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Title	Metalinguistic Negation, Echo Questions and Verbal Irony : From a Relevance-Theoretic Point of View
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Citation	[岐阜大学教養部研究報告] vol.[32] p.[79]-[92]
Issue Date	1995-09
Rights	
Version	Department of English, Faculty of General Education, Gifu University
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12099/3993">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12099/3993</a>

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## Metalinguistic Negation, Echo Questions and Verbal Irony: From a Relevance-Theoretic Point of View

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### Abstract

Negative utterances are both descriptive and echoic-interpretive, in the view of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, Wilson 1994, Wilson and Sperber 1988). In ordinary negation, the negative operator serves to show a truth-conditional judgment on an echoed thought and it is used descriptively. In metalinguistic negation, however, the operator is argued to indicate a dubious attitude toward the faithfulness of an echoed expression or meaning (Burton-Roberts 1989, Carston 1994, Yoshimura (To appear)), and it is used interpretively. Other linguistic phenomena, such as echo questions (Blakemore 1994) and verbal irony (Sperber and Wilson 1981, Sperber 1984, Ward 1988) are characterized in terms of description and interpretation. The relevance-theoretic view of utterances has the advantage of capturing significant similarities among those seemingly distinct linguistic phenomena, together with important generalizations.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

In this article, I would like to explore the ability of relevance theory to capture significant generalizations among some seemingly distinct linguistic phenomena. The structure of the paper is as follows: In the next section, the distinction between *description* and *echoic interpretation* is introduced and discussed. Negation is analyzed in terms of this distinction. Other linguistic phenomena, e.g., echo questions and verbal irony, are also investigated (sections 4 and 5) and their similarities and differences discussed in detail in section 6.

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<sup>1</sup> I gratefully acknowledge the invaluable help, advice, and encouragement from the following researchers, although the confusion, misunderstanding, and premature argument found in this article are, of course mine: Seizi Iwata, Akiko Yoshimura, and (last but not least) William Lee.

## 2. Relevance Theory

### 2.1. Principle of Relevance

The argument in this paper is based on Sperber and Wilson's *relevance theory* (Sperber and Wilson 1986, Wilson 1994, Wilson and Sperber 1988). They assume that a communicator conveys information *ostensively*, whether it is linguistic or gestural. An addressee interprets the ostensive stimulus *inferentially*, focusing on the information that will best improve his *cognitive environment*.<sup>2</sup> They propose the following:

(1) Principle of Relevance

Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance.

(2) Presumption of Optimal Relevance

(a) The set of assumptions {I} which the communicator intends to make manifest to the addressee is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the ostensive stimulus.

(b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate {I}.

((1)-(2) Sperber and Wilson 1986: 158)

The interpretation most consistent with the principle of relevance is argued to be the first interpretation that the addressee reaches. Both (1) and (2) are shared by the speaker and the hearer. Relevance is a function of the *contextual effect* the information may bring about, and the *processing effort* the hearer makes. The addressee should get as much effect as he can with as little effort as possible. Otherwise, communication may require a gratuitous effort on the addressee's part.

### 2.2. Description and Echoic Interpretation

Sperber and Wilson assume that the propositional form of an utterance *represents* a speaker's *thought*. The propositional form need not be identical to the speaker's thought, but in fact only *resemble* it. As long as it shares some logical properties and contextual implications, the propositional form can be said to *represent* or *interpret* the speaker's thought. In other words, identity of the form and the thought will be a special case of linguistic representation. Let us consider the following examples:

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, a speaker (or a person who initiates a conversation) is assumed to be female and a hearer male, for convenience.

- (3) What did Sally say?  
(3a) Oh, it's a dreigh day. (mimicking her Edinburgh accent)  
(3b) She said it was a dreigh day.  
(3c) She said that the weather was miserable.

In (3a) the speaker mimics Sally's utterance. This is a case of a direct quotation. According to Sperber 1984, if an utterance but not a proposition is merely repeated, then it is interpreted as a case of *parody*. Notice that Sally's utterance itself is repeated and its distinctive form imitated. In such a case relevance will be achieved by recognizing the speaker's parodic *attitude*. Sperber argues, that if the proposition or meaning is echoed, it is a case of *irony*. Of course, this distinction is not always obvious: in theory, it would depend on which - parody or irony- is more relevant in context.

The degree of resemblance decreases, as we go through (3b) and (3c). Nevertheless, the logical properties and contextual implications are preserved in both cases. And the speaker's thought is represented more explicitly in the form *she said (that)*. (3b) is a case of an indirect quotation. Example (3c) seems more remote from the original utterance.

In contrast, in (3b) and (3c) the speaker *echoes* what Sally said, although in both cases she signals no dissociation from the echoed thought. Examples (3a) to (3c) are called *echoic-interpretive utterances*. Echoing does not necessarily mean repetition in the strict sense of the term. This will be one of the vital factors when we discuss the nature of metalinguistic negation, echo questions and verbal irony.

Although the propositional forms are interpretations of a speaker's thought, they can, of course, be used assertively (i.e., to inform the hearer of the true state of affairs). This is considered a case of *description*. "Hey, look! It's raining." may be uttered when a speaker looks out the window and talks about the ongoing event. Thus, in the genuine case of description, informing the true state of affairs is relevant to the addressee. Although the speaker represents or interprets her own thought, this is not a case of echoic utterance, since a *genuine* descriptive utterance should be uttered out of blue (cf. negation in section 3).<sup>3</sup>

If an utterance is viewed this way, then the following characterization (Fig. 1) seems to hold: (a) is concerned with verbal irony, (b) with interrogatives and exclamatives, (c) with assertive declaratives (including ordinary negation), and (d) with imperatives. In the following sections, I will argue that metalinguistic negation and echo

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<sup>3</sup> The discourse-initiating utterances (Rochemont 1986: 211, n. 182) tend to be genuinely descriptive. Utterances like "Here comes the bus.", "Hey, there's a snake!" are also cases in point. However, as the conversation goes on, the language users' cognitive environments are improved. The utterances may be echoing the thoughts previously represented. If we see communication this way, then, utterances which are "all-new" are less frequent than interpretive utterances.

questions, like verbal irony, belong to (a).

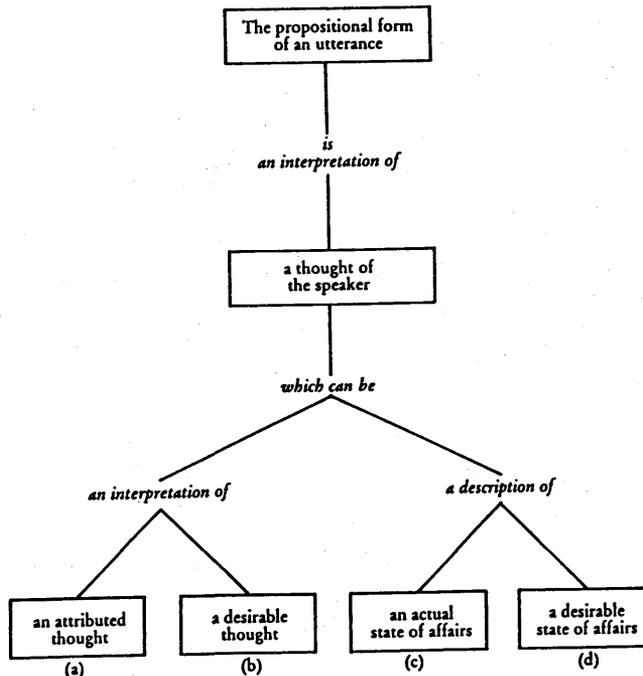


Fig. 1. (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 232)

### 2.3. Literalness and Metaphor

In relevance theory, the degree of resemblance between the form and the thought is argued to form a continuum. If both are exactly the same, namely, if the logical form represents the thought directly, the utterance is *literal*. *Metaphor* is an instance of the utterance representing the thought only loosely. Take (4) as an illustration:

(4) He is a bulldozer.

The speaker has a thought about a certain man. She utters (4) because it resembles the thought she entertains. Since the utterance is indirect, it will require a certain amount of processing effort on the hearer in order to interpret the utterance. However, such an effort should be rewarded with a greater contextual effect, in the view of optimal relevance. Sperber and Wilson call this a *poetic effect*.

This should not be taken to mean that a direct, literal expression always requires less processing efforts than an indirect expression does, though. A literal expression may also cause the addressee to make a lot of unnecessary processing efforts. Suppose that B is a teacher of geography and that he knows the population of Japan very precisely:

- (5) A: What is the population of Japan?  
(5a) B: It's 123,921,000.  
(5b) B: It's about a hundred and twenty million.

Obviously, the approximate figure in (5b) will help the addressee to grasp the relevant information more easily. Likewise, if you are not familiar with relevance theory and want to know about it as you read this article, it will save you a lot of effort to read an outline or summary of the theory described in this section, rather than to start reading a copy of *Relevance* (as long as my description here is relevant and faithful enough - and it need not be utterly and exactly faithful - just faithful *enough*). Thus, the communicator may exploit the options of using a more literal or a less literal utterance and that choice may vary according to the style she chooses.

### 3. Negation and Description-Interpretation Dimension

Perhaps not as obviously, ordinary and metalinguistic negation may also have a stylistic aspect.

- (6) A: Is it raining?  
B: No. It isn't raining.

Example (6) is considered a case of truth-conditional, ordinary negation. B's sentence echoes A's thought, and shows a negative judgment on the propositional *content*.<sup>4</sup> Thus the negative operator is descriptively used, i.e., this is a case of description.<sup>5</sup> The utterance will be relevant with the contradiction to A's assumption made manifest, and his cognitive environment improved.

Both (7) and (8), on the other hand, are cases of *metalinguistic* negation, which differ from ordinary negation:

- (7) A: How come you look so happy?  
B: I'm not happy. I'm ecstatic!  
(8) I'm not his daughter. He's my father.

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<sup>4</sup> i.e., "it is raining." In relevance theory, it is assumed that an affirmative interrogative sentence is biased towards an affirmative reply.

<sup>5</sup> We may say that in ordinary, truth-conditional negation, both description and interpretation occur. Negation itself should be regarded as descriptive (Wilson 1994, Yoshimura (personal communication)).

Metalinguistic negation is non-truth-conditional. It does not address the *truth* or *falsity* of the state of affairs. Rather, the negative sentence serves to question the *assertability* of the interlocutor's utterance (Horn 1989). The speaker shows objection to a linguistic form (phonetic, morphological or lexical), or to the utterance as a whole. They are mentioned or metarepresented. Thus, I argue that metalinguistic negation is used interpretively, not descriptively. Although the negative operator *not* is used, it seems to function differently from ordinary negation, which echoes the propositional content and descriptively negates it. Metalinguistic negation mentions a part or whole of the former utterance and the negative operator signals a negative or dubious *attitude* towards it explicitly.<sup>6</sup>

In some cases, however, metalinguistic negation may be truth-conditional:

- (9) He doesn't need FOUR MATS; he needs MORE FATS. (Carston 1994: 327)

In (9), the phrase *four mats* is rectified and is followed up by *more fats*. That is, the word-initial consonants are interchanged. It seems that this negation is metalinguistic, but at the same time it commits to the real state of affairs.

Example (10) is a well-known and oft-quoted "presupposition-cancelling" (Burton-Roberts 1989) sentence.

- (10) The king of France is not bald - there is no king of France! (p. 234)

The negative sentence is not considered true or false on some theories. Burton-Roberts argues that this must be another case of metalinguistic negation. The negative sentence cannot be given any truth value, in view of the state of affairs, as the follow-up clause ("There is no king of France!") shows. He argues that the utterance *there is a king of France* is echoed (or mentioned) and the negative operator shows its absurdity.

This claim has been attacked, mistakenly, in my opinion. Carston 1994 points out that in metalinguistic negation involving scalar implicature or connotation such as (7) and (8), the two clauses stand in the relation of *contradiction* if the negative sentence is interpreted truth-conditionally. She adds that this relation is linguistically characterized: if a speaker is not happy, then she cannot be ecstatic, either. In fact, the contrasted item in the follow-up sentence (i.e. *ecstatic*) entails the positive counterpart of the highlighted item in the negated clause (i.e. *happy*):

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<sup>6</sup> Notice that it is the attitude of the speaker that is made explicit. However, the way the expression or utterance is echoed is considered implicit (i.e., it is not clear whether what is echoed is a meaning or an expression). See Carston 1994 for details. See also Yoshimura (To appear), for her discussion of a *procedural* role of the negative operator in metalinguistic negation.

- (11) If I'm ecstatic, then I'm (certainly) happy.  
(12) If he is my father, then I am his child. (Carston 1994: 330)

This relation does not apply to the presupposition-cancelling sentence:

- (13) ??If there is no king of France, then the king is bald.  
(Carston 1994: 330 partly changed)

But there is no need to limit metalinguistic negation to the rectification of contradictory implicature. Notice that if metalinguistic negation involves the rectification of a phonetic or morphological form, the relation of contradiction will not be observed:

- (14) He didn't call the [pólis], he called the [polís]. (Horn 1989: 371)  
(15) ??If he called the [polís], then he called the [pólis].

The cases where an expression rather than a meaning, implicature, connotation or register is echoed or mentioned may be more likely to be interpreted as metalinguistic negation. There may exist "fuzzy" cases, such as (9) and (10), with truth-conditional negation at one pole, and the non-truth-conditional negation at the other.

This variation, I argue, depends on what the speaker echoes. If she echoes a meaning or a proposition, then the negative sentence is more likely to be used descriptively (i. e., (c) in Fig. 1). If, on the other hand, she echoes an expression, then the negative sentence may be used interpretively or metalinguistically (i. e., (a) in Fig. 1).

How would this variation be captured by relevance theory? Let us recall the relation between literalness and metaphor, and the poetic effect caused by the choices of style. In the linguistic literature, examples of metalinguistic negation are usually illustrated by sentences like (7) and (8). It is pointed out that metalinguistic negation induces a sort of "garden-path" phenomenon, where an addressee is led to contradiction. The contradiction is made clear by the following rectifying clause.

However, this is not the *only* way this kind of negation is presented and interpreted. As Carston convincingly argues, there are actually several means to facilitate the metalinguistic interpretations, although they are by no means obligatory. If the communicator aims at a more poetic effect, the metalinguistic reading will be conveyed only indirectly. Thus, the addressee makes a lot of processing effort for the greater effect that he deserves.

On the other hand, the communicator may use fall-rise intonation (Horn 1989, Kumagai 1994), or in written language, may use quotation marks to indicate explicitly that the "target" is mentioned. But they will, in turn, decrease the processing effort; hence the less poetic effect.

Thus, it should not be strange for us to expect cases where the echoed item is interpreted as being either an expression or a meaning. The two types of negation should not be regarded as separate linguistic phenomena. They may form a continuum.

Relevance theory, therefore, provides us with an interesting way to capture a wide range of negative phenomena. I will argue that the same line of reasoning will apply to other cases.

## 4. Echo Questions

### 4.1. Echo Questions in the View of Relevance Theory

Consider the following examples.

(16) A: Have you seen my agapanthus?

B: Have I seen your AGAPANTHUS?

(16') B has seen A's agapanthus ((16)-(16') Blakemore 1994: 202)

Following Sperber and Wilson 1986, let us assume that an interrogative sentence is an interpretation of A's *desirable thought*, namely, (16'). In uttering (16), A communicates that (16') will be relevant to B. If B took her utterance this way, he would respond by either "yes" or "no".

However, B utters an echo question with a prominent accent (indicated by small capitals throughout this paper) on the lexical item *agapanthus*. His utterance may be analyzed in the following way, according to Blakemore. He casts doubt on whether the word *agapanthus* may constitute "a faithful enough representation (1994: 205)" of A's desirable thought. Therefore, Blakemore argues, B communicates that it is *agapanthus*, but not A's utterance as a whole, that is relevant to him.

On the other hand, when B utters a wh-echo question ("Have I seen your WHAT?"), B communicates that it is the identity of a wh-element, (i.e., the completion of a variable in an open proposition) rather than a particular value (e.g. *agapanthus*), that would improve his cognitive environment.

Blakemore argues that there are two possible ways of interpreting echo questions. First, echo questions may be used to search for the phonetic or morphological identity of the echoed element. Second, echo questions may also serve to question the reference or meaning of the echoed item, or the entire utterance that contains it. Examples illustrating the second possibility are given below:

#### Echoing a word and eliciting its reference

(17) A: Have you met the epidemiologist?

B: Have I seen WHAT?

A: The man who gave the lecture.

Echoing a thought attributable to an interlocutor

(18) A: Echo questions aren't interrogatives.

B: Echo questions aren't interrogatives?

A: Not from a syntactic point of view.

Echoing a word and eliciting the underlying state of affairs

(19) A: I was blown over by the wind.

B: You were blown over by the WIND ?

A: Well, it was blowing at about 80 miles per hour.

((17)-(19) Blakemore 1994: 203)

## 4.2. Echo Questions and Metalinguistic Negation

We can now see the similarities between echo questions and metalinguistic negation, in terms of description and interpretation. As discussed above, metalinguistic negation serves to question the assertability of an interlocutor's utterance, explicitly casting some doubt on what is echoed. Likewise, in echo questions, the echoer doubts whether a part of the echoed utterance or thought is faithful enough, instead of accepting the interrogative sentence as an interpretation of A's desirable thought. It is this property, namely, the *objection* to the communicator's interpretation of her thought, that echo questions and metalinguistic negation serve to indicate. Thus, they show an echoer's negative or dubious attitude toward the assertability or faithfulness of the echoed thought, even though they do not seem to share surface syntactic and/or semantic properties.

## 5. Verbal Irony

### 5.1. A Relevance-Theoretic View of Verbal Irony

Let us recall Fig. 1 in section 2. The propositional form of an utterance resembles the thought of a speaker, which can be an interpretation of an attributed thought. Let us consider the following examples:

(20) Peter: It's a lovely day for a picnic.

[They go for a picnic and the sun shines]

Mary: It is a lovely day for a picnic, indeed.

(21) Peter: It's a lovely day for a picnic.

[They go for a picnic and it rains]

Mary: It is a lovely day for a picnic, indeed.

((20)-(21) Wilson 1994)

In both examples, Mary echoes Peter's utterance, achieving relevance by implicitly conveying her attitude. What kinds of attitudes is Mary conveying in the above examples? It is easy to see that she is *endorsing* Peter's thought in the former example, and that she is showing *dissociation* from Peter's thought in the latter. Sperber and Wilson argue that verbal irony crucially involves implicit echoic interpretation.<sup>7</sup> In (21), Peter will assume that Mary's utterance is ostensive and suspect that she must be conveying her attitude. And he realizes that there is a discrepancy between Mary's utterance and the weather. Since her attitude is implicit, it is not until Peter finds out the discrepancy that he actually understands Mary's statement as ironical.

If Mary showed her dissociation more purposefully, by means of, for example, her facial expression and/or tone of voice, the ironic nuance would be conveyed to Peter more explicitly, and therefore, more easily. The more explicit the attitude or style is, the less processing effort the hearer needs to make. But the contextual effect will also decrease; hence the less poetic effect.

As mentioned above, Sperber distinguishes between parody and irony according to what is echoed. If a speaker dissociates herself from a meaning or a proposition, then the utterance is considered a case of irony. On the other hand, if she literally mimics a part or the whole of the original utterance, then it is regarded as a case of parody. Even though there may be such differences, the speaker's dissociative or ridiculing attitude is implicitly conveyed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sperber and Wilson 1981 employed the terms *mention* and *use* in order to explain verbal irony. The former is later superseded by *interpretation*, and the latter by *description*. They discarded the term *mention* since there are cases in which an echoed thought is not directly retrieved by any utterance made by an interlocutor.

- (i) a. Peter: I think I'll have another gin.
- b. Mary: I wouldn't, if I were you.
- c. Peter (sarcastically): Oh, right, I agree, I'm drunk. (Wilson 1994)

Here, Peter concludes from Mary's utterance that he seems drunk. He echoes such a conclusion and then dissociates himself from it. However, if it is clear that the former utterance is directly mentioned, and there will be no confusion, I will use the term *mention*, as I did in the previous sections.

<sup>8</sup> This does not seem to exhaust the whole story of irony, however. In fact, the relevance-theoretic approach to irony is facing criticisms from, for example, the *pretense* theory. In this approach, the speaker is argued to pretend to say the opposite of what she means. This may explain the following better than the relevance-theoretic approach:

- (i) Thanks to John, we lost the game.

In the above example, *thanks to* is used but the speaker really wants to convey that WITHOUT John, they might have won the game. See Sperber 1984 and Williams 1984, for the detail.

## 5.2. Verbal Irony and Metalinguistic Negation

Let us consider the similarity and the difference between the two seemingly distinct linguistic phenomena. If we suppose that the relevance-theoretic view of verbal irony correctly captures the phenomena, we can say the following.

Regardless of the explicitness or implicitness of the attitudes conveyed, both serve to show objections to the interlocutor's thought. Metalinguistic negation questions its assertability, as does verbal irony: The difference between the two is that verbal irony echoes a meaning, while metalinguistic negation usually echoes an expression or utterance. In this sense, irony resembles ordinary negation, and metalinguistic negation resembles parody, if Sperber's characterization of parody is correct. Again, however, we should not expect a clear distinction between parody and irony, since it is sometimes difficult to tell whether it is the expression or the meaning that is echoed.

Suffice it to say that whether considered a case of parody or irony, the utterance serves to show implicitly that the interlocutor's utterance or thought is not faithful or relevant enough to the hearer.

## 5.3. Ironic Nuance in Negation and Echo Questions

Last but not least, I would like to point out that metalinguistic negation and echo questions may convey dissociative attitudes, like verbal irony.<sup>9</sup> There are a number of cases of metalinguistic negation and echo questions which involve the speaker's ironical attitudes. This is natural, if we suppose that they function, pragmatically, like verbal irony.

In his comprehensive study of English preposing constructions, Ward 1988 points out that a class of preposings may convey speaker's ironical attitudes:

(22) What do you think of John?

He's a very successful, but humble guy.

Successful, yes. But HUMBLE {he's NOT/he AIN'T}.

(Ward 1988: 230 example added)

(23) [upon seeing a golfer miss the ball]

Well, one thing's for sure. Another Jack NICKLAUS he AIN'T.

(ibid. p. 227)

In (22), John's properties, namely, success and humility are under discussion. Ward argues that B's utterance may be taken either as a typical case of topicalization or an ironic preposing. In the former interpretation, speaker B is selecting John's properties from a set {successful, humble} which was evoked in A's utterance. B asserts that being

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<sup>9</sup> Burton-Roberts 1989 points out this fact, too. See notes 6 and 13, pp.257-259.

successful satisfies the open proposition *John is X*, while being humble does not. We might say that A's thought is echoed, but B asserts that John is not humble. The negation is descriptive.

In the latter interpretation, by contrast, the preposed element (i.e. *humble*) may be taken as *epitomization* or a maximum value of a scale. Namely, *humble* may be interpreted as the highest value of the scale of humility. The negation is a sort of dissociation. Thus the utterance may be paraphrased "Humility, he is far from it." This interpretation will be made more explicit, when the register (*ain't* vs. *isn't*) or the tone of voice is changed. This is an ironic preposing.

Example (23) is another example of ironic preposing. Jack Nicklaus is considered one of the most outstanding golfers. In the preposed construction, however, this word is not referential. It is used as epitomization of excellent golfers. What the utterance conveys is that the player is far from being called another Jack Nicklaus. Thus, the preposed element is metarepresented, and the negation is used interpretively.

In the following example as well, the negation shows, rather explicitly, the speaker's dissociation from the propositional content.

(24) I love you, Daddie. NOT. (Wilson 1994)

Let us turn to echo questions. Blakemore points out that the echo question in (25) may be intended to "draw A's attention to his slip of the tongue, and perhaps to the absurdity to (sic) his utterance (1994: 205)."

(25) A: ... and then you add a tablespoon of cayenne pepper.

B: A TABLESPOON (of cayenne)? (ibid.)

## 6. Generalizations

Metalinguistic negation, echo questions, and verbal irony are used in order to echo the communicator's thought and to let her know, whether implicitly or explicitly, that it is not relevant or faithful enough to the hearer.

The crucial factor is that the thought represented by the communicator is mentioned or interpreted by the hearer. The more implicit the representation is, the more processing effort is required for the hearer to make, but the greater contextual effect is expected.

## 7. Summary and Conclusion

The points I have made in this paper are summarized as follows. First, the relevance theory helps us understand the nature of utterances in a profound way. It helps us understand how particular linguistic phenomena (e.g. declaratives and interrogatives) can be used and interpreted.

Second, ordinary negation and metalinguistic negation should be characterized as forming a continuum in the description-interpretation dimension. The communicator may intentionally make her utterance implicit or explicit. Therefore, the style she chooses is, as Sperber and Wilson argue, relational.

Third, relevance theory has the advantage of capturing the pragmatically significant properties shared by seemingly distinct phenomena, which might be overlooked by merely observing their syntactic and/or semantic structures.

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