

Left Sentence Peripheries in Spanish

Diachronic, Variationist
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Fronting and irony in Spanish

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This paper aims at explaining why irony is particularly salient in a certain kind of Spanish sentences that involve fronting of a constituent. This fact should be totally unexpected if one assumes – as we do – that irony is mainly a contextual phenomenon (Wilson & Sperber 1992 et passim). An analysis of the syntactic pattern of the examples under consideration shows that it corresponds to a specific construction where a marked word order triggers a ‘verum focus’ interpretation (Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal 2009). Our proposal is quite simple: we argue that ‘verum focus’ gives rise to emphasis, and emphasis magnifies certain aspects of meaning. Together with other grammatical devices, the ‘verum focus’ construction highlights the inappropriateness of the utterance with respect to the context in which it occurs, thus making irony a very accessible interpretive solution. The more a representation is emphasized, the easier it is for it to receive an ironic reading. This approach provides evidence in favor both of Sperber and Wilson’s proposal for irony and of our analysis of Verum Focus-inducing Fronting in Spanish: the connection of this construction with irony cannot be understood if this kind of fronting is taken as an instance of focalization.

1. Introduction

It is commonly assumed that irony is mainly a pragmatic phenomenon, one in which the context and the situation play a crucial role. Yet in Spanish – at least in the Castilian variety, the only one we will consider in this paper – there are some utterances that seem to be consistently interpreted as having a salient ironic reading. The cases in point include examples like the following (coming both from oral and written sources):

- (1) a. *Mucho interés tienes tú en la conferencia...*
much interest have.PRS.2SG you in the conference
‘A great interest you have in the conference...’ (Barraji3n L3pez 2009)

- b. *Bastante te importa a ti lo que me*
 enough you.OBJ matter.PRS.3SG to you.OBL it that me.OBJ
ocurre...
 happen.PRS.3SG
 ‘A lot you care about what happens to me!’ (Barrajón López 2009)
- c. *¡Bueno está el maestro!* 
 good be.PRS.3SG the teacher
 ‘In a fine mood the teacher is!’ (Álvarez Quintero, *Los leales*)
- d. *¡Contenta me tienes!*
 happy me.OBJ have.PRS.2SG
 ‘You have me happy! / Very happy I am with you!’
- (2) a. *¡A ti te voy a dejar el coche!*
 to you.OBL you.OBJ go.PRS.1SG to let the car
 ‘To you I’ll be lending my car!’
- b. *¡A las ocho vamos a llegar!*
 at the eight go.PRS.1PL to arrive
 ‘At eight we’ll be arriving!’
- (3) a. *¡A buenas horas llegas!*
 at good hours arrive.PRS.2SG
 ‘A fine time you’re arriving! / A very fine time for you to arrive!’
- b. *Bonita faena me has hecho.*
 nice job me.OBJ have.PRS.2SG done
 ‘A nice chore you’ve done for me!’
- c. *¡Floja gresca he armado yo en la rebotica...!*
 loose fuss have.PRS.1SG kicked-up I in the back-room
 ‘A real fuss did I kick up in the back room!’ (Álvarez Quintero, *Los leales*)
- (4) a. *¡Para canciones estoy yo!*
 for songs be.PRS.1SG I
 ‘I’m not in the mood for songs! / Songs is not what I’m the mood for now!’
- b. *¡Con monsergas se anda este!*
 With drivels CL go.PRS.3SG this-one
 ‘Drivel he talks!’

According to a survey conducted with 147 informants (see Escandell-Vidal & Leonetti, forthcoming, for details), speakers tend to see the ironic interpretation of these examples as the most straightforward and natural option even in the absence of other specific linguistic (tone of voice) and contextual (situation; previous exchanges...) factors. Without any contextual clues for interpretation, 87% of our subjects judged the examples as always or usually ironic.

What is remarkable about these examples is that all of them share a crucial grammatical property, namely, a marked word order, in which one of the constituents has been moved to the initial position.

This fact raises some general questions: Why do these utterances apparently get an ironic interpretation by default? Is there any connection between fronting and irony? Is fronting a fundamental device in the expression of irony? These are the issues we want to deal with.

The organization of the paper is as follows. Section 2 is devoted to present Sperber and Wilson's ideas about irony, which will serve as a starting point from the pragmatic side. In Section 3 we will try to determine what kind of fronting construction is involved in Spanish 'ironic' examples. Section 4 addresses our main questions and suggests a pragmatic account based on the relationship between irony and emphasis. In Section 5 we analyze other connections between word order and ironic interpretations, with special attention to VSX order in Spanish and the absence of partition in information structure. Finally, Section 6 will gather our main conclusions.

2. Irony

2.1 Irony as echoic use

The approach to irony that we will endorse in this paper follows the lines of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1981, 1990, 1986/1995, 1998, Wilson & Sperber 1992, 2012, Wilson 2006, forthcoming, Curc6 2000, Yus 2009, Rosales 2011; see also Reyes 1994 for a very similar perspective within the Spanish research tradition). According to this view, irony is a pragmatic phenomenon that "consists in echoing a thought attributed to an individual, a group or to people in general, and expressing a mocking, skeptical or critical attitude to this thought" (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 125). What leads to an ironic interpretation is the existence of an obvious mismatch between the representation expressed in the attributed thought and the actual state of affairs, which makes the utterance inadequate because of its "blatant irrelevance when taken at face value" (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 344). Thus, irony indicates "that a proposition the speaker might otherwise be taken to endorse is ludicrously inadequate" (Wilson & Sperber 2012: 123).

The inappropriateness of the utterance with respect to the situation is a common feature in all accounts of irony (cf. for example Gibbs (2012: 104): "Irony is particularly notable for its ability to forcefully highlight the discrepancy between some reality and what some people expected or desired.") But there are two claims that make Sperber & Wilson's characterization of irony quite different from others: (i) ironic interpretations involve the attribution of a thought and (ii) the role of irony is to express an attitude towards this thought.

The first claim has to do with the source of irony. According to the relevance-theoretic approach, irony involves the attribution of a thought, not necessarily an utterance or a speech act as suggested in Clark and Gerrig's (1984, 1990) 'pretence account' (see also Récanati 2000, 2007, Currie 2002, 2006). Of course, the echoing can target an actual utterance (i.e., an instance of verbal public behavior) occurring in the immediate discourse, but the attribution is not limited to linguistic expressions. In fact, also private thoughts can be echoed, whether of an individual (including the speaker's own at a different time), a certain kind of individuals or even thoughts and expectations shared by people in general (cf. Reyes 1994 for a similar proposal). Thus, an ironic interpretation can be recognized as long as the audience can recognize that an attribution is being made. This crucially involves "a displacement from the here and now" (Curcó 2000: 262), which requires certain mindreading capacities (namely, the ability to form second-order metarepresentations), emerging around the age of six (Happé 1993, Curcó 2000; see Wilson, forthcoming, for a more detailed discussion). Needless to say, the more salient the echoed thought, the easier it is for the ironic utterance to be adequately interpreted, as has been shown by empirical research (Jorgensen, Miller & Sperber 1984, Kreuz & Glucksberg 1989, Kreuz & Roberts 1995, Keenan & Quigley 1999, Kapogianni 2011). Like in other forms of attribution, the relationship between the echoed and the echoing representation in irony is one of resemblance, not of absolute identity. The attributed thought has to be recognizable, though not necessarily a verbatim duplicate of its source. In this sense, irony is not different from other utterances, for which there is no such truthfulness or identity requirement either. An utterance constitutes a form of ostensive behavior that makes manifest (or more manifest) a set of assumptions, but these assumptions need not be thoroughly and literally encoded (Wilson 2000).

The second main idea in Sperber and Wilson's approach has to do with the intention an ironic utterance conveys and its communicative role. According to classical approaches, irony is a kind of trope conveying a figurative meaning, usually considered to be a reversal of the expressed thought (see Partington 2007, 2011 for a recent defense of this view). The Gricean approach to irony (Grice 1967/1989) represents a modern version of this stance: irony is a blatant violation of the maxim of quality and the speaker's intended meaning (typically contrary or contradictory to the one expressed) can be worked out by some regular process of inversion of the overt content. Along similar lines, Giora (1995) has suggested that irony is a form of indirect negation, in which what is conveyed is not the opposite, but the negation of the proposition expressed (see Curcó 2000 for a detailed discussion of this approach). Thus, both the classical and the (neo)-Gricean approaches put the emphasis on the propositional side of the utterance. For the relevance-theoretic approach, in contrast, irony has to do mainly with the expression of an attitude, not of the content. In fact, the speaker's aim is "not to provide information about the content of an attributed thought, but to convey her [i.e., the speaker's] own attitude or reaction to that thought" (Wilson & Sperber 2012: 128–129; see also Wilson, forthcoming). Both the literal meaning of the utterance

and the speaker's attitude towards it have to be reconstructed during the process of interpretation, as experimental research has shown (Jorgensen, Miller & Sperber 1984). But it is precisely the expression of an attitude that explains why irony exists at all; otherwise, why should speakers bother to convey their messages by saying the opposite of what they really mean? In addition, it is easy to see that the interpretive effects of an ironic utterance are not equivalent to the effects of its opposite literal counterpart. Irony, thus, always conveys an attitude and this attitude is a dissociative one: it is directed primarily towards a thought and, secondarily, towards the individual or group endorsing it. Dissociation usually involves a critical stance towards the echoed representation (as in the case of sarcasm), but there are also positive and affiliative ironic utterances (a figure known as *asteism*; see Gibbs 2000, Alba-Juez 2000, Norrick 2003, Haugh 2010, Alba-Juez & Attardo, [forthcoming](#)). It is precisely the expression of the speaker's (dissociative) attitude that makes it possible to distinguish irony from other forms of thought-attribution, such as reported (indirect) speech.

The specificity of the account suggested by Sperber & Wilson can be summarized in the following words:

[The] recovery [of irony] depends, first, on a recognition of the utterance as echoic; second, on the 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 dissociation. (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 240)

2.2 Are there linguistic cues for irony?

As any pragmatic phenomenon, irony can, in principle, rest on contextual cues only, so no overt mark is needed to indicate that the utterance is intended as ironic. However, it is not unusual that speakers provide different kinds of indications to make it easier for their audience to identify the intended set of communicated assumptions.

The contribution of overt linguistic indicators to the interpretation of irony falls – we want to argue – into three main categories: first, those making more evident the inappropriateness of the echoed thought; second, those helping the audience perceive the attribution, i.e., indicating that the speaker is uttering a thought s/he does not endorse at the present time; and third, those marking the speaker's (dissociative) attitude towards the attributed thought.

Prosody and tone of voice are, by far, the most extensively analyzed linguistic marks (Bryant & Fox Tree 2002, 2005, Bryant 2010, 2011, Padilla García 2009, 2011). They can provide guiding cues for all three categories: the attributive nature of the utterance (by means of using a voice quality manifestly different from that of the speaker), the expression of the speaker's attitude (by a mocking intonation) and the inappropriateness of the echoed thought (by highlighting some crucial words). It is not so easy, in contrast, to find morphological and syntactic markers to the same effect: ironical utterances reject the use of overt marks of attribution or reported speech

(Attardo 2000) and the explicit indication that the speaker is being ironic is totally excluded as well -hence the contrast between *To speak metaphorically*, which is perfectly acceptable, and *#To speak ironically*, which is not (Grice 1967/1989: 54).

Nevertheless, the examples in (1)–(4) suggest that there is something more to be said about the contribution of grammar to the salience of ironic interpretations. What we want to argue is that word order, together with other grammatical devices, can be an indirect means of making more salient the inappropriateness of the echoed thought, thus favoring the ironic interpretation. This is precisely, as we will show below, what fronting does in Spanish. But before developing this idea, some considerations about marked word orders are due.

3. Fronting

When we say that the examples in (1)–(4) have a salient ironic interpretation, we mean that, even out of context, they are straightforwardly judged as ironic by most native speakers. Since the only linguistic property all these examples seem to share is the fronting of one of their constituents, we will begin by examining what kind of fronting they are instances of.

3.1 Kinds of fronting

For Spanish, like for other Romance languages, it is usually assumed that the fronting of non-interrogative constituents falls into two main classes: clitic left dislocation and contrastive focalization. The examples in (5) and (6) illustrate these two possibilities:

- (5) [_T *La casa*], *Juan la vendió*.
 the house Juan it sell.PST.3SG
 ‘The house, Juan sold it.’
- (6) [_F *La CASA*] *vendió Juan*.
 the house sell.PST.3SG Juan
 ‘The HOUSE (is what) Juan sold.’

In clitic left dislocation constructions, the fronted constituent is phonologically deaccented, is co-referential with a resumptive clitic and is interpreted as a topic. If it is the object that is dislocated, the subject can occupy its canonical position before the verb. Clitic dislocation can be iterated and can occur in both root and embedded sentences (cf. Zubizarreta 1998, 1999, Alexiadou 2006 for details).

Contrastive focalization, on the other hand, is characterized by emphatic stress (indicated by small capitals) on the fronted constituent, which is interpreted as a highlighted element selected from a contextually given set; consequently, the remaining alternative members of the set are excluded. Focalization differs from clitic dislocation

in a number of syntactic properties: there are no resumptive clitics, there is only one contrastive focus slot, and the construction shows all the typical features of operator-variable configurations, such as subject-verb inversion, sensitivity to island contexts and weak cross-over effects (Zubizarreta 1998, 1999, Szendrői 2006).

What kind of fronting can be found in examples (1)–(4)? Apparently, these do not fall squarely into either category (cf. Vallduví 1992, Quer 2002, Barbosa 2009, Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal 2009, Cruschina 2011). To begin with, resumptive clitics are excluded, as shown by the ungrammaticality of (7):

- (7) a. **Mucho interés lo tienes tú en la conferencia...*
 much interest it have.PRS.2SG you in the conference...
 b. **Bonita faena me la has hecho.*
 nice job me.OBJ it have.PRS.2SG done

In this sense, the examples in (1)–(4) resemble focalization. However, the fronted constituent does not bear any emphatic stress, so the examples in (8) are not equivalent to those in (1a) and (3b):

- (8) a. *Mucho INTERÉS tienes tú en la conferencia...*
 much interest-EMPH have.PRS.2SG you in the conference...
 b. *Bonita FAENA me has hecho.*
 nice job-EMPH me.OBJ have.PRS.2SG done

Like in focalization, the subject must occur after the verb, as shown in (9):

- (9) a. *Mucho interés tienes tú... /*
 much interest have.PRS.2SG you /
 **Mucho interés tú tienes...*
 much interest you have.PRS.2SG
 b. *Bonita faena me has hecho tú. / *Bonita faena tú*
 nice job me.OBJ have.PRS.2SG done you / nice job you
me has hecho.
 me.OBJ have.PRS.2SG done

However, the interpretation is totally different from the contrastive focus reading triggered by fronted, emphatic foci. In (1)–(4) the fronted constituents are not interpreted as elements being singled out from a discourse set of competing alternatives; actually, they cannot co-occur with an explicit mention of the discarded options:

- (10) a. [?]*Mucho interés tienes tú, no poco...*
 much interest have.PRS.2SG you not few
 ‘A lot of interest you have, not a little...’
 b. [?]*Bonita faena me has hecho, no fea.*
 nice job me.OBJ have.PRS.2SG done not dirty
 ‘Nice job you’ve done on me, not a bad one.’

Thus, the fronted element is not interpreted as a contrastive focus, but it is not an informational focus either. The examples in (1)–(4) cannot be used as adequate answers to information-seeking questions, as shown by the oddness of the dialogues in (11) and (12):

(11) A: – ¿Crees que tengo interés?
 think.PRS.2SG that have.PRS.1SG interest
 ‘Do you think I have interest?’



B: – #Mucho interés tienes tú...
 much interest have.PRS.2SG you
 ‘A great interest you have...’

(12) A: – ¿Qué he hecho yo?
 what have.PRS.2SG done I
 ‘What have I done?’

B: – #Bonita faena me has hecho...
 nice job me.OBJ have.PRS.2SG done
 ‘A nice chore you’ve done for me...’

Finally, the fronted constituent cannot be interpreted as a topic. In fact, bare singulars such as *bonita faena* and *mucho interés* could only qualify as contrastive topics under very restrictive contextual conditions¹, but certainly not with the same intonational contour and the same interpretation that characterize the ironic use of (1)–(4).

The construction illustrated in (1)–(4), thus, seems to have ‘mixed’ features. Its basic syntactic properties can be summarized as follows:

- It is derived by A-bar movement.
- It displays subject-verb inversion (with the corresponding requirement of adjacency of the fronted constituent and the verb).
- It cannot be considered as a case of focus movement (neither contrastive focalization, nor informational focus fronting).

The properties we have considered so far are not exclusive of the examples that get salient ironic readings. The examples in (13), for instance, have the same grammatical properties: they do not allow clitic resumption (14), the fronted constituent is neither a topic (15) nor a focus (16), and fronting forces subject inversion (17). However, the ironic reading is not salient in these cases:

1. *Mucho interés*, for instance, could make a contrastive topic in the following context, where it reproduces the form of a previously mentioned constituent:

- (i) Q: ¿Pero hay alguien aquí que tenga mucho interés?
 but there-be.PRS.3SG someone here that have.SBJ.3SG much interest
- A: *Hombre, sí. Mucho interés, tiene Pedro, y también Laura.*
 man yes much interest have.PRS.3SG Pedro and also Laura

- (13) a. *Nada tengo que añadir.*
nothing have.PRS.1SG that add
'I have nothing to add.'
- b. *Algo debe saber.*
something must.PRS.3SG know
'(S)he must know something.'
- c. *Poco te puedo decir.*
little you.OBJ can.PRS.1SG say
'Little can I say to you.'
- d. *Predijo que vendería la casa, y la casa vendió.*
foretell.PST.3SG that sell.COND.3SG the house and the house sell.PST.3SG
'(S)he foretold that (s)he'd sell the house, and selling the house (s)he did.'
- (14) a. **Nada lo tengo que añadir.*
nothing it have.PRS.1SG that add
- b. **Algo lo debe saber.*
something it must.PRS.3SG know
- c. **Poco te lo puedo decir.*
little you.OBJ it can.PRS.1SG say
- d. *#Predijo que vendería la casa, y la casa la vendió.*
foretell.PST.3SG that sell.COND.3SG the house and the house it sell.PST.3SG
- (15) a. **En cuanto a nada, (lo) tengo que añadir.*
as-for nothing (it) have.PRS.1SG that add
- b. **En cuanto a algo, (lo) debe saber.*
as-for something, (it) must.PRS.3SG know
- c. **En cuanto a poco, te (lo) puedo decir.*
as-for little you.OBJ (it) can.PRS.1SG say
- d. *#Predijo que vendería la casa, y en cuanto a la casa, (la) vendió.*
foretell.PST.3SG that sell.COND.3SG the house, and the house (it) sell.PST.3SG
- (16) a. **NADA tengo que añadir, no algo.*
nothing-EMPH have.PRS.1SG that add not something
- b. **ALGO debe saber, no nada.*
something-EMPH must.PRS.3SG know not nothing
- c. **POCO te puedo decir, no mucho.*
little-EMPH you.OBJ can.PRS.1SG say not much

- d. *Predijo que vendería la casa, y la CASA
foretell.PST.3SG that sell.COND.3SG the house and the house-EMPH
vendió, no el coche.
sell.PST.3SG not the car
- (17) a. Nada {*yo tengo /^{OK} tengo yo} que añadir.
nothing {*I have.PRS.1SG have.PRS.1SG I} that add
- b. Algo {*él debe /^{OK} debe él} de saber.
something {*he must.PRS.3SG must.PRS.3SG he} of know
- c. Poco {*yo te puedo decir /^{OK} te puedo decir yo.}
little {*I you.OBJ can.PRS.1SG say you.OBJ can.PRS.1SG say I}

As for the fronted element, it is not restricted to argument NPs or DPs; on the contrary, it can belong to different syntactic categories, as shown in the examples below:

(18) Noun phrases

- a. A alguien conocerás ¿no?
to someone know.FUT.2SG not
'You must know someone.'
- b. Bastante trabajo tengo ya.
enough work have.PRS.1SG already
'I have already enough work.'
- c. Algún ruido debiste oír...
some noise must.PST.2SG hear
'You must have heard some noise.'
- d. ...y el Quijote se leyó.
...and the Quijote 3REFL read.PST.3SG
'...and read the Quijote (s)he did.'

(19) Adjectival phrases

- a. Muy harto debe estar para contestar así...
very fed.up must.PRS.3SG be to answer that.way
'Very fed up indeed he must be to answer you that way.'
- b. A: – ¿Eres de Sevilla?
be.PRS.2SG from Seville?
'A: Are you from Seville?'
B: – Sevillano soy...
from.Seville be.PRS.1SG
B: – Sevillian I am.'

(20) Adverbials

- a. Pronto te has cansado ¿eh?
soon you.OBJ have.PRS.2SG got.tired
'(So) soon you've tired yourself out, haven't you?'

- b. *Ahí lo tienes.*
 there it.OBJ have.PRS.2SG
 ‘There you have it.’

(21) Prepositional phrases

- a. *Hasta aquí podíamos llegar.*
 till here can.PST.1PL arrive
 ‘Up to here could we get!’
- b. *Con la Iglesia hemos topado.*
 with the Church have.PRS.1PL bumped
 ‘The Church we’ve bumped into.’
- c. *De poco te servirá quejarte ahora.*
 of little you.OBL serve.FUT.3SG complain now
 ‘Little good will it do to complain now.’
- d. *Por algo será.*
 for something be.FUT.3SG
 ‘There must be some reason for it.’

Leaving aside for the moment the fact that only some of them ((1)–(4)), but not all, get the salient ironic interpretation, the rest of the grammatical properties of the examples presented so far suggest that the construction under discussion can be assimilated neither to left dislocation nor to focalization, so it should represent a third kind of fronting pattern.

One could wonder what syntactic configuration corresponds to this kind of fronting. There are basically two options for the analysis of this pattern in formal syntax. One exploits the hypothesis that the preverbal subject position (Spec,IP) in Spanish is, following Vallduví (1992) and Zubizarreta (1998), an unspecified, all-purpose, A-bar position that may host a number of different constituents (from *wh*-phrases to argumental DPs and PPs); this position is thus a plausible landing site for fronted non-contrastive phrases of any kind. The other one, well represented in Cruschina (2011: 111–117), requires a more articulated functional structure at the left periphery of the sentence: assuming that topics, contrastive foci and *wh*-phrases target different functional projections inside the CP domain, it is possible to assimilate the fronting pattern to the kind of non-contrastive Focus Fronting found in languages like Sicilian and Sardinian, and postulate that fronted constituents are moved to the peripheral position that serves as the landing site for informational foci and some quantificational operators. This approach is based on the idea that in such cases the fronted phrase is to be interpreted as focus, as the syntax is essentially the same as the syntax of Focus Fronting (cf. Gallego 2007, Batllori & Hernanz 2011). Our previous considerations have already made clear that we cannot endorse such a proposal: we have shown that the third kind of fronting must not be assimilated to focalization. As a consequence, we have a preference for the first of the two options presented, where fronting is not triggered by

any [Focus] feature. In general terms, we would favor a syntactic analysis with a minimal functional structure in the left periphery and with movement not necessarily triggered by a feature-checking mechanism. As this paper does not deal with the syntax of fronting in Spanish, we will not engage into further elaboration of these issues.

In the next section we will present an account of the interpretive properties of this construction.

3.2 Verum Focus-inducing Fronting

Recent literature on Spanish has suggested an approach to the above examples in terms of focalization (RAE 2009, Barrajón López 2009) or ‘mild focalization’ (Gallego 2007, Batllori & Hernanz 2011). In this section we will present a different analysis, based on Leonetti and Escandell-Vidal (2009). While we do agree that the syntax of this kind of fronting resembles that of focalization in many respects, we maintain that neither the phonological status of the fronted constituent nor its interpretation can be adequately captured by an analysis in terms of movement to a focus position. Moreover, we will argue that the interpretive properties of these utterances are not compatible with any kind of split of the overt constituents of the sentence in a focus/background articulation.

Since the fronted element in (1)–(4) is neither a topic nor a focus, what can the effect of fronting be in these cases? The effect of fronting without phonological detachment or phonological emphasis is, we believe, that of preventing any of the sentential constituents, including the fronted element, from receiving an interpretation as focal material. As a consequence, there cannot be any kind of informational partition.

The behavior of postverbal subjects provides strong evidence for this claim. It is well known that in Spanish informational focus falls on the rightmost element in the sentence. The postverbal subject in (22a) is in fact taken as narrow focus, at least in the most natural reading of the sentence. In contrast, the same postverbal subject in (22b), where fronting of the object has taken place, can no longer be interpreted as narrow focus:

- (22) a. *Me ha hecho una bonita faena Ernesto.*
 me.OBJ have.PRS.3SG done a nice job Ernesto
 ‘It has been Ernesto to do me a good favor.’
- b. *Bonita faena me ha hecho Ernesto.*
 nice job me.OBJ have.PRS.3SG done Ernesto

Notice that *bonita faena* is not an informational focus either, as already pointed out. This shows that fronting precludes any focus/background partition in (22b).

Now, if there is no informational partition, all the constituents of the sentence should belong to the same informational region. An obvious possibility for the interpretation of examples like (1)–(4) is taking them asthetic, all-focus structures. However, this cannot be the case either, since sentences with this kind of fronting are not adequate as answers to questions seeking for all-new information. The dialogue in (23) provides an example:

- (23) A: – ¿Qué pasa?
 what happen.PRS.3SG
 ‘What’s up?’
- B: – He oído algo. / #Algo he oído.
 have.PRS.2SG heard something / something have.PRS.2SG heard
 ‘I heard something.’

As argued in Leonetti and Escandell-Vidal (2009), the only way to explain how the sentences under consideration are interpreted is by treating them as cases of ‘verum focus’ or ‘positive polarity focus’, i.e. a case of narrow focus falling on the positive polarity of the proposition (cf. Höhle 1992, Romero & Han 2004, Romero 2006, Féry 2007, Krifka 2007, Gutzmann & Castroviejo-Miró 2011).

According to our proposal, what the third kind of fronting does is to block the assignment of a focus-structure to the overt sentential constituents: neither the fronted constituent nor the postverbal subject can receive narrow focus. However, every sentence must have a focus. In this situation, the only remaining possibility is to force a ‘verum focus’ interpretation, i.e. one with the focus falling on the positive polarity, which in this case is a non-overt constituent. We have called the syntactic construction illustrated in (1)–(4) VFF, as a short name for ‘Verum Focus inducing Fronting’. VFF does not mean, then, that the fronted constituent *is* the ‘verum focus’, but that this kind of fronting gives as a result a ‘verum focus’ interpretation of the whole structure.

When focus affects the polarity and the polarity is not overtly expressed, all the visible constituents of the sentence are the background. This means that the sentence itself does have a focus/background partition where narrow focus falls on the polarity, but there is no informational partition among its overt components.

The idea that the third sort of fronting induces a ‘verum focus’ interpretation is, we claim, the most adequate theoretical tool for capturing the emphatic interpretation of sentences such as (1)–(4). This view has a number of welcome results. First, all the discourse properties of VFF sentences can be derived from the interaction of the semantics of ‘verum focus’ and contextual information. Proving this claim is far beyond the limits of this paper (see Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal 2009: §4, Escandell-Vidal & Leonetti 2009 for a detailed examination of the discourse contexts where VFF structures fit in well). The arguments can be summarized along the following lines. The effect of narrow focus on a constituent is well known: the constituent under its scope is highlighted and its possible alternatives are discarded. In the present case, focus on the positive polarity of a sentence is not only a means of asserting its propositional content, but also of rejecting the corresponding negative proposition; as a consequence, the propositional content is asserted in a very strong way. Since the focus falls on the polarity – here, a tacit constituent – the overt constituents in the sentence are treated as a whole as representing background information (i.e., already present, in a sense or another, in the common ground). Reintroducing and asserting a background assumption contributes to the strength of the assertion. This is exactly what the discourse

contexts of VFF show: the speaker either reintroduces a propositional content under discussion and chooses the affirmative, or rejects a previous negation of the same content. What we call ‘emphasis’ is therefore the result of focus on positive polarity, i.e., of reasserting background information and removing from the context any competing assumption (see Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal 2009 for details). It also explains why this construction – but not “regular” focus fronting – is incompatible with negation, as shown in Escandell-Vidal & Leonetti (2011) (cf. **Pronto no te has cansado*).

This is also the reason why VFF sentences are not felicitously used “out of the blue”: they impose certain requirements on the context that can be traced back to the nature of ‘verum focus’, as acknowledged by Gutzmann and Castroviejo-Miró (2011). For all we know, no alternative accounts of how sentences showing VFF fit into the context seem to be available based on the idea that the fronted constituent is focalized.

In addition to the VFF construction, there are other ways of expressing ‘verum focus’. Languages can resort to phonological, morphological and syntactic devices to this effect (see Escandell-Vidal & Leonetti 2009, Escandell-Vidal 2011 for a survey of grammatical and phonological means in Spanish). The most transparent way is the syntactic pattern “*sí que* + sentence”, which makes explicit the partition between the polarity (*sí* ‘yes’) and the propositional content. Another equivalent pattern is “*vaya si* + sentence”, which is commonly used in informal conversation (see Escandell-Vidal & Leonetti 2009 for an analysis of the discourse conditions for each alternative pattern):

- (24) a. *Sí que te has cansado pronto...*
 yes that you.OBJ have.PRS.2SG got-tired soon
 ‘You DID get tired soon...’
- b. *Vaya si te has cansado pronto...*
 wow if you.OBJ have.PRS.2SG got-tired soon
 ‘Gee, you’ve gotten tired fast!’
- c. *Pronto te has cansado...*
 soon you.OBJ have.PRS.2SG got-tired
 ‘Soon you have tired yourself out.’

The notion of ‘verum focus’ may help understand the set of properties that fronting in (1)–(4) and (18)–(21) shares with other fronting constructions such as that of the manner adverb *bien* ‘well’ in (25) – a structure thoroughly investigated in Hernanz (2006, 2010) and Batllori and Hernanz (2011):

- (25) a. *Bien (que) cantó la soprano.*
 well (that) sing.PST.3SG the soprano
 ‘Of course the soprano sang.’
- b. *Bien (que) habló el decano ayer.*
 well (that) speak.PST.3SG the dean yesterday
 ‘Of course the dean spoke yesterday.’

As Hernanz rightly points out, fronted *bien* counts as an assertive particle that adds an emphatic value. The sentences in (25) are emphatic affirmative sentences just like the instances of VFF we are considering. Moreover, we claim that fronting of *bien* is a particular instance of VFF, since both the syntactic and the semantic properties of ‘*bien*-constructions’ and VFF happen to be the same. One further argument for treating *bien* fronting as a particular case of VFF is that *bien* cannot co-occur with VFF, as Hernanz (2010: 57) points out, clearly because they represent the same kind of fronting operation.

- (26) a. **Bien mucho has trabajado tú esta semana.*
 well a-lot have.PRS.2SG worked you this week
- b. **Bien bastante hemos hablado ya de este tema.*
 well enough have.PRS.1PL talked already about this matter

VFF is not found only in Spanish. Other languages also have fronting constructions with similar properties, which provides further support for our proposal. Fronting and focalization in Sardinian, for instance, have recently been studied in Mensching & Remberger (2010) and Remberger (2010, this volume), among others. The authors point out that non-topical fronted elements in Sardinian can be interpreted as contrastive/emphatic foci, as informational foci, and – what is more relevant for us – as triggers of a ‘verum focus’ reading, with emphasis on the truth value of the sentence as a whole, both in interrogative and in declarative sentences conveying emphasis or surprise by means of a special ‘exclamative’ intonation. Sardinian, thus, exhibits a construction where fronting contributes to the expression of ‘verum focus’, and such a construction closely resembles Spanish VFF. Our approach to VFF can also extend to other phenomena such as ‘negative preposing’ and ‘VP preposing’ in English. Future research might provide us with new instances of the same construction in different languages.

To sum up, we have enough evidence in favor of our analysis of a certain type of fronting in Spanish as VFF, that is, as a movement rule that places a constituent in initial position, blocks all possibilities of informational partition on explicit constituents, and triggers a ‘verum focus’ interpretation as a last resort effect. It is important to stress that what makes our proposal different from others is the claim that, although VFF might look syntactically similar to focalization, its contribution to interpretation is clearly different, since the fronted constituent is not focalized in any sense.

4. Irony and VFF

4.1 Why VFF favors irony

After the considerations made in the previous sections, we are now ready to present an account of the connection between irony and VFF. We need to explain why the

connection between irony and VFF is so salient in examples such as (1)–(4). Nevertheless, we have to keep in mind that not all VFF sentences are necessarily ironic.

The first point we want to make clear is that VFF does not encode irony in any sense. As pointed out in Section 2, we view irony as a pragmatic phenomenon, where the only necessary condition is the existence of a manifest mismatch between the content of an utterance and the actual state of affairs; this perceived gap is interpretively bridged by considering that the speaker does not actually endorse the content of the utterance but is merely attributing it to a different individual. Therefore, what we want to explain is why VFF can make irony more salient in certain cases. We will see that VFF is just one of several factors conspiring to favor ironic interpretations.

Our proposal is that the connection between irony and VFF is built on the notion of emphasis. Recall that ‘emphasis’ is the result of reasserting background information and removing from the context any competing assumption. This is what ‘verum focus’ does, by placing the focus on sentence polarity. It is therefore the emphatic status of VFF constructions that makes them adequate means for conveying irony.

To see how emphasis contributes to irony, consider the following situation. Someone makes a statement like (27) and afterwards it turns out to be false.

- (27) *Mañana tendremos un bonito día.*
 tomorrow have.FUT.1PL a beautiful day
 ‘Tomorrow we’ll have nice weather.’

An ironic speaker who wants to mock this wrong weather forecast can echo the thought in (27) by merely repeating it as it is. However, other things being equal, this is not the most effective way of being ironic. The native informants consulted agree that any of the sentences in (28) would be much better ways to convey an ironic remark than the mere repetition of (27).

- (28) a. *Bonito día tenemos hoy!*
 beautiful day have.PRS.1PL today
 ‘Nice day we have today!’
 b. *¡Sí que tenemos hoy un bonito día!*
 yes that have.PRS.1PL today a beautiful day
 ‘We do have a nice day today!’
 c. *¡Vaya si tenemos un bonito día hoy!*
 wow if have.PRS.1PL a beautiful day today
 ‘Sure we have a nice day today!’

Notice that in (28) the speaker is not just repeating the original statement in (27), but introducing a representation that resembles its content.

Why are these forms of attribution preferred over the more literal ones to make an ironic remark? What do they add to the interpretation? The crucial point here is that the three sentences in (28) are instances of ‘verum focus’ constructions, as we already

explained in Section 3.2: the first one is a case of VFF, where the constituent *bonito día* ('nice day') has been moved to the leftmost edge from its canonical postverbal position; the remaining two correspond to patterns where the positive polarity is made overt and detached from the propositional content. These 'verum focus' constructions make very strong, emphatic assertions that reject any competing proposition, particularly, their negative counterpart *non-p*. In the situation we are discussing, when the ironic speaker utters (28), it has to be manifest that *non-p* is actually the case, and so the mismatch between reality (*non-p*) and the propositional content (*p*) becomes evident.

Thus, by using a 'verum focus' construction, the ironic speaker is not merely attributing a thought to another individual or group; s/he is also adding emphasis to it, i.e., attributing them the strongest commitment to the validity of that thought. In other words, emphasis on the attributed representation indicates that the source individual is highly committed to its content. If an echoed thought that is manifestly wrong is presented under the form of an emphatic assertion, this contributes to making more salient its inappropriateness as a description of the real world. The contrast between the echoed thought and the actual state of affairs is thus highlighted. Our proposal is that the contribution of emphasis to ironic utterances boils down to widening the existing gap between the attributed representation and the actual state of affairs.

There must be a reason for mentioning a manifestly wrong, inadequate thought. A justification can be found by inferring that the speaker is trying to express a dissociative attitude towards that thought (and the individuals who entertain it). The echoed individuals or groups are wrong not only because of the content of one of their thoughts, but also because of the strength with which they are alleged to sustain it. The more a representation is emphasised, the more the individual or group that entertained it is ridiculed when their claim proves wrong. Emphasis on an inadequate thought results in a caricaturizing effect. This is not surprising since exaggeration, caricature and hyperbole have been considered as resources that typically co-occur in ironic speech (cf. Kreuz & Roberts 1995, Norrick 2004, Rosales 2011).

Therefore, 'verum focus' is not at all a conventional means for being ironic, but the emphasis it adds to the wrong representation can be exploited to make clearer its inappropriateness when compared with (a very different) reality. The contribution of 'verum focus' constructions to irony is that of highlighting the (wrong) thought to make the contrast neater. Thus, VFF provides a clue for the ironic interpretation by making the perceived gap between an echoed thought and the actual state of affairs more salient.

This proposal provides an account of the connection between irony and fronting that cannot be obtained when other analyses of fronting are adopted. If the fronted constituent is characterized as an informational focus, the interpretive properties of the utterance – including its connections to emphasis, 'verum focus' and irony – remain unexplained. In contrast, when an analysis in terms of VFF is adopted, such connections are straightforward.

4.2 The need for additional cues

The previous considerations have made it clear how and why a VFF construction is particularly suited to expressing irony. This is not to say, of course, that all such constructions must receive an ironic interpretation. In this section we will show that the apparently ‘default’ ironic interpretation found in (1)–(4) is due to the co-occurrence of VFF with other grammatical factors that favor ironic interpretations and are completely independent of VFF (see Seto 1998, and the papers in Ruiz Gurillo and Padilla García (eds) 2009 for a review of the role of intonational cues, evidentials, derivational morphology and idioms, among other ironic “indicators”). A closer look at the relevant examples shows in fact that fronting alone is not enough to explain why the sentences in (1)–(4) have the ironic reading as the preferred one. It is therefore crucial to set apart the role that VFF may play in the derivation of ironic interpretations from the contribution that other elements of the Spanish grammatical system can make. We assume that none of them strictly encodes irony, but together they can guide the hearer towards an attributive and dissociative interpretation. Among the co-occurring grammatical factors, we will focus on two particularly significant devices: the futurate periphrasis and the prenominal position of adjectives in fronted constituents.

4.2.1 The “*ir a + infinitive*” periphrasis

The examples in (2), as well as the examples in (29), taken from Bosque (1980: 107), will suffice to realize that quite often VFF and the “*ir a + infinitive*” (‘*go to + infinitive*’) periphrastic construction appear together in utterances with a salient ironic interpretation:

- (29) a. *En dos horas vamos a llegar!*
 in two hours go.PRS.1PL to arrive
 ‘(Yeah, right) In two hours we’re going to arrive!’
- b. *Las historias de Antonio me voy a creer!*
 the tales of Antonio CL go.PRS.1SG to believe
 ‘(Yeah, right) Antonio’s stories I’m going to believe!’
- c. *Hasta las ocho voy a esperarte!*
 until the eight go.PRS.1SG to wait-you
 ‘(Yeah, right) Until eight I’m going to wait for you!’

In principle, “*ir a + infinitive*” in Spanish expresses someone’s disposition to do something in the future, and it differs from the simple future tense in several respects (see Bravo 2008 and RAE 2009: §28.8 for details). Yet, it happens to be an essential ingredient for getting ironical interpretations. The question is why it should be so.

A first striking fact that shows how the “*ir a + infinitive*” periphrasis constrains the interpretation is the clear weakening – if not the cancellation – of the likelihood of having an ironic reading when it is replaced by a simple future form, as in (30), or by a present form, as in (31):

- (30) a. *En dos horas llegaremos!*
 in two hours arrive.FUT.1PL
 'In two hours shall we arrive!'
- b. *Las historias de Antonio me creeré!*
 the tales of Antonio CL believe.FUT.1SG
 'Antonio's stories will I believe!'
- c. *Hasta las ocho te esperaré!*
 until the eight you.OBJ wait.FUT.1SG
 'Until eight shall I wait for you!'
- (31) a. *En dos horas llegamos!*
 in two hours arrive.PRS.1PL
 'In two hours we arrive!'
- b. *Las historias de Antonio me creo!*
 the tales of Antonio CL believe.PRS.1SG
 'Antonio's stories I believe!'
- c. *Hasta las ocho te espero!*
 until the eight you.OBJ wait.PRS.1SG
 'Until eight I wait for you!'

Significantly, the periphrasis is systematically included in other Spanish constructions that share a typically echoic flavor, when used as responses to previously uttered expressions, in contexts that Fernández Ramírez (1951/1986b: §93) dubs *'de exclamación, incredulidad y repulsa'* ('exclamation, incredulity and repulse'): the examples in (32), both from Fernández Ramírez (1951/1986b), are used by the speaker to communicate an attitude of incredulity, rebuke and disapproval with respect to the content of the previous utterance or some contextual implication of it.

- (32) a. - *¿A qué ocultarlo?*
 to what hide-it
 'Why hide it?'
- *No, a mí qué me vas a ocultar...*
 no to me.OBL what me.OBJ go.PRS.2SG to hide
 'Well, how do you think you can hide anything from me?'
- b. - *Habrá hablado de ti...*
 have.FUT.3SG talked of you.OBL
 'S/he must have spoken about you...'
- *¿Qué iba a hablar de mí si no me conocía!*
 what go.IMP.F.3SG to talk of me.OBL if not me.OBJ know.IMP.F.3SG
 'How could s/he have talked about me, if s/he didn't even know me!'

In these examples both attribution to a different speaker and the expression of a dissociative attitude are involved – significantly, two defining features of irony. Thus, any account of the role of the periphrasis in ironic utterances in Spanish should also be able to cover the use illustrated in (32). Again, the simple future is excluded in (32).


Another interesting fact is that in all these cases “*ir a* + infinitive” can be felicitously replaced by the deontic periphrasis “*haber de* + infinitive” ‘have to + infinitive’. The examples in (33) are natural paraphrases of those in (32).



- (33) a. *En dos horas hemos de llegar!*
 in two hours have.PRS.1PL of arrive
 ‘In two hours we’re to arrive!’
- b. *Las historias de Antonio me he de creer!*
 the tales of Antonio CL have.PRS.1SG of believe
 ‘Antonio’s stories I’m to believe!’
- c. *Hasta las ocho he de esperarte!*
 until the eight have.PRS.1SG of wait-you
 ‘Until eight I’m to wait for you!’

In (33) the ironic reading is again particularly salient, though the ‘*haber de* version’ may have an archaic, old-fashioned flavor – a fact related to the general decrease of use of the *haber de*-periphrasis. Therefore, there must be a common feature at the basis of this similarity. Our tentative proposal can be developed along the following lines. Both periphrases contribute a modal component of necessity or obligation. This is very clear in the case of deontic ‘*haber de*’ and maybe not so much in the case of ‘*ir a*’. However, it becomes more evident when the ‘*ir a*’ periphrasis is seen as indicating epistemic necessity. Notice, in fact, that ‘*ir a*’ focuses on the initial phase of an event; now, this can be understood either as expressing the strong intention to carry it out, or as actually indicating that its preparatory phases have already been accomplished. In either case, the event itself is presented as a necessary, unavoidable outcome of the initial phase.



If this characterization is on the right track, then we can provide a common account of the occurrence of the two periphrases in ironic utterances. They both indicate necessity, so they express the speaker’s strong commitment to the truth of the proposition, which is presented as an unavoidable result. When the proposition is found inappropriate as a description of the actual state of affairs, the expression of strong commitment makes the inappropriateness of the utterance more salient, which can lead the hearer towards an ironic interpretation. This effect cannot be obtained by means of the future tense, which lacks this kind of modal necessity component. Therefore, in the ironic use of examples such as (32) and (33), a thought is attributed to an individual who presents a certain state of affairs as necessary; when the course of events shows that her/his prediction is wrong, the strength of her/his commitment makes the gap between the propositional content and the actual state of affairs more

salient. The contribution of the periphrases to favoring ironic interpretations, then, boils down to highlighting the inappropriateness of the echoed thought, i.e., to the very same effect obtained via the ‘verum focus’ constructions.

The periphrases and VFF are thus two independent grammatical devices with a very similar effect: they both increase the speaker’s commitment towards a thought. If this thought proves wrong, the inadequacy gets highlighted. When they are combined, these two mechanisms reinforce each other. The systematic connection between the modal periphrases and echoic use represents a further argument for Sperber & Wilson’s echoic theory of irony. 

- (34) a.  *A buenas horas llegas!*
 b. *Bonita faena me has hecho.*
 c.  *Floja gresca he armado yo en la rebotica a cuenta de Gustavo!*
 (Álvarez Quintero, *Los leales*)

As most native speakers would acknowledge, many Spanish sentences corresponding to this pattern have undergone some sort of idiomaticization or lexicalization process and have become ‘ironic formulas’ (see Kreutz & Roberts 1995, Alba-Juez 1998 for the conventionalization of ironic meanings in certain English adjectives, such as *cool*, *awesome*, *groovy*...). This is the case of the examples in (35):

- (35) a.  *Menudo lío has armado!*
 small fuss have.PRS.2SG kicked-up
 ‘What a fuss you’ve kicked up!’
 b.  *Valiente día ha elegido para visitas!*
 brave day have.PRS.3SG chosen for visits
 (Fernández Ramírez 1951/1986a: 85)
 ‘What a day he’s picked for the visit!’

Certain grammatical features of (35) provide clear evidence for idiomaticization. The first one is that the fronted NP lacks a determiner, which would be impossible with a canonical word order (i.e. without fronting), as shown in (36):

- (36) a. **Has armado menudo lío.*
 have.PRS.2SG kicked-up small fuss
 (cf. *#Has armado un lío menudo.*)
 have.PRS.2SG kicked-up a fuss small
 b. **Ha elegido valiente día para visitas.*
 have.PRS.3SG chosen brave day for visits
 (cf. *#Ha elegido un día valiente...*)
 have.PRS.3SG chosen a day brave

The second one is the prenominal position of the adjective (*menudo*, *valiente*), obligatorily associated with fronting in these cases, but optional in the rest of constructions.

- (37) a. **Lío menudo has armado.*
 fuss small have.PRS.2SG kicked-up
 b. **Día valiente ha elegido para visitas.*
 day brave have.PRS.3SG chosen for visits

This fact has attracted the grammarians' attention at least since Fernández Ramírez (1951/1986a: §82), who pointed out that adjective preposing is connected with ironic readings even in "nominal exclamatives" such as those in (38):

- (38) a. *Dichoso pueblo!*
 blissful people
 b. *Bonito razonamiento!*
 beautiful reasoning

The intended interpretations have been typically paraphrased, respectively, as 'Damned people!' and 'Faulty reasoning!' (see Beinbauer 1958, Bosque 1980: 107, Haverkate 1985: 349, Hernanz 2001: 103–107, Barrajón López 2009 and RAE 2009: §42.13q for more data on prenominal adjectives in exclamative structures).

The requirement on prenominal position is surely related to the affective and evaluative nature of adjectives. In ironic formulas adjectives are always used in a sense that does not correspond to their literal meaning: it is the case of *menudo* 'small' (nowadays almost always used with the contrary meaning of 'big' or 'good'), *valiente* 'brave' ('unworthy', 'inappropriate') and *dichoso* 'blissful' ('damned'), among others. In a few words, both their syntax and their readings are fossilized.

A further property, clearly related to the previous one, is that it is quite difficult to replace the prenominal adjective in ironic formulas for some other synonymous expression (Hernanz 2001: 103), as shown in (39):

- (39) a. *Pequeño lío has armado!*
 little fuss have.PRS.2SG kicked-up
 b. *Valeroso día ha elegido para visitas!*
 valiant day have.PRS.3SG chosen for visits

What this suggests is that the adjectives *menudo* and *valiente* have changed their meanings and nowadays are merely intensifiers. This is particularly clear in the case of *valiente*, where even its selectional restrictions have changed, since it can apply to non-humans, as in (35b).

There are, thus, good arguments in favor of the idea that the examples in (35) are partially formulaic expressions. This is something that any accurate observer should take into account. It is not, in any case, a reason to discard the study of adjective preposing in ironic utterances as something non-productive. On the one hand, it is clear that not all the relevant examples are formulas: those involving positive evaluative adjectives like *bonito* 'beautiful', *bueno* 'good', *estupendo* 'wonderful'... do not show the

properties of idiomatical expressions and nevertheless they get an ironic interpretation very easily. On the other hand, the connection between irony and fronted 'Adj + N' constructions is still worth exploring because even if all our data would reduce to a set of idiomatic expressions we could wonder why it is precisely the VFF pattern that appears in all of them.

We cannot offer a detailed answer to the question why prenominal adjectives with bare nouns and VFF are systematically associated (see Hernanz 2001 for a syntactic account), but a few remarks will suffice to give an informal picture of how we would approach the issue. The most important feature of the prenominal adjectives occurring in VFF is their evaluative and affective nature. Evaluative adjectives can be prenominal in Spanish; they actually must be prenominal, if a restrictive interpretation is to be avoided in favor of an explicative one that stresses the affective implication of the speaker. The explicative reading is precisely the kind of interpretation that can favor the salience of an ironic interpretation.

The reason is basically the same as the one we have resorted to in analyzing VFF and the role of the futurate periphrasis: an evaluative adjective in prenominal position expresses the emotional involvement of the echoed individual, and thus contributes to highlighting the inappropriateness of the attributed thought when the propositional content happens to provide an inadequate description of a state of affairs. If this is correct, the contribution of preposed adjectives goes in the same direction as that of VFF. The two grammatical devices reinforce each other, as in the case of the futurate periphrasis we analyzed in the previous section.

4.3 Other emphatic constructions

Now, if emphasis has the indirect effect of highlighting the contrast between reality and the attributed thought, then the prediction is that any linguistic device indicating emphasis will favor ironic interpretations by widening that gap and making the inappropriateness of the echoed thought more salient. Among the syntactic devices that are commonly associated with irony in the literature (see Seto 1998: 246–249 for an overview), focalization and exclamations deserve a prominent place. It is their emphatic nature that is responsible for their connection with irony.

As for focalization, it is not difficult to find examples of its ironic use, such as the English sentences in (40), from Seto (1998):

- (40) a. [A *fine* FRIEND] *she turned out to be.*
 b. [A *lovely* FIX] *you left me in.*

In these cases ironic readings depend both on focalization and on the presence of positive evaluative words, like *fine* and *lovely*.

The way in which focalization favors irony in Spanish is illustrated in the minimal triplet in (41), where the three different kinds of fronting constructions are compared:

- (41) a. *Buena impresión, debemos producir.* (Left dislocation)
 good impression must.PST.1PL cause
 'A fine impression at least we must have made on them.'
- b. *Buena impresión debemos producir.* (VFF)
 good impression must.PST.1PL cause
 'A fine impression we must have made on them.'
- c. *Buena IMPRESIÓN debemos producir.* (Contrastive focalization)
 good IMPRESSION must.PST.1PL cause
 'A FINE IMPRESSION we must have made on them.'

The same propositional content is 'packed' in three different ways, each with a different information structure and a specific intonational contour. (41a) is an instance of contrastive left dislocation, and the bare NP *buena impresión* is interpreted as a detached topic. The prediction is that there will be no salient ironic reading for (41a) -though, of course, we could think of some particular discourse situation that could force it. The example in (41b) is an instance of VFF. Here the ironic reading is definitely salient: 102 out of our 147 informants (70%) judged it as always or usually ironic, while 34 (23%) said that it can be ironic or not depending on the context, and only 10 informants (7%) choose the non-ironic interpretation (cf. Escandell-Vidal & Leonetti, forthcoming). Finally, (41c) is a case of contrastive focalization, with heavy stress on the preposed constituent. In this case a non-ironic reading would be preferred, though an ironic interpretation can also be obtained.

In a few words, while left dislocation is in no particular way linked to the expression of irony, VFF seems to be a privileged tool for such a communicative goal, and contrastive focalization can be a suitable vehicle for irony too, to the extent that it counts as an emphatic construction. The asymmetry between left dislocation and the other two kinds of fronting is a consequence of the fact that dislocation does not convey emphasis.

Emphasis is also a basic component in exclamatives and exclamations, and this is enough to account for their potential for irony. Exclamative intonation is widely recognized as one of the main linguistic cues for ironic interpretations. In addition, there are other interesting similarities between 'verum focus' and exclamatives. As Castroviejo-Miró (2008: 57) points out, "exclamatives actually involve two types of content: a descriptive one and an expressive one". The descriptive content is a propositional form that the speaker takes for granted; the expressive content can be described as "an emotional attitude towards a degree". From this point of view, the semantics of (*wh*)-exclamatives and the semantics of 'verum focus' sentences are very close to each other, if we accept that the emphatic component obtained from focus on polarity is the counterpart of the expressive content of exclamatives – an indication of the speaker's attitude –, while the propositional content is in the background and taken for granted to some extent like descriptive content in exclamatives. Given such parallelism, it is not surprising that both kinds of sentences are well suited for irony.

A nice example of how the combination of evaluative adjectives, marked word order and exclamative intonation can favor an ironic interpretation is the specific type of exclamations that Castroviejo-Miró (2008: 75) calls *predicative constructions with predicate inversion*. A couple of representative examples appear in (42):

- (42) a. *Fantástica, esta película!*
wonderful this film
'Wonderful, this film!'
- b. *Muy sagaz, tu observación!*
very sagacious your remark
'Very clever, your remark!'

5. VSX and the lack of informational partition

Additional support for our point of view can be found in other facts that confirm that Spanish word order – and, thus, information structure – can favor ironic interpretations by adding emphasis to an assertion and thus indirectly highlighting the inappropriateness of a thought that has proven wrong. The basic data are in (43), where four different versions of the same proposition can be compared (the examples are inspired by a similar sentence from Bosque 1980: 107). The four sentences crucially involve the prospective periphrasis “*ir a + infinitive*” and are paired to an exclamative intonational contour, but differ in word order. Thus, two important factors favoring irony – “*ir a + infinitive*” periphrasis and exclamative intonation – are kept constant in all the examples, while word order is manipulated to obtain four different patterns.

- (43) a. *Eva te va a esperar hasta las ocho!*
Eva you.OBJ go.PRS.3SG to wait until the eight
- b. *Hasta las ocho te va a esperar Eva!*
until the eight you.OBJ go.PRS.3SG to wait Eva
- c. *Te va a esperar Eva hasta las ocho!*
you.OBJ go.PRS.3SG to wait Eva until the eight
- d. *Te va a esperar hasta las ocho Eva!*
you.OBJ go.PRS.3SG to wait until the eight Eva
'Eva is going to wait for you until eight!'

The contrast between (43a) and (43b) adds nothing new to our previous discussion: (43a) represents the unmarked SVX order, whereas (43b) represents XVS, hence the VFF pattern. We expect to get a much more natural ironic reading in (43b) than in (43a), and in fact the expectation is borne out (the reading is more or less equivalent to ‘You are a fool if you think that Eva is going to wait for you until eight o’clock’). Such reading is the most straightforward one for (43b), though not the only possible one.

Let's look now at the patterns in (43c) and (43d). (43c) is an instance of VSX, a marked word order that is quite common in Spanish but severely constrained in other Romance languages like Italian and Catalan (cf. Leonetti 2010 for some speculations on this kind of cross-linguistic variation). The precise conditions of use for VSX order in Spanish are still poorly understood, but it is usually assumed that VSX is associated with wide focus. This is a significant property of VSX, because it entails that the sentence in (43c) will be interpreted by default with no informational partition on its explicit constituents. Crucially, the lack of informational partition is also the hallmark of VFF, illustrated here by (43b). Both (43b) and (43c) have an ironic reading as their most salient interpretation even out of context. We think that the absence of informational partition and the salience of ironic readings must be somehow linked.

As for (43d), it displays VXS order, a common pattern in Romance in which the postverbal subject typically receives narrow focus. In this case, it is difficult to obtain an ironic reading.

Yet both (43a) and (43d) can actually receive an ironic interpretation. It might not be as straightforward as those in (43b) and (43c), but becomes salient – as any native speaker would accept – as soon as a specific condition on information structure is met: the sentence should contain no informational partition at all. Thus, when we interpret (43a) as ironic – with a characteristic intonational contour –, *Eva* cannot be treated as the topic; and similarly, when (43d) gets an ironic reading, the postverbal subject cannot be interpreted as a narrow focus. Irony, then, seems to require that the attributed thought had been taken as a whole, without partitions.

Therefore, the analysis of word order alternations in (43) brings to light two valuable generalizations, which have largely gone unnoticed until now as far as we know:

1. VSX can receive a salient ironic interpretation, just like XVS (when fronting of a constituent corresponds to what we termed VFF): since both patterns are defined by the lack of an informational partition, it is reasonable to assume that this property is somehow related to ironic interpretations.
2. SVX and VXS patterns do not show salient ironic readings, unless they are assigned an interpretation that erases all informational partitions among explicit constituents.

These generalizations seem to hold quite systematically, as illustrated in (44) and (45).

- (44) a. *¡(Tú) tienes mucho interés en la conferencia!*
 (you) have.PRS.2SG much interest in the conference
- b. *¡Mucho interés tienes (tú) en la conferencia! [= (1a)]*
 much interest have.PRS.2SG (you) in the conference
- c. *¡Tienes tú mucho interés en la conferencia!*
 have.PRS.2SG you much interest in the conference
 'You have great interest in the conference!'

- (45) a. *¡(Yo) no estoy para canciones!*
 (I) not be.PRS.1SG for songs
 ‘I’m in no mood for songs!’
- b. *¡Para canciones estoy yo! [= (4a)]*
 for songs be.PRS.1SG I
- c. *¡Estoy yo para canciones!*
 be.PRS.1SG I for songs
- d. *¡Estoy para canciones yo!*
 be.PRS.1SG for songs I

The sentence in (44) confirms that, on the one hand, XVS (the VFF construction) and VSX make ironic readings easily accessible (together with non-ironic emphatic ones), whereas, on the other hand, SVX, being an unmarked word order, may have such readings but does not make them particularly salient. Obtaining an ironic interpretation for an SVX sentence entails preventing any informational partition in it – more specifically, avoiding narrow focus on the last constituent.

In (45) we find the same interpretive pattern. The SVX sentence in (45a) can hardly be interpreted in an ironic sense. In contrast, when the marked word orders XVS and VSX are used, as in (45b) and (45c), the lack of informational partition makes the ironic interpretation highly accessible. Finally, the VXS sentence in (45d) may well be interpreted as ironic, but only when the postverbal subject *yo* is not the narrow focus (i.e. when there is no focus/background distinction).

Incidentally, it is worth remarking that the occurrence of the predicate *estar para canciones* ‘(lit.) to be in the mood for songs’, which is an idiomatic expression and behaves as a negative polarity item (NPI), provides us with some nice evidence for the distribution of ironic readings. The SVX order in (45a) is typically non-ironic, and the predicate requires an explicit negation to be licensed; the sentence is otherwise ungrammatical in its idiomatic meaning (cf. **Yo estoy para canciones*). Quite significantly, when word order favors irony – XVS, VSX and VXS, with no informational partition – the sentence is perfectly grammatical without negation, as shown in (45b–d). The licensing of the NPI in these constructions can be explained by assuming that the missing negation is inferentially added at some interpretive level. The inferential addition of negation succeeds only with non-canonical word orders, i.e. those that can favor irony. As a result, XVS, VSX and VXS in (45) can only have an ironic reading: the non-ironic emphatic reading is in these cases excluded by the fact that the predicate is an NPI and the negation required for its licensing cannot be inferentially retrieved. In a few words, the ironic interpretation allows the occurrence of the predicate without any explicit negation, and this happens precisely in XVS, VSX and VXS orders. These remarks can shed some light on the problem of why irony and rhetorical exclamations may count as triggers for NPIs (cf. Bosque 1980: 106–108).

The challenge now is how to integrate the data in our account of the connection between irony and VFF. The fundamental question concerns the role of the lack of

informational partition. The reason why information structure should play a role in the expression of ironic attitudes is not evident at first sight, since it is not clear why there should be a dependence relation between the two phenomena, and in fact such a relation is presumably a very indirect one. As a starting point, we assume that information structure constrains interpretation in a way that, in combination with other possible factors, forces the hearer to finally access an interpretation where the proposition expressed has to be attributed to someone else. But why should precisely the absence of informational partition be the feature shared by word orders that lead into salient ironic interpretations?

In the case of XVS order (giving rise to VFF), we argued that it is emphasis, together with the markedness of fronting, that contributes to highlighting contextual inappropriateness (cf. Section 4.1). In VSX, where emphasis is not a characterizing feature, it must be some other feature that paves the way for the salience of the ironic reading. At this point we can just offer a speculative informal hypothesis that will be confirmed or falsified once we obtain a better understanding of the discourse conditions that govern the use of the VSX pattern in Spanish. The idea is that the absence of any focus/background partition in VSX (and in all the other relevant cases), together with a particular prosodic contour, presents the proposition as a whole, as an unstructured informational unit. ~~In addition, VSX, as a marked word order, is quite often associated to a sententious style.~~ Such combination of factors favors an interpretation of the utterance as a block of information that is being echoed by the speaker. The strategy of inferring an attributive interpretation is exploited in other contexts too as a last resort interpretive solution when a string does not fit in properly with its syntactic environment or its discourse context (cf. Escandell-Vidal 2002).

If this is on the right track, the two generalizations above can thus be easily conflated into a single one:

- (46) Other things being equal, the lack of informational partition tends to favor attributed interpretations.

The propositional schema obtained when an utterance is taken as an attributed thought can be inferentially developed into an ironic reading along the lines of Sperber & Wilson's account. If the speaker has resorted to a marked word order that presents the proposition as a single information unit, there must be a motivation; the hearer has to figure out what the reason for avoiding any informational partition might be; a possibility is to assume that the speaker is merely echoing a thought attributed to someone else, and certain contextual clues may guide the interpretation towards inferring that the speaker intends to show a dissociative attitude. Irony thus appears as a result of the inferential process initially triggered by the syntax of VSX ~~and/or the lack of informational partition in other word order patterns.~~ VFF is a particular instance of the general schema ~~where syntax forces an emphatic reading; and emphasis, together with information structure, can drive the hearer towards an attributed interpretation.~~ In this way a tentative answer is provided to the question of why the lack of informational partition is indirectly related to irony.

6. Conclusions

The problem raised by the Spanish examples in (1)–(4) represents one particular case study in a more general research domain, the Syntax/Pragmatics interface. It can be briefly formulated as follows: if irony is a pragmatic phenomenon and it is not encoded in the grammar of a language, why is a certain marked word order in Spanish typically associated with a salient ironic interpretation? The data in (1)–(4) suggest that a strong connection holds between irony and the syntax of fronting in Spanish, and pose some further interesting questions that have a bearing both on pragmatic approaches to irony and on the role of syntax as a guide for inferential processes in utterance interpretation. We believe these are good reasons for investigating the nature of the connection between irony and constituent fronting in Spanish.

In order to give an answer to our main research question, we began by establishing two basic assumptions concerning the two notions involved, i.e. irony and fronting. As for irony, we adopted Sperber & Wilson's analysis, according to which ironic utterances are interpreted by attributing a thought to someone in order to communicate a dissociative, critical attitude to this thought. The fundamental piece in this approach is the notion of *echoic use*, the combination of attribution and dissociative attitude.

As for fronting, we showed that the relevant examples correspond in all cases to a precise grammatical pattern different from both left dislocation and focalization, the one we called *Verum Focus-inducing Fronting* (VFF). The hallmark of the construction is a marked word order that precludes the possibility of any informational partition among the overt constituents of the sentence and forces an emphatic interpretation, with the focus falling on the positive polarity.

Our answer to the main question is that the connection between irony and fronting is built on the role of emphasis. When the content of an utterance is found inadequate as a description of the current situation, and there are no reasons to believe that the speaker is lying, the hearer has to assume that the speaker does not endorse the propositional content but is merely attributing a thought to someone else. If an emphatic construction is used, the contrast between the echoed thought and the actual state of affairs becomes more salient, which favors an ironic interpretation. Therefore, 'verum focus' and emphasis are not conventional means for being ironic: they rather strengthen an assertion; if it proves wrong, 'verum focus' and emphasis contribute to widening the perceived gap between the attributed thought and the real world. A significant prediction of this view is that any linguistic device indicating emphasis will favor ironic interpretations by making the inappropriateness of the echoed representation more salient. This is in fact the case, as a number of grammatical constructions show (exclamatives and exclamations, focalization, extreme degree modifiers...). As VFF does not encode irony, the apparently default ironic interpretations of the Spanish examples under consideration must be related to the co-occurrence of VFF with other independent grammatical factors that favor ironic interpretations too. We have analyzed two of them: the futurate periphrasis and the prenominal position of adjectives

in fronted constituents. Their contribution is again that of highlighting the inappropriateness of the echoed thought, by emphasizing either the commitment or the emotional involvement of the source individual towards the propositional content. This approach makes it possible to encompass all grammatical devices that favor irony under a single general mechanism.


One of our contributions is the explanation of how information structure is involved in the construction of ironical interpretations. Information structure has revealed as a decisive factor in accounting for the role of fronting, but fronting is not the only word order phenomenon that is relevant for irony in Spanish. Another marked word order pattern that clearly favors ironic readings is VSX. Both VSX and fronting (XVS) lack informational partitions on overt constituents, which suggests that this property is somehow related to ironic interpretations. We have offered a tentative proposal about the consequences of the lack of informational partition: the idea is that presenting the proposition as a single information unit ~~when there is~~ no connection with the immediate discourse context induces an attributive interpretation which can be further developed into an ironic reading. According to this, irony is ~~mainly~~ favored by emphasis in fronting – by highlighting the inappropriateness of the utterance –, ~~but~~ built on the absence of informational partition – by leading into an attributive use – in the case of other word order patterns. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that emphasis in VFF is itself the outcome of the lack of any informational partition.

The resulting picture of the connection between irony and fronting – or rather, between irony and grammar – shows a quite complex interaction of different factors where grammar and contextual information conspire to lead inferential processes towards plausible ironic readings.

We would like to stress that the generalizations we have reached on the basis of the notion of *Verum Focus* ~~inducing~~ *Fronting* could not have been obtained within other alternative accounts of fronting in terms of focalization. This lends some support for our analysis of VFF and in favor of Sperber & Wilson's theory of irony, which provides the precise notions we need to understand how grammar contributes to ironic interpretation.

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