with a colleague and friend Sheldon Cooper.

Dr. Sheldon Lee Cooper is a theoretical physicist, possessing a Bachelors in Science, Masters in Science, Masters in Astronomy, a PhD, an ScD, and an IQ of 187. Originally from East Texas, he was a child prodigy, starting college at the age of 11, and receiving his first Ph.D at age 16. He is calculating, cynical, and asexual. Sheldon exhibits a strict adherence to routine, a lack of understanding of irony, sarcasm and humor, and a complete lack of humility; these characteristics are the main sources of his character's humor and the center of a number of episodes. Whenever he tells a joke, or plays a prank, he concludes with the word 'Bazinga!' to signal that he has just told a joke.

Penny (last name is not revealed) is Leonard and Sheldon's neighbor across the hallway. Originally from Omaha, Nebraska, she is a waitress at the local Cheesecake Factory and also an aspiring actress. Penny is very outgoing, kind, and assertive, her personality contrasting with those of the guys.

Howard Joe Wolowitz is a Jewish engineer at Caltech's Department of Applied Physics who often hangs out at Leonard and Sheldon's apartment. Unlike Sheldon, Leonard, and Raj, Howard lacks a doctorate. He defends this by pointing out that he has a master's degree in Engineering from MIT.

Dr. Rajesh Ramayan 'Raj' Koothrappali is Howard Wolowitz's best friend, and yet another genius of the group; his name is usually shortened to "Raj". He is originally from New Delhi, India, and he works in the Physics department at Caltech, where his area of expertise is particle astrophysics.

4. The analysis of irony in The Big Bang Theory “The Gothowitz Deviation” episode

As Grice's cooperative principle is tied in the maxims and their violation, Sperber and Wilson's Relative theory approaches important features in communication both related to verbal and non-verbal communication and explains in realistic terms that utterances are precise enough and predictable enough to guide the hearer towards the speaker's meaning. Therefore, to make the analysis of ironical utterances in the Big Bang Theory sitcom's script, both the Cooperative Principle and the Relevance Theory will be used as guidelines to explain in how relevance expectations can contribute to an empirically plausible account of comprehension.

The main aim of this part is to analyze irony from the point of view of relevance in the utterances of the characters presented in the Big Bang Theory sitcom. To make the analysis easier to be described, it has been chosen the initial scene of the third seasons episode “The Gothowitz Deviation”, as this episode presents a great amount of ironical utterances. As a way of helping the analysis, transcriptions of the episode taken from the hypnoweb.net will be used. Also it is important to mention that the title of the episode is a very interesting combination of the character's names and the plot of the story. “Gothowitz” is a combination of ‘Goth’, which is Howard's last name and the club he went with Raj, and “Deviation”, which, according to Macmillan dictionary, means behavior that most people do not consider morally correct, which is the experiment Sheldon does on Penny to change her behavior.

The “Gothowitz Deviation” episode can be summarized as follows: Sheldon finds that Penny is more and more present in his apartment. As Leonard and Penny are dating, she interrupts Sheldon's very scheduled life. She has made French toast on Oatmeal Day, and this upsets him. He decides to take things into his own hands by using positive reinforcement to try and train Penny to behave how he likes, and he rewards her with chocolate every time she produces good behavior. Leonard figures out what Sheldon is doing and tells him to stop until she realizes it. Sheldon uses it to his own advantage saying that it is a better way of dealing with Penny. Howard and Raj decide to go to the local Goth club to pick up some girls. Of course, the guys need to dress for the party—including some slip-on tattoo sleeves to impress the ladies. At the bar, Howard seems to have impressed one of the girls and her friend, and they decide to leave the bar for something a little more fun. The girls lead them to a tattoo parlor, and after the girl gets her tattoo done, she says its Howard's turn. He chickens out of getting a real tattoo, and the girls leave.

4.1. The analysis

The first scene is very appealing and shows the girlfriend of one of the roommates singing and dancing until she is interrupted by Sheldon, her boyfriend's roommate. After Sheldon being asked to dance with Penny, his roommate's girlfriend, he replies ironically to Penny and this happens twice in the sketch. This situational irony shows that Sheldon is not a funny person at all. During the dialog, Penny tries to keep a smooth conversation with Sheldon, who does not like it and for that reason reacts ironically to her comment:

“Penny: Morning, Sheldon. Come dance with me.

Sheldon: No.

Penny: Why not?

Sheldon: Penny, while I subscribe to the many worlds theory which posits the existence of an infinite number of Sheldons in an infinite number of universes, I assure you that in none of them am I dancing.”

This part can be decomposed in the following simplified segments:

1. Sheldon refuses Penny's invitation to dance.
2. Sheldon does not dance.
3. Sheldon follows a certain physics theory that describes an existence of an infinite multiverse.
4. Sheldon in the infinite number of universes does not dance in any of them.

Analysis:

There is a violation of two maxims from the Cooperative principle in Sheldon's explanation: the maxims of quantity and the maxim of relation. Sheldon violates the maxim of quantity when he speaks more than is required giving a big range of explanations instead of being objective while being not relevant to Penny's question.

Sheldon studies many theories about the cosmos and believes that an infinite number of universes exist and, consequently, the probability of him dancing is mathematically certain. Thus the verbal irony responding to Penny that, even in face of mathematical certainty, he does not dance, which is a lie. Penny should activate her background knowledge about physics to understand Sheldon's assertive, but with incredible effort, thus making Sheldon's response not relevant, considering Sperber and Wilson theory.

The dialog continues with the following sentences:

“Penny: Are you fun in any of them?

Sheldon: The math would suggest that in a few I'm a clown made of candy. But I don't dance.”

This part can be decomposed in the following simplified segments:

1. Sheldon is not fun.
2. He may be thought of as a “clown made of candy” in possible worlds.
3. Sheldon means that being fun does not necessarily include dancing.

Analysis:

It is noticed that Sheldon violates three maxims from the Cooperative Principle. Here is a description of the maxims violated: the maxims of quantity, because he is more informative than required, the maxim of relation, as his answer is not relevant to the topic, which is "let's dance", and the maxim of manner, while he does not say clearly that he does not want to dance.

From the Relevance Theory perspective, Sheldon does not achieve maximal relevance in his response, because he is not clear enough forcing Penny to spend excessive exertion to finally understand that he implicates that he does not want to dance, while ironically avoiding to mention that mathematical probabilities may eventually prove he may be in fact dancing in an alternate universe.

These lines of the transcript follow:

“Penny: All right, want some French toast?
Sheldon: It's Oatmeal Day.
Penny: Tell you what, next French Toast Day, I will make you oatmeal.
Sheldon: Dear Lord, are you still going to be here on French Toast Day?”

These parts can be decomposed in the following simplified segment:

1. It's the day Sheldon always eats oatmeal.
2. Penny has made French toast and offers it to Sheldon, trying to negotiate with him.
3. Penny does not know Sheldon's schedule.
4. Sheldon is appalled with the idea that Penny will stay indefinitely in his apartment.

Analysis:

The scene continues in the apartment where Sheldon and Leonard live. The conversation between Penny and Sheldon becomes even more ironical. When Sheldon says it is oatmeal day he implies he does not want French toast. This implicature is not part of the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered, but depends on features of the context of the conversation.

Relevance theory will determine that Sheldon's response was relevant, but a great cost process is required by Penny to understand the ironical statement he makes. Comprehension comes to her only if she remembers that Sheldon is extremely organized in his life and day to day affairs, thus grasping that not only he does not want French Toast as it was not expected in this morning.

Instead, she tries to negotiate with Sheldon as well as changing his programmed eating calendar. This verbal irony can only be known by the audience that follows this TV show regularly. The maxim of manner is violated by Penny when she does not mention when will the French toast day be, which implies that she will be living with them until this day and this makes Sheldon rather confused.

These lines for the transcript follow:

“Leonard: Morning.
Sheldon: Look, Leonard, Penny made French toast.
Leonard: Sorry. I haven't given her your schedule yet.
Sheldon: It's an iCal download; she can put it right in her phone. And I thought we agreed that you'd have your conjugal visits in her apartment.
Leonard: We did, but there were extenuating circumstances.
Sheldon: I see. Did her abysmal housekeeping skills finally trump her perkiness?”

1. Leonard knows Sheldon's schedule.
2. Sheldon thinks Penny should have downloaded his schedule on her cell phone.
3. Sheldon thinks Leonard broke their roommate agreement.
4. Leonard is dismissive again about the roommate agreement.
5. Sheldon thinks Penny is a messy person.

Analysis:

As soon as Leonard appears and greets his friend and his girlfriend, Sheldon verbally utters an irony: "Look, Leonard, Penny made French toast". This utterance shows Leonard that Penny has done something for breakfast and it is intended to remind him that something is not correct according to Sheldon's eating schedule.

When Leonard replies: "Sorry. I haven't given her your schedule yet." Leonard politely apologizes for not following Sheldon's breakfast routine at that moment while acknowledging explicitly his mistake by omitting the information from Penny. Penny would be excused for not knowing Sheldon's eating schedule, but Leonard, who has previous background knowledge on Sheldon's schedule, should know that today is oatmeal day.

Being humorous, Sheldon utters "it's an iCal download, she can put it right in her phone", as if Penny must have a copy of his schedule at hand at all times. In other words, he is calling her inattentive for not knowing his set of rules for breakfast preparation. Apparently, the audience are the ones who know better the routine of Sheldon and Leonard's house, once again, this dramatic irony is implicit in the plot of this sitcom being instrumental for its comical goal.

When Sheldon asks the reason why they are (Leonard and Penny) not having breakfast in her apartment, he is implicitly demanding Leonard about a breach in the roommate agreement. It is known by the audience that Sheldon is very strict about the rules. Leonard, again for humorous intent, seems formal in his reply at the same time being dismissive about the objective of the rules. In Sheldon's utter "I see. Did her abysmal housekeeping skills finally trump her perkiness?", he shows his disapproval on Penny's mess and dirty implying that their relationship would not last.

The dialog continues with the following sentences:

Leonard: No, her bed kind of... broke.

Sheldon: That doesn't seem likely. Her bed's of sturdy construction. Even the addition of a second normal size human being wouldn't cause a structural failure, much less a homunculus such as yourself.

Penny: A homunculus?

Leonard: Perfectly formed miniature human being.

Penny: Oh, you're my little homunculus.

Leonard: Don't do that."

This part can be decomposed in the following simplified segments:

1. Leonard explains that they did not sleep in her apartment because the bed broke. He is happy about it.

2. Sheldon thinks it is improbable that the bed would not support both Penny and Leonard, as he is considered very short, while not acknowledging Leonard's remark about their sex.
3. Penny does not know what "homunculus" means.
4. Leonard explains the meaning of the word.
5. Penny is affectionate, using the word as a lovely nickname.
6. Leonard does not approve that.

Analysis:

Leonard states happily that the bed in Penny's apartment broke, which implies he is bragging about his sex with Penny as a physical relationship between two people is widely expected to be strenuous and vigorous. It is understood that the vitality and drive of their act made the bed to break.

Once again, Sheldon demonstrates a lack of understanding of human relations (notorious amongst the audience) as he does not acknowledge Leonard's remark about the sex with Penny. He simply utters that Penny's bed should bear the weight of both Penny and Leonard, who is very short in comparison to a normal man. He is ironic unintentionally. Unfortunately, Penny does not have this assumption in her head and the effort expended to retrieve the assumption is also considerable. In the relevance theory: 'the more processing effort is required to achieve a goal, the less relevant the input will be considered' (Sperber and Wilson 2004:252). For that reason she does not understand what Sheldon wants to say and replies with a question which indicates that she did not understand the word "homunculus". Here, Sheldon violated two maxims of the cooperative principle: quantity (do not make your contribution more informative than is required) and manner (be brief) which made Penny's comprehension of that word difficult.

When Leonard introduces a context in the conversation, which explains the meaning of homunculus as "a perfectly formed miniature human being", Penny rapidly understands the meaning of the word, appropriating it as a fond nickname for Leonard, who clearly does not like it.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to analyze irony by the light of the Cooperative Principle proposed by Grice and the Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson. Both the Cooperative Principle and the Relevance theory were important for the analysis of utterances of The Big Bang Theory, third season "Gothowitz Deviation" episode. Verbal irony was another tool used in the description of this article to show humor through pragmatic interpretation. The first scene of this episode is an introduction to the whole episode, but what is remarkable about it is the great amount of the ironical assumptions uttered by the characters of this TV show. To help us analyze the utterances in the conversation between the characters, it was necessary to decompose the topics developed during their talk. It has been noticed that the decomposition of the utterances in the context helped us to see the meaning the characters in the show wanted to express. Not all of the utterances were understood by the characters involved in the breakfast conversation. For example, the character Penny did not have the same degree of background knowledge and scientific understanding that Sheldon and Leonard have.

Sheldon, who is the most ironical of the characters, demonstrates a difficulty to be optimally relevant in his utterances. In fact, he is very obscure and uses verbal irony as a way to be critical about his intentions without dissociating himself. On the other hand, Leonard replies Sheldon's enquiries ironically as well without caring about his friend's breakfast routine. Penny preparing breakfast is the centerpiece of the conversation between Sheldon and Leonard and she does not usually understand some of the utterances. As Sheldon is a theoretical physicist, he understands much about the universe and has great background knowledge. This leads him to use peculiar ways of expressing himself, not being objective or relevant. This is a very humorous character and abuses of irony, which is an important pragmatic means of communication.

Penny is the total opposite, as she does not know much about physics concepts nor uses fancy vocabulary. The mental processes she has to employ to understand Sheldon's utterances are not efficient, which leaves her out of the context.

For this purpose, the Cooperative principle proposed by Grice would not be enough for the analysis because it is only concerned with the distinction between what is said and the violation of the maxims to achieve successful conversation as all of the characters' involved in the conversation violate them. The maxims violated by the characters of the show are of quantity, relation and manner, as they are more present in the conversations. Sperber and Wilson share Grice's interpretation of utterances, but relevance focus on pragmatic process, which leads to a complete comprehension of what has been uttered. Differently from Grice, utterances in relevance do not expect speakers to obey the cooperative principles and the maxims to achieve understanding, because relevance can be found in an input representation provided a cognitive process, which include perception, memory and inference that will be considered or not at that time.

Irony, as a figure of speech, usually shows an incongruity or discordance between what is said to what is meant. The verbal irony was the most predominant in the scene. Also, it was very prominent to possess a previous knowledge about the characters of the TV show in order to understand issues they have been through. Non-verbal situation is implicit in the scene in the fact that Penny and Leonard are having breakfast in Sheldon's apartment and not in hers. This was a brief analysis of how relevance and irony can work together, but it is a subject open for far more deep discussions and study.

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Received: May 20, 2011

Accepted: October 10, 2011

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