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Grammatical emphasis and irony in Spanish

1 Introduction

It is widely assumed in the literature that irony is a pragmatic phenomenon: in other words, irony is not encoded, but inferred (Searle 1979; Grice 1975; Clark and Gerrig 1984; Gibbs 1994). The trigger for the ironic interpretation is the obvious ‘incongruence’ between the assumption expressed by the utterance and the actual state-of-affairs (Colston 2000). This contrast suggests that the speaker cannot be seriously committed to entertaining the thought expressed. In the framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995 and subsequent work), irony is further analysed as simultaneously “echoing a thought attributed to an individual, a group or to people in general, and expressing a mocking, sceptical or critical attitude to this thought” (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995:125). Thus, when a speaker utters *What a lovely day!* on a stormy morning, she provides information about the content of an attributed thought with the intention of showing her own dissociative attitude towards that thought (Sperber and Wilson 1981; Wilson and Sperber 1992, 2012; Curcó 2000; Wilson 2006; Yus 2009; Rosales Sequeiros 2011).

In all these approaches, recognising that the speaker is being ironic crucially depends on contextual cues. It has been noted in the literature, however, that certain factors can favour, or make more accessible, ironic interpretations, such as prosody and changes in the fundamental frequency (Gibbs 2000; Bryant and Fox Tree 2002, 2005; Attardo et al. 2003; Bryant 2010, 2011; Padilla García 2012) and gestural cues (Gibbs 2000; Bryant 2011; Attardo et al. 2003, 2011; Gonzalez-Fuentes et al. 2015).

For Spanish, Escandell-Vidal and Leonetti (2014) have argued that some sentences can easily elicit an ironic interpretation based on their syntactic form even in the absence of a (previous) context. This is the case of constructions involving non-focal, or ‘*verum focus*’-inducing fronting (hereinafter, VFF) (see Leonetti and Escandell-Vidal 2009; Escandell-Vidal and Leonetti 2009, 2014), like those in (1), and verb-subject-object word order (Leonetti 2014), like those in (2).

- (1) a. *¡Contenta me tienes!*
Happy me.OBJ have.PRS.2SG
‘You’ve sure made me happy!’

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- b. *¡A buenas horas llegas!*
 At good hours arrive.PRS.2SG
 ‘It’s a fine time for you to arrive!’

- (2) *¡Estoy yo para canciones!*
 Be.PRS.1SG I for songs
 ‘I’m in a fine mood for songs!’

The fact that these sentences can receive an ironic interpretation even without a context (see Giora et al., this volume for a related proposal) seems to suggest that irony is encoded in these cases, thus providing a counterargument to the initial assumption that irony is not encoded, but rather inferred. However, as argued in Escandell-Vidal and Leonetti (2014), these constructions encode not irony, but rather different degrees of emphasis. When emphasis is expressed by grammatical means, as in sentences like (1)–(2), it can favour ironic interpretations by making it easier to imagine, or accommodate, a state-of-affairs not congruent with the proposition expressed. In this sense, like prosodic and gestural cues, grammatical emphasis merely plays a facilitating role in irony without encoding it in any direct way.^{1,2}

2 Hypotheses

Elaborating on these ideas and assumptions, in this paper we seek to test if there is any significant correlation between different means of expressing intensification and grammatical emphasis, on the one hand, and the saliency of ironic interpretations, on the other.

1 The investigation presented in this paper forms part of the research project “The Semantics-Pragmatics Interface and the Resolution of Interpretive Mismatches” (SPIRIM), funded by the Spanish Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (FFI2015-63497-P). A previous, shorter version was presented at the *6th International Conference on Intercultural Pragmatics and Communication* (University of Malta, La Valletta, May 2014) and published in Spanish as Escandell-Vidal and Leonetti, (2015). We are grateful to the editors of this special issue for their kind invitation to participate, and also to the two reviewers for their careful and insightful comments on a previous version.

2 The problem we face with irony in Spanish is the same one that Michaelis and Feng (2015) face in their analysis of the syntax of sarcasm in English (specifically, the analysis of so-called *split interrogatives*: like “What is this, Spain?”). However, our approach is different: while they assume that the expression of a sarcastic judgement is an encoded function of English split interrogatives, we maintain that irony is not conventionally associated with the constructions we analyse – except when they become formulas.

Our main hypothesis is that ironic interpretations are favoured by the accumulation of grammatical resources that encode intensification and emphasis (such as exclamative intonation, exclamative syntax, polarity focus structures, marked word order and certain lexical choices). This predicts a scalar result: the more the grammatical resources used for intensification in a sentence, the higher the bias of its interpretation towards an ironic reading without a context. Thus, intensification and emphasis do not encode irony, though their concentration in a sentence facilitates it.

We assume that there is a difference between intensification and emphasis. Intensification is the use of grammatical means to express a high degree of some property, as in *wh*-exclamatives. Emphasis, in turn, is reactive intensification, in other words, intensification used to reject or cancel an assumption, as in the *Verum*-focus cases illustrated below. Sentences involving emphasis expressed by grammatical means need to activate and make salient the assumption they are meant to reject: they act as presuppositions triggers, and therefore they need first to activate the corresponding contrary proposition in order to reject it. This is what favours irony without the need to rely on contextual data. Sentences involving intensification, in contrast, will not trigger such a strong effect because they do not carry any presupposition that can make particularly salient any other proposition.

This general hypothesis can then be broken down into four predictions:

1. Declarative sentences will be preferentially interpreted in their literal meaning.
2. Declarative sentences with exclamation marks – i.e., exclamative intonation – will be preferentially interpreted as literal, though there will be an incipient tendency to make their interpretation more dependent on the context.
3. Exclamative sentences (i.e., sentences with exclamative syntax, marked either by *wh*-fronting or predicate fronting with right-dislocation of the subject) will show a stronger tendency to mark their interpretation as context-dependent, with an incipient tendency to receive ironic readings.
4. Sentences with grammatical marking for emphasis (*VerumFocus*-inducing fronting, marked word order, use of <*ir* + *a* + infinitive> periphrasis) will receive the highest scores for ironic interpretations.

The overall prediction is, therefore, that sentences containing more grammatical features for emphasis (emphatic syntax, marked word order) will be interpreted more straightforwardly as ironic compared to neutral sentences and sentences with intensification. To test these predictions, we carried out an informal survey to determine what kind of sentences are more likely to receive ironic readings in the absence of any contextual or prosodic cue.

3 The survey

3.1 Design

A total of twenty sentences in Spanish were presented in the questionnaire. On the basis of their grammatical properties, they can be grouped into five different categories:

- Declarative sentences with evaluation expressed by lexical means and with no grammatical intensifiers, exemplified in (3).

(3) a. *La película fue muy aburrida.*
 The film be.PST.3SG very boring
 ‘The film was very boring.’

b. *Armó un buen lío.*
 Raise.PST.3SG a good mess
 ‘S/He kicked up a fuss.’

- Declarative sentences with exclamation marks, with or without lexical evaluation, exemplified in (4).

(4) a. *¡Hoy hace un día espléndido!*
 Today make.PRS.3SG a day splendid
 ‘It’s a lovely day!’

b. *¡A las ocho llegaremos!*
 At the eight arrive.FUT.1PL
 ‘We’ll arrive at eight!’

- Exclamative sentences with *wh*-fronting, as in (5), or an inverted order, either by right-dislocation of the subject, as in (6a), or by subject inversion in the VSX pattern, as in (6b).

(5) a. *¡Qué bonito!*
 What beautiful
 ‘How lovely!’

b. *¡Cuánto tiempo sin verte!*
 How much time without see.INF.YOU.OBJ
 ‘I haven’t seen you in such a long time!’

- (6) a. *¡Sensacional, esta película!*
Great, this film
'What a great film!'
- b. *¡Tienes tú mucha prisa por terminar!*
Have.PRS.2SG you much hurry for finish.INF
'You're in a big hurry to finish!'
- Sentences with VFF (XVS word order), exemplified in (7).
- (7) a. *Algo sabrá...*
Something know.FUT.3SG
'S/he must know something.'
- b. *¡Mucho interés tienes tú en la conferencia!*
Much interest have.PRS.2SG you in the conference
'You're sure interested in the conference'
- c. *¡Menudo coche se ha comprado!*
Small car REF have.PRS.3SG bought
'That's some car he's bought!'
- d. *¡Para fiestas estoy yo!*
For parties be.PRS.1SG I
'I'm in a fine mood for parties!'
- e. *¡Bastante trabajo tengo ya!*
Enough work have.PRS.1SG already
'As if I didn't have enough work already!'
- f. *¡Buena impresión debimos producir!*
Good impression must.PST.1PL cause
'A fine impression we must have made!'
- g. *¡A buenas horas llegas!*
At good hours arrive.PRS.2SG
'Fine time for you to arrive!'
- h. *¡Muy enterado te veo!*
Very informed you.OBJ see.PRS.1SG
'You sure know a lot about it!'
- i. *¡Eso mismo le dije!*
That same s/he.OBJ tell.PST.1SG
'That's exactly what I told him/her!'

- Sentences with VFF (XVS word order) or with VSX order, plus the verbal periphrasis <ir a + infinitive> (roughly equivalent to ‘be going to + infinitive’), exemplified in (8).

- (8) a. *¡A ti te voy a dejar yo el coche!*
 To you.OBL you.OBJ go.PRS.1SG to lend I the car
 ‘Yeah, right, I’m going to lend you my car!’
- b. *¡Te va a esperar Eva hasta las ocho!*
 You.OBJ go.PRS.3SG to wait Eva until the eight
 ‘Yeah, sure Eva’s going to wait for you until eight!’
- c. *De poco te va a servir quejarte...*
 of little you.OBL go.PRS.3SG to serve complain
 ‘Little good it’ll do you to complain.’

Before we move on to a description of the remaining features of our survey, some observations about the list of grammatical patterns in (3)–(8) are in order. Aside from the examples in (3), which are simple declarative sentences, all these constructions can be qualified as exclamative constructions (Michaelis 2001, Bosque 2017, Villalba 2017): this explains most of their common properties and gives some internal coherence to the list. That said, they show clear differences. In (4) we find cases of so-called *declarative exclamatives*, that is, intonational-only exclamative sentences; in (5) the central, prototypical pattern of *wh*-exclamatives is represented – although the examples contain just *wh*-phrasal exclamatives, instead of full sentential structures; (6a) exemplifies *binomial exclamatives*, predicative verbless clauses with the predicate in initial position and the subject typically right-dislocated (Bosque 2017:32–34, Villalba 2017:611); (6b) is a case of exclamative sentence with VSX order, an option that has received little attention in the literature on Spanish, but which is close to other cases of verb-subject inversion in exclamatives (Michaelis 2001:1048); the examples in (7) represent another productive schema for verb-subject inversion, here triggered by fronting of a constituent, and XVS order as a result – labelled *focal*³ and *polarity exclamatives* in Bosque (2017:25–28), and *rhetorical exclamatives* in Andueza (2011);

³ The term *focal* is due to the (controversial) assumption that the fronting operation in (7) should be analysed as focus movement of a phrase to a left peripheral position. In Leonetti and Escandell-Vidal (2009) and Escandell-Vidal and Leonetti (2014) we argued that this kind of fronting cannot be analysed as a case of focus fronting, since the fronted phrase is not interpreted as a focus. The same holds for so-called *emphatic polarity exclamatives* obtained from the fronting of *bien* ‘well’ (Bosque 2017:27–28).

and finally, (8) shows the combination of VSX and XVS patterns with a futurate periphrasis. This series of grammatical options clearly suggests a strong link between the expression of irony and the syntax of exclamatives. How all these ingredients interact in the interpretive process will be the topic of the discussion in Section 5.

3.2 Participants

One hundred and forty-seven native speakers of Spanish volunteered to participate in the experiment. They were mostly students of the degree in Spanish Language and Literature at the UNED (an on-line national university covering the whole of Spain and abroad), though we allowed them to pass the questionnaire on to friends and relatives to obtain a more representative sample in terms of age and educational level. Ninety-five participants (65%) were women. As for age range, 77 of our informants (52%) were between 30 and 45 years old; 53 (36%) were between 46 and 60; and ten (7%) were between 18 and 30. The sample covered all regions of Spain, the largest groups coming from Madrid (38 participants, 26%), Andalusia (33 participants, 23%), Castilla-León (16 participants, 11%) and Castilla-La Mancha (13 participants, 9%). Other regions provided between one and six participants. This distribution is of interest because it means that more than 70% of the participants were from monolingual Spanish-speaking areas. All the participants but one had at least a secondary education.

3.3 Procedure

Participants were sent a hyperlink to access the survey. They were informed that completing the survey entailed their prior consent and that no personal data would be collected. They were first sent to a training page where the experiment was explained. They were told that this was a survey on irony and were given some examples of sentences in context to illustrate what we meant by irony and how the interpretation of an utterance can vary from its literal, “face-value” meaning to the ironic, antiphrastic⁴ meaning, depending on the context. Participants were

⁴ In this survey we limited the interpretations offered to antiphrastic interpretations. We did this for two main reasons: first, antiphrastic interpretations are the prototypical instances of irony; and second, they are the interpretations that an untrained participant will recognize most easily. However, we are not claiming that antiphrasis is the only way in which ironic interpretations are obtained and that irony is always achieved by uttering a sentence with a content that the speaker

then told that in the experiment they would read isolated sentences with different structures. For each sentence, they had to choose an interpretation using a 5-point annotated Likert scale, where five possibilities were offered, from the literal reading to the ironic, antiphrastic one (*Never ironic, Seldom ironic, It depends on the context, Often ironic, Always ironic*), plus an *Other* option to mark other possible interpretations not captured by the scale. The two extreme interpretations were specified by means of an explicit statement to make the intended interpretation completely clear. The centremost option on the scale indicated the neutral point, where the ironic value of the utterance would be entirely context-dependent. The participants were instructed to make their choice as quickly as possible so that their response would reflect their instinctive, unpremeditated intuitions. The presentation of the examples was randomized to avoid any training effect. Therefore, the order in which the examples are discussed below does not reflect the order in which they were presented to the test subjects.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Hypothesis #1: Declarative sentences will be preferentially interpreted in their literal meaning

In the results of our survey, the two neutral, unbiased declarative sentences (see (3) above) obtained the highest scores for the literal, non-ironic interpretation. As shown in figures 1 and 2 below, 106 informants (72%) preferred the literal interpretation over the ironic one in the case of *La película fue muy aburrida*, and 107 (73%) favoured a literal reading in the case of *Armó un buen lío*. The strength of this result is confirmed by the fact that 19 informants (13%) chose ‘Seldom ironic’ as their preferred option in the former instance and 16 (11%) of them did so in the latter, so altogether non-ironic interpretations scored 85% and 84%, respectively. In both cases, the option ‘It depends on the context’ obtained a similar percentage (13% and 11%, respectively), which, according to the standard view of irony as a contextual phenomenon, should be the default choice. The fact that few informants interpreted these sentences as ironic shows a strong preference for literal interpretations.

does not endorse. Returning to our initial example, a speaker is ironic when she says *I love calm and sunny days!* in the middle of a terrible storm. This shows that what counts is the mismatch between the content of the utterance and the actual state-of-affairs that triggers the ironic interpretation, regardless of the fact that the speaker does indeed love calm and sunny days.

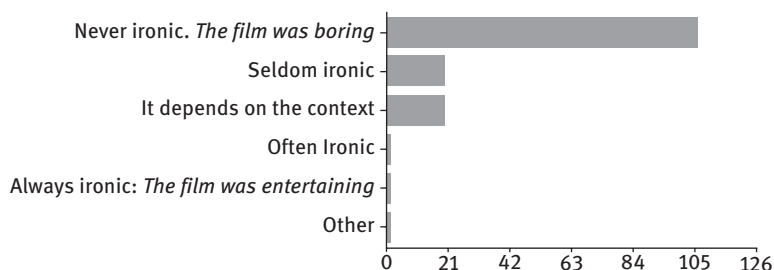


Figure 1: *La película fue muy aburrida* ('The film was very boring').

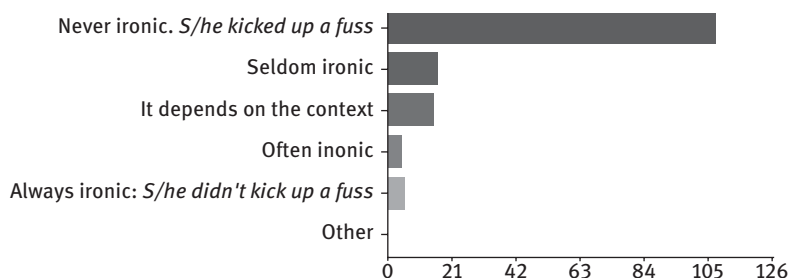


Figure 2: *Armó un buen lío* ('S/he kicked up a fuss.').

The two sentences contain a judgemental evaluation expressed by lexical means, but this fact has not helped to bias the interpretation towards the pole of irony. This seems to provide a first piece of support for our initial hypothesis that only when intensification is expressed by grammatical means can it be strong enough to favour an ironic reading.

4.2 Hypothesis #2: Declarative sentences with exclamation marks will be preferentially interpreted as literal, though there will be an incipient tendency to make their interpretation more dependent on the context

The data show that the answers obtained for declarative sentences with exclamation marks (see ex. (4)) are consistent with our predictions. For the sentence *¡Hoy hace un día espléndido!* (see Fig. 3 below), 60 informants (41%) chose the literal interpretation, but 31 informants (21%) left some room for an ironic interpretation, and a significant number of informants (45 cases; 31%) marked the option that the interpretation would depend on the context.

A similar distribution was obtained for the sentence *¡A las ocho llegaremos!* (see Fig. 4), where 74 informants (50%) preferred the literal interpretation, 17 (12%) chose ‘Seldom ironic’ and 42 (29%) favoured ‘It depends on the context’. In both cases, though the interpretation still falls on the side of literal readings, there is more diversity in the answers.

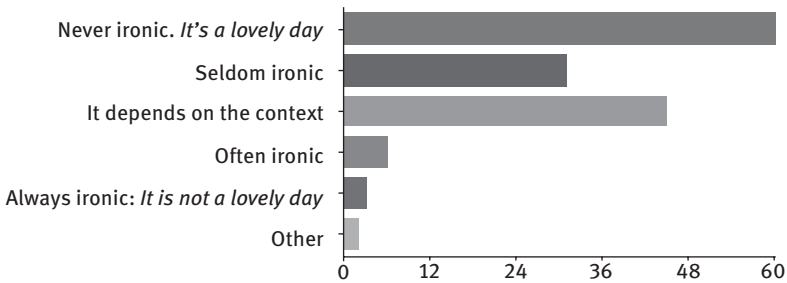


Figure 3: *¡Hace un día espléndido!* ('It's a lovely day!').

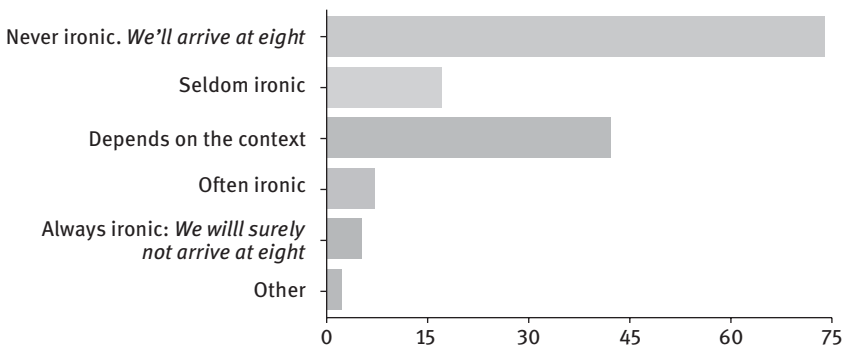


Figure 4: *¡A las ocho llegaremos!* ('We'll arrive at eight!').

4.3 Hypothesis #3: Exclamative sentences will show a stronger tendency to mark their interpretation as context-dependent, with an incipient tendency to yield ironic readings

Exclamative sentences combine prosodic marking (cued textually by exclamation marks) with specific forms of syntactic marking (either by *wh*-fronting or marked word order). Our prediction is that syntactic marking will begin to shift the informants' preferences towards the pole of irony. The data obtained seem to support this prediction.

Sentences with *wh*-fronting (see ex. (5)) obtained a neutral interpretation, where it is the context that provides the relevant data to decide whether the interpretation can be ironic or not. In the case of *¡Qué bonito!* (Fig. 5), 95 informants (65%) chose the neutral option, where the interpretation is entirely dependent on the context. The remaining responses were distributed evenly between the literal interpretation (11%) and the ironic interpretation (8%), with a balanced result for the other intermediate options (4% and 11%, respectively). The results for this example, then, are closer to a normal Gaussian distribution.

In the case of *¡Cuánto tiempo sin verte!* (Fig. 6), the neutral option was again preferred by a majority (71 informants; 48%), though the remaining responses are closer to the pole of literal interpretations (24% and 17%), to the detriment of ironic readings (3% and 1%). In any event, it is worth noting that no other structure shows such a marked preference for neutrality as syntactic exclamatives with *wh*-fronting.

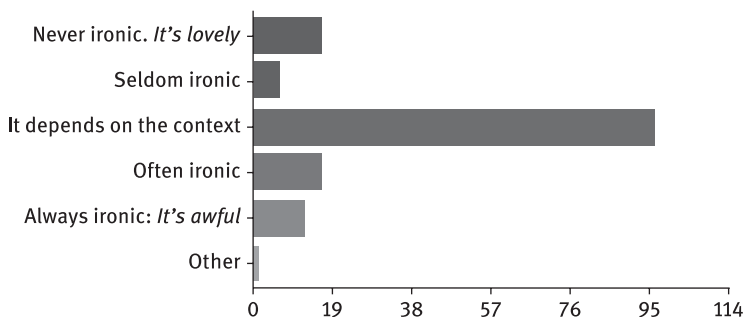


Figure 5: *¡Qué bonito!* ('How lovely!').

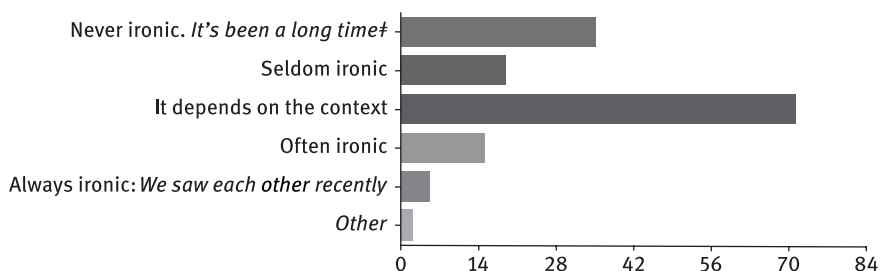


Figure 6: *¡Cuánto tiempo sin verte!* ('I haven't seen you in such a long time!').

A similar picture is obtained for exclamatives with right-dislocation of the subject and verb-initial orders (see ex. (6)). In *¡Sensacional, esta película!* (Fig. 7) the literal interpretation still predominates (70 cases; 48%), but the percentages favouring neutral

interpretations are higher in comparison with declaratives with 24 informants selecting ‘Seldom ironic’ (16%) while 43 prefer the context-dependent option (29%).

The preference for neutral and ironic interpretations is clearer in *¡Tienes tú mucha prisa por terminar!* (Fig. 8), an exclamative with VSO word order (see (6b) above). In fact, the preferred option here is the ironic reading, with 39 cases (27%), followed by the neutral, context-dependent option, with 35 cases (24%) and the ‘Often ironic’ option (31 cases, 21%). In the aggregate, the bias towards ironic interpretations represents 48% of the answers, twice the score of the set of answers favouring a literal interpretation (25%).

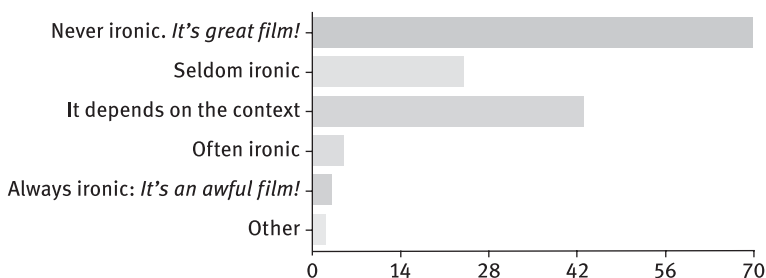


Figure 7: *¡Sensacional, esta película!* (‘What a great film!’).

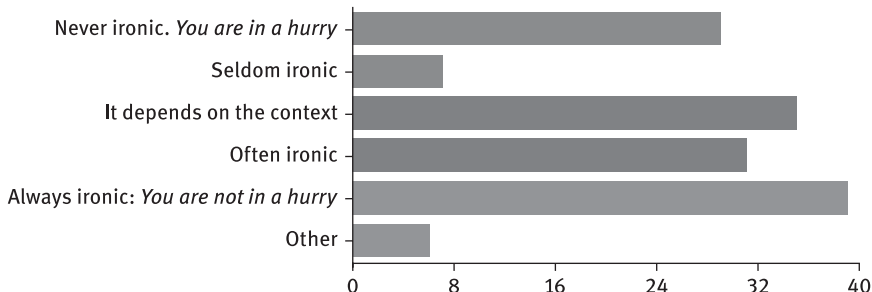


Figure 8: *¡Tienes tú mucha prisa por terminar!* (‘You’re in a big hurry to finish!’).

The divergent evaluations of these two exclamative patterns by our informants calls for an explanation. We believe that at least three factors may be conspiring to make the ironic interpretation more salient in the case of *¡Tienes tú mucha prisa por terminar!*. The first factor concerns the kind of “mocking, sceptical or critical attitude” that the speaker is able to communicate by means of irony: in *¡Sensacional, esta película!* the dissociative attitude does not necessarily target the hearer, whereas in *¡Tienes tú mucha prisa por terminar!* the hearer is clearly the target, which makes the ironic reading particularly salient and easy to grasp. The second

factor is the presence of two different interpretations that can be seen as ironical in *¡Tienes tú mucha prisa por terminar!* – the same situation that we also perceive in example (7b) (see 4.4 below): one is the basic antiphrastic reading, equivalent to ‘You don’t seem to be in a hurry to finish’ and implying a critical remark like *Come on, hurry up!*; the other is not antiphrastic, and consists in asserting that the hearer really is in a hurry and, at the same time, suggesting that it is because of some hidden reason which is not the one that we might in principle expect, thus communicating a dissociative attitude on the part of the speaker (but not the same attitude as in the antiphrastic reading). The availability of two varieties of ironic interpretation in *¡Tienes tú mucha prisa por terminar!* clearly favours the bias toward irony in the informants’ intuitions. Finally, a third relevant factor is the syntax of the two examples. While the grammatical pattern of *¡Sensacional, esta película!* can only be accompanied by an exclamative intonational contour, which suggests that it is intrinsically exclamative, the VSX pattern of *¡Tienes tú mucha prisa por terminar!* is potentially acceptable as an ironic comment and indeed might well be interpreted as such even in the absence of exclamative intonation. This means that VSX, despite not being intrinsically exclamative, is particularly appropriate for the expression of irony (see Escandell-Vidal and Leonetti 2014: §5; Escandell-Vidal and Leonetti 2019), as shown by the bias observed in our results.

A striking feature of the syntax of (6b) is the presence of the subject pronoun *tú*. As Spanish is a null subject language, it could perfectly well be omitted (*Tienes mucha prisa por terminar*), but then the salience of the ironic reading is considerably weakened (note that when the subject is null the sentence no longer exhibits VSX order). Though it is not easy to come up with a principle that would justify the insertion of an overt subject pronoun here, we believe that the motivation lies in the need to make the VSX pattern “visible”, with all the interpretive consequences this entails. The main effect is to force an all-focus reading of the sentence (Leonetti 2014). The question is why, and to what extent, this should favour irony. We will deal with this issue again in section 4.4. At this point, there is at least one conclusion that we can safely draw: the link between syntactic structure and ironic interpretation must be seen as a multifactorial issue.

4.4 Hypothesis #4: Sentences with grammatical marking for emphasis will receive the highest scores for ironic interpretations

The examples used to test this prediction fall into two main categories, being either sentences with ‘*verum focus*’-inducing fronting VFF (XVS order; see ex. (7)) or sentences that combine XVS or VSX with the <*ir + a + infinitive*> periphrasis (see ex. (8)).

4.4.1 Sentences with XVS order

The sentences with XVS seem to show a mixed behaviour. A significant subgroup (*Algo sabrá...*, *¡Bastante trabajo tengo ya!* and *¡Eso mismo le dije!*; ex. (7a–c)) shows a bias towards literal interpretations very similar to that of declaratives with exclamation marks (see 4.2). A second, equally significant subgroup (*¡Mucho interés tienes tú en la conferencia!*, *¡Menudo coche se ha comprado!*, *¡Para fiestas estoy yo!*, *¡Buena impresión debimos producir!*, *¡A buenas horas llegas!*, and *¡Muy enterado te veo!*; ex (7d–h)) shows a strong preference for ironic readings.

The sentence *Algo sabrá...* (Fig. 9) is interpreted literally a majority of the time (61 cases, 41%), followed by context-dependent readings (40 cases, 27%), while ironic readings represent a total of only 30 cases (20%). The bias in favour of literal interpretations is more marked for *¡Bastante trabajo tengo ya!*, with a distribution very similar to that of declaratives (Fig. 10), where 98 informants (67%) chose the literal interpretation, whereas the remaining options receive relatively meagre percentages, all between 5% and 10%.

Finally, the sentence *¡Eso mismo le dije!* (Fig. 11) stands in an intermediate position, with 91 informants (55%) selecting the literal reading, and the ironic interpretations representing a residual 6% only.

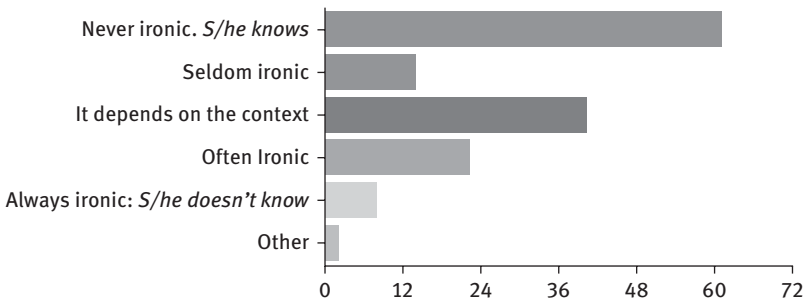


Figure 9: *Algo sabrá...* (‘S/he must know something’).

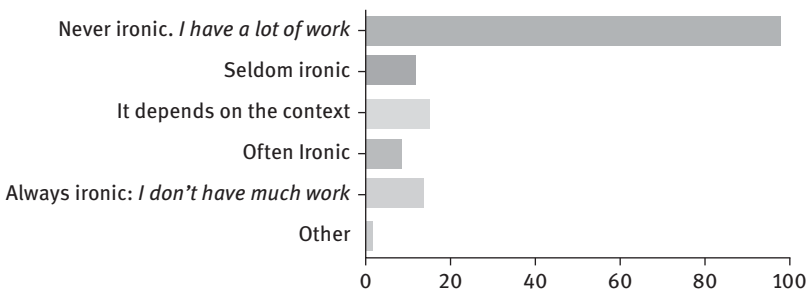


Figure 10: *¡Bastante trabajo tengo ya!* (‘As if I didn't have enough work already!’).

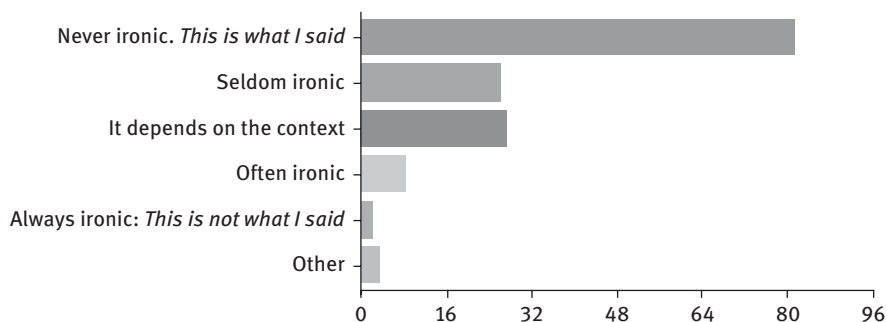


Figure 11: *¡Eso mismo le dije* ('That's exactly what I told him/her!').

The second subgroup in the XVS category, by contrast, shows a very significant bias towards ironic interpretations, as if it were the mirror image of the first group. For the sentence *¡Mucho interés tienes tú en la conferencia!* (Fig. 12), if we add the 58 cases (39%) of 'Always ironic' to the 51 cases (35%) of 'Often ironic', we get an aggregate score of 109 cases (74%) of ironic interpretations. Only 24 informants (16%) chose the context-dependent option, and the literal interpretations show only residual figures. Among the reasons why informants preferred ironic interpretations, we should mention that the sentence can have two different readings, both of which can be perceived as "ironic", similarly to what we saw with (6b). On the one hand, the sentence can be used to ironically express the notion that the addressee has no interest at all in the conference – in other words, the antiphrastic interpretation, and on the other, it can be also used to convey the idea that the addressee has little interest in the content of the conference, though possibly a great interest in other secondary aspects, such as who is going to attend the conference. In either interpretation, there is a clash between the encoded content and the actual state-of-affairs, together with a dissociative attitude on the part of the speaker, so both interpretations count as ironic.

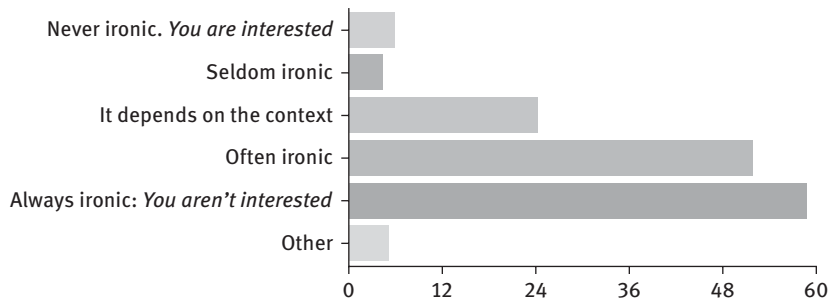


Figure 12: *¡Mucho interés tienes tú en la conferencia!* ('You sure are interested in the conference!').

The interpretation of the sentence *¡Para fiestas estoy yo!* (Fig. 13) was almost unanimously ironic: 114 informants (78%) labelled it ‘Always ironic’ and another 18 (12%) judged it ‘Often ironic’, which yields a grand total of 90%, the remaining options eliciting insignificant scores. The pattern of answers shows a very consistent, shared intuition across a large body of informants. The reason is, we think, that the predicate *estar para fiestas* is actually a ‘negative polarity item’ which requires a negation. *No estar para fiestas* is an idiom, so an ironic interpretation simply adds the missing negation. Therefore, the grammatical properties of the sentence trigger a negative interpretation, in much the same way as do other negative polarity items in rhetorical interrogatives, such as when *Did you ever lift a finger for him?* is interpreted as ‘You never lifted a finger for him’ (see Bosque 1980: 106–108 for the link between irony and negative polarity items). As a result, irony is not encoded directly here but rather favoured by the grammatical properties of the sentence.

In *¡Menudo coche se ha comprado!* (Fig. 14), the preferred option is the ‘Always ironic’ interpretation (53 cases; 36%), followed by the neutral option (46 cases, 31%). If we add the score for ‘Often ironic’ (17 cases, 12%), the preference for the

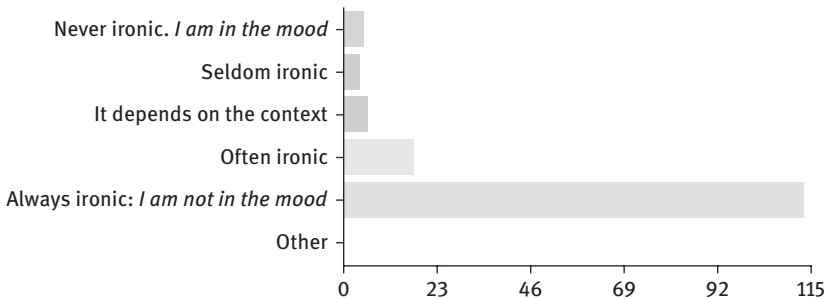


Figure 13: *¡Para fiestas estoy yo!* (‘I’m in a fine mood for parties!’).

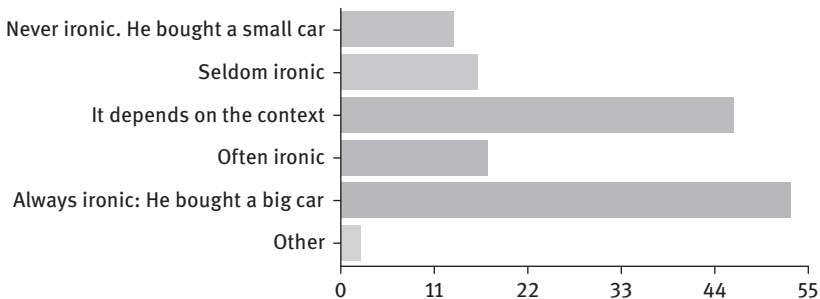


Figure 14: *¡Menudo coche se ha comprado!* (‘That’s some car he has bought!’).

ironic readings rises to 48%. In this case, the fact that 20% of the informants selected the literal interpretation is totally unexpected, given that what *menudo coche* implies is that the car is very big, or very expensive, or very flashy, and not that it is small or insignificant, as the literal meaning of the adjective *menudo* encodes. What we have here is probably a case of reanalysis of the meaning of *menudo*. When this adjective occurs before the noun – a marked word order in Spanish – it works as a sort of idiomatic intensifier. This has led the informants to assume that the literal meaning of *menudo* is ‘big’, not ‘small’, which can explain the diversity of judgements obtained.

The interpretation of *¡Buena impresión debemos producir!* (Fig. 15) shows a strong bias in favour of ironic readings (a total of 68%: 67 responses for ‘Always ironic’, 46%, and 35 for ‘Often ironic’, 24%). These results contrast with those elicited by a closely related sentence, *¡A buenas horas llegas!*, with similar syntax and lexical choice, but here the bias towards the ironic interpretation is stronger. In fact, this is the sentence that produced the greatest consensus (Fig. 16), with 121 informants (82%) choosing ‘Always ironic’ and another 15 (10%) choosing ‘Often ironic’, to yield a total of 92%. In fact, this sentence has become an idiom with an antiphrastic interpretation, which surely biased the results for this question.

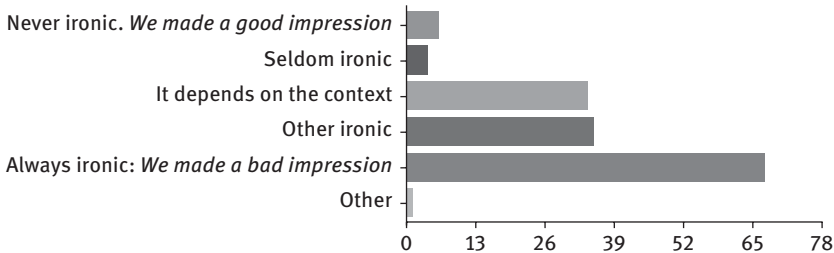


Figure 15: *¡Buena impresión debemos producir!* ('A fine impression we must have made!').

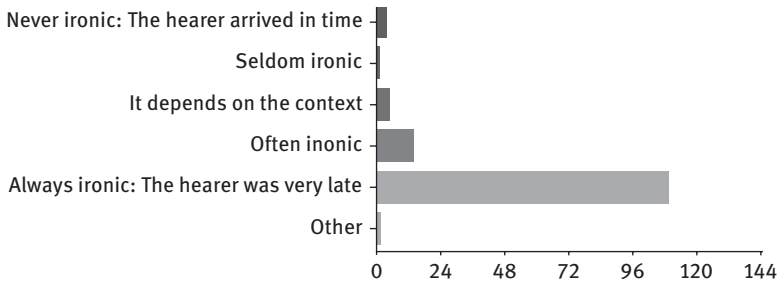


Figure 16: *¡A buenas horas llegas!* (Fine time for you to arrive!).

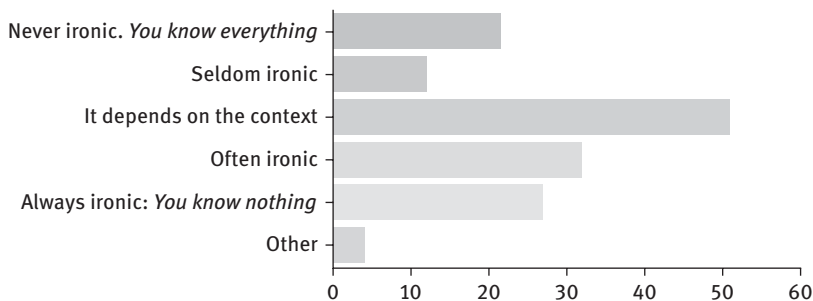


Figure 17: *¡Muy enterado te veo!* (‘You sure know a lot about it!’).

Finally, *¡Muy enterado te veo!* (Fig. 17) shows a similar distribution, with a less marked bias towards ironic interpretations, and a strong preference for the context-dependent option.

To sum up, within the class of sentences with XVS word order there are two distinct groups: one where the preference falls on the side of literal interpretations, and one favouring ironic interpretations. The difference can be explained, we think, by a number of factors. First, irony is never encoded in any of the examples under consideration. At most, syntax can favour certain readings to various degrees, but a certain amount of choice is always available to the speaker. Furthermore, the bias towards ironic interpretations increases when other resources are added, such as the fronting of evaluative adjectives or, as we will see later, the use of the *<ir + a + infinitive>* periphrastic structure. On the other hand, not all the contents are equally apt for expressing ironic remarks. For instance, the future and indefinite in *Algo sabrá...* and the weak quantifier in *¡Bastante trabajo tengo ya!* are not good candidates for argumentative inversion, particularly because they do not favour the expression of a dissociative attitude. This shows again that irony is not encoded. It can be favoured by some syntactic structures, but lexical choices and world knowledge also play a very significant role in the interpretation.

A reviewer raises a very interesting question related to our perspective: what proportion of a construction’s interpretations need to be ironic before we can say that it ‘encodes’ irony, rather than just being a trigger for an ironic interpretation? In this paper we have taken a strong monosemous approach, trying to avoid the multiplication of meanings in the grammatical system and therefore leaving identification of the intended interpretation to the utterance’s interaction with its context. Thus, in the cases we have examined here it is the context that makes it possible to determine whether the interpretation is ironic or not. Of course, the more frequent an interpretation, the higher the likelihood that it will become grammaticalized. This is probably the case with *menudo* (‘small, minute’), which in the expression ‘*Menudo + [noun]!*’ automatically elicits an ironic interpreta-

tion – an interpretation that has almost completely replaced the original meaning in Spanish speakers’ consciousness.

4.4.2 XVS with <ir + a + infinitive> periphrasis

Our last group of examples of sentences with XVS order is that in which this grammatical resource is combined with the <ir + a + infinitive> periphrasis. This construction places focus on the initial phase of an event, triggering the inference that, once initiated, the event will necessarily and inevitably occur. This component of epistemic necessity is what underlies the speaker’s strong commitment, which makes any incongruence more salient (see Escandell-Vidal and Leonetti 2014).

Informants showed a strong preference for literal readings for the sentence *De poco te va a servir quejarte...* (103 answers, 70%, for ‘Never ironic’ and 20 more, 14%, for ‘Seldom ironic’, making a grand total of 84%) (Fig. 18). These results seem to contradict our initial predictions. There are various possible reasons for this behaviour, however. On the one hand, the utterance was presented to informants as text followed by ellipsis points, a graphic representation which does not favour emphatic readings, and on the other, as in other examples considered above like *Algo sabrá...* and *Bastante trabajo tengo ya*, the occurrence of a weak quantifier does not facilitate strong emphatic interpretations either. It is worth noting that if we had presented the example with an intensifier like *mucho* ‘much’, as in *De mucho te servirá quejarte* (lit. ‘You will gain a lot from complaining’), the interpretation would have been clearly biased towards the irony pole. Again, syntactic form plays a major role, but it can be overridden by the effects of lexical choices.

The sentence *¡A ti te voy a dejar yo el coche!* (Fig. 19) received a very high number of answers for the ironic readings (91%, of which 112 answers, 76%, for ‘Always ironic’, and 22 answers, 15%, for ‘Often ironic’). Crucially, none of the informants chose the literal interpretation and only one of them marked ‘Seldom ironic’.

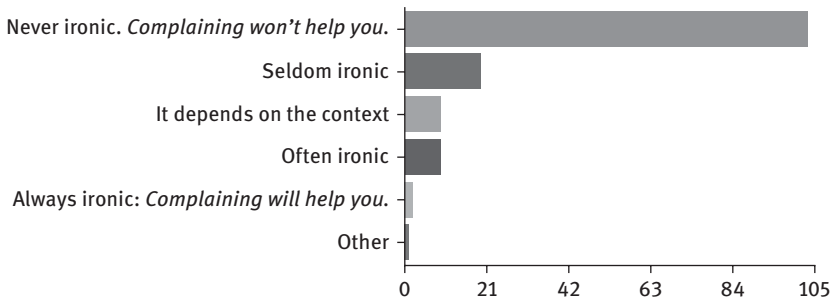


Figure 18: *¡De poco te va a servir quejarte!* (‘Little good it’ll do you to complain!’).

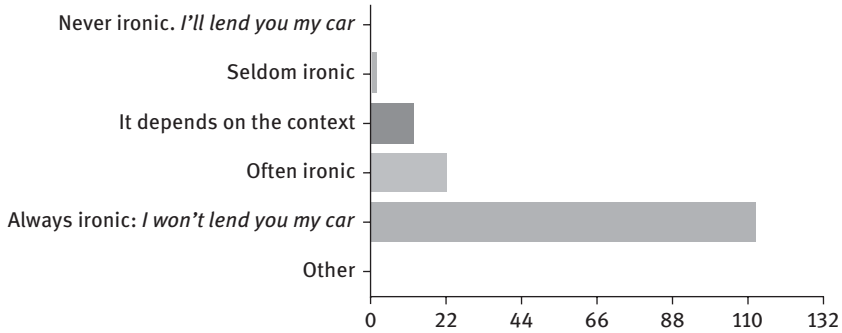


Figure 19: *¡A ti te voy a dejar yo el coche!* ('Yeah, right, I'm going to lend you my car!').

The results for *¡A ti te voy a dejar el coche!* (Fig. 19), with fronting and a radical preference for ironic interpretation, contrast with the scores obtained for the sentence *¡Te va a esperar Eva hasta las ocho!* (Fig. 20), with VSX order but without fronting (the initial clitic is irrelevant here). In this case ironic interpretations still predominate (74 cases, 50%, for 'Always ironic', and 26 cases, 18%, for 'Often ironic'), literal readings attracting only 9% of responses), but the utterance leaves considerable room for ambiguity – in fact, an exclamative but non-ironic reading is perfectly acceptable. The differences between these two sentences may seem unexpected, since the *<ir + a + infinitive>* periphrasis is present in both of them. However, there is a syntactic factor that can explain the differences in scores. In the first sentence VFF combines with an additional mark for emphasis, namely, the doubling of the fronted second person pronoun, which occurs twice, once in its full strong form, introduced by the preposition *a* (*a ti*) and then again in its clitic, weak form (*te*). By contrast, in the second sentence there is VSX order, but we have neither fronting nor clitic doubling. Thus, apparently, the sentence with more marks for emphasis receives higher ratings as ironic. This highlights the importance of 'verum

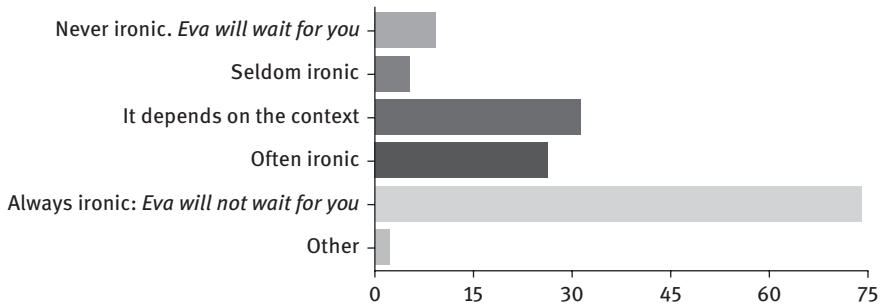


Figure 20: *¡Te va a esperar Eva hasta las ocho!* ('Yeah, sure Eva's going to wait for you until eight!').

focus'-inducing fronting as a possible trigger for ironic readings, and at the same time raises the question as to why clitic doubling should be relevant.

We cannot offer a fully articulated answer here, but we would like to note certain facts that may help to justify bringing clitic doubling into the overall discussion. Clitic doubling is grammatical – actually, obligatory – in all varieties of Spanish with strong pronouns as objects, but resorting to the bare clitic pronoun, without doubling, is always an available option. If the object is in focus, doubling is required, since the clitic alone is unable to express focal information. This is not the case with *¡A ti te voy a dejar el coche!*, but in this example doubling is needed to allow fronting (cf. **A ti voy a dejar el coche*). The crucial data come from contexts where doubling is not licensed by focus structure and has no apparent motivation. For instance, in *¡Te va a esperar Eva...!* doubling of the direct object is optional (*¡Te va a esperar a ti Eva...!*): it is of interest to observe that with doubling the bias towards ironic interpretations is reinforced. Doubling has essentially the same effect that the presence of a strong subject pronoun in postverbal position may have (in competition with the null option), as already mentioned with respect to (6b). The minimal pairs in (9) and (10) illustrate this point (both include the futurate periphrasis).

- (9) a. *Si sigues así, vas a llegar muy lejos.*
 If go-on.PRS.2SG So, go.PRS.2SG to arrive very far
- b. *Si sigues así, vas tú a llegar muy lejos.*
 If go-on.PRS.2SG so, go.PRS.2SG you to arrive very far
 ‘If you go on like this, you are going to get very far.’
- (10) a. *Vete a decirle que lo haga.*
 Go.REF.IMP.2SG to tell.him that it.OBJ do.PRS.SUBJ.3SG
- b. *Vete tú a decirle que lo haga.*
 Go.REF.IMP.2SG you to tell.him that it.OBJ do.PRS.SUBJ.3SG
 ‘Go tell him to do it!’

In (9) and (10) the two options – null subject/overt subject – are compared: in both cases the version with an overt pronoun is almost obligatorily interpreted ironically (with readings equivalent to ‘If you go on like this, you are not going very far’, for (9), and ‘Don’t dare to tell him to do it!’, for (10)), whereas its counterpart can receive a literal interpretation as well. The key factor is the insertion of a strong pronoun in a context where a simple clitic or a null subject could have been used. Since strong pronouns are traditionally associated with emphasis in grammatical descriptions of null subject languages, it is not surprising that their presence counts as a marker of emphasis, possibly through contrast and the evo-

cation of contextual alternatives. In our examples, the effect is strengthened by the fact that we have second person pronouns: this surely favours the expression of a critical attitude towards the hearer. The common feature for strong pronouns in all cases we observed is that they are interpreted neither as topics nor as narrow foci. The role of pronouns in the relative saliency of ironic interpretations deserves a detailed study that we cannot carry out here, but hopefully these brief notes can shed some light on certain aspects of the results in our survey.

5 The grammatical ingredients of emphasis

The hypothesis that irony is favoured by the grammatical expression of intensification and emphasis is confirmed by the results of our survey. Emphasis plays the role of making the incongruence between utterance and context more easily noticeable. As noted above, all emphatic constructions in the survey belong to the typology of exclamative sentences or are closely related to them. At this point, it is worth discussing in more detail the connections among all the constructions involved.

Exclamatives can be defined as grammatical structures which convey an emotional attitude on the part of the speaker towards a certain state of affairs, this attitude usually reflecting surprise with respect to a situation that is judged to be non-canonical or unexpected. Exclamatives express propositions which the speaker assumes to be true.

A facet of the grammar of exclamatives that is seldom discussed is their informational articulation (see § 4.3). In *wh*-exclamatives (like (4)), focus falls on the degree value of some gradable predicate (for instance, in *How tall she is!*, on the degree variable in a proposition like ‘She is tall at degree *d*’), and the rest of the propositional content is a single, unarticulated informational chunk, which represents the background. We would like to stress that the remaining exclamative schemas we reviewed share this property of lacking informational articulation (topic comment, focus/background).

Binomial exclamatives (like (6a), ¡*Sensacional, esta película!*) at first sight contradict this generalization, since they contain a clear partition: the subject is right-dislocated. However, we believe that the true exclamative –despite the presence of exclamation marks in writing – is actually only the predicative constituent in initial position; the subject is right-dislocated merely to comply with the condition related to informational structure, as a means of obtaining a single informational chunk that presents an unexpected state of affairs, once the topical subject has been “expelled” from the core predication. If these observations

are well founded, binomial exclamatives no longer serve as a counterexample anymore for the condition regarding information structure.

As for exclamatives built on marked orders (XVS, VSX; see §4.4), the generalization holds, since both patterns give rise to informational chunks without internal articulation, as shown in Leonetti and Escandell (2009) for XVS and in Leonetti (2014) for VSX in Spanish. In the first case, overt constituents in the sentence form a single informational region that acts as the background with respect to narrow focus on the sentence polarity; focus on polarity is a way of emphasizing the truth of a contextually known proposition, and explains why the construction is perceived as emphatic (note the parallel with the basic properties of exclamatives mentioned above).

In the second case (VSX), there is no aboutness topic – though there could be an initial ‘stage topic’ – and the sentence is assigned an all-focus,thetic interpretation. Thus, the two orders are interpreted differently, but both give rise to the absence of internal informational divisions. It is interesting to recall that even in unmarked SVO sentences coupled with exclamative intonation (for instance, *Eleanor has bought a new bike!*), the expression of surprise and unexpectedness of new information correlates with an all-focus,thetic reading, in other words, with the absence of informational partitions.

The common feature in all these constructions is informational packaging: the propositional content forms a single informational unit, because focus is limited either to a degree value (*wh*-exclamatives) or to the polarity (VFF), or because focus extends to the whole predication (binomial exclamatives, VSX). Emphasis is rooted in the interpretation of focus. It may derive (a) from focus on a degree that is beyond the speaker’s expectations; (b) from focus on the polarity and the consequent strong assertion of the propositional content; (c) from focus on the whole clause, which is presented as new information (this implies that the speaker is unaware of such information and gives rise to the expression of surprise and unexpectedness). The set of constructions under discussion includesthetic sentences, mirative expressions and exclamatives: this confirms that they are closely related constructions, as argued in García Macías (2016) on the basis of cross-linguistic data. Then, it should not be particularly shocking that they are all appropriate linguistic tools for the expression of irony.

6 Conclusions

With this survey we have attempted to gather some preliminary data to understand why some sentences seem to receive an ironic reading even out of context.

Our claim is not that irony is encoded, but rather that there are certain grammatical resources that can facilitate ironic interpretations. We have explored the correlation between ironic readings and grammatical resources for intensification and emphasis. Our data show that the more emphatic a sentence, the greater the likelihood that it can receive an ironic interpretation. This interpretive bias can be explained along the lines of Sperber and Wilson's approach to irony. In their view, irony consists of echoing a thought and communicating an attitude of distance towards it (typically, because that thought does not actually correspond to the state-of-affairs it intends to represent). When the content of an utterance is clearly incongruent with the actual state-of-affairs, the stronger the emphasis, the more noticeable the incongruence. Put in other words, intensification and emphasis can contribute to making the incongruence more salient.

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