

4 Rhetoric and relevance

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4.1 A paradox and a dilemma

The student of rhetoric is faced with a paradox and a dilemma. We will suggest a solution to the dilemma, but this will only make the paradox more blatant.

Let us start with the paradox. Rhetoric took pride of place in formal education for two and a half millennia. Its very rich and complex history is worth detailed study, but it can be summarised in a few sentences. Essentially the same substance was passed on by eighty generations of teachers to eighty generations of pupils. If there was a general tendency, it consisted merely in a narrowing of the subject matter of rhetoric: one of its five branches, *elocutio*, the study of figures of speech, gradually displaced the others, and in some schools, became identified with rhetoric *tout court*. (We will also be guilty of this and several other simplifications.) The narrowing was not even offset by a corresponding increase in theoretical depth. Pierre Fontanier's *Les Figures du Discours* is not a radical improvement on Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, despite the work of sixty generations of scholars in between.

This combination of institutional success and intellectual barrenness is puzzling, particularly since the history of rhetoric cuts across major social changes: the eighty generations of pupils had little in common, yet Greek politicians, Roman lawyers, mediaeval clerks, Renaissance aristocrats and nineteenth-century bourgeois were all taught the same thing. The extraordinary institutional resilience of an otherwise ossified rhetoric turns puzzle into paradox.

Then came the Romantics, and the end of rhetoric – or so it seemed. The Romantics were particularly scathing about the classical treatment of metaphor, irony, and other figures of speech. In classical rhetoric, figures were seen as ornaments added to a text, which made it more pleasant and therefore more convincing, but without altering its content. In particular, tropes were described as achieving their ornamental effect through the replacement of a dull literal expression of the author's thought by a more attractive figurative expression (i.e. an expression whose literal meaning is set aside and replaced by a figurative meaning).

A mother says to her child:

- (1) You're a piglet!

A classical rhetorician would analyse 'piglet' in this context as a metaphor with the figurative meaning *dirty child*. Or the mother might say:

- (2) You're such a clean child!

Here, a rhetorician would analyse 'clean child' as a case of irony with the same figurative meaning, *dirty child*. The figurative meaning of the metaphorical or ironical expression is seen as identical to the literal meaning of the ordinary expression it replaces. In general, on this view, every figure has a non-figurative paraphrase.

Against the notion of a figure as a mere ornament, the Romantics maintained that a felicitous trope cannot be paraphrased. According to Coleridge, the 'infallible test of a blameless style' is

its *untranslatableness* in words of the same language without injury to the meaning. Be it observed, however, that I include in the *meaning* of a word not only its correspondent object but likewise all the associations which it recalls. (Coleridge 1907, vol. II: 115)

In her modest way, the mother who calls her child a piglet achieves some unparaphrasable effects: for instance, she appears more forgiving than if she had called him a dirty child. Similarly, the mother who says 'You're such a clean child!' conveys not only that the child is dirty but also – with a light touch that would be lost in the explicit paraphrase – that he ought to be clean.

The Romantic critics were unquestionably right to point out the richness and importance of those effects of figures of speech which are not maintained under paraphrase. These effects were merely noted by classical rhetoricians, who did not describe, let alone explain them. But for all their well-taken criticisms and subtle observations, the Romantics were content to talk about metaphor in metaphorical terms, and provided no explicit theory; if anything, they cast doubt on the very possibility of a non-metaphorical theory of metaphor by entirely rejecting the notion of a literal meaning – the 'proper meaning superstition' as I. A. Richards (1936: 11) calls it.

The Romantic critics' objections have generally been accepted by the contemporary academic heirs to the classical rhetorical tradition. It is now almost a commonplace that, in Jonathan Culler's words, 'one can never construct a position outside tropology from which to view it; one's own terms are always caught up in the processes they attempt to describe' (1981: 209).

The incorporation of Romanticism into academic theorising led – paradoxically – to a resurgence of classical rhetoric. For if 'words are equal, free, of age', as Victor Hugo said, scorning rhetorical typologies (1985: 265), then the words found in these typologies are inferior to none, and can be freely used. And so we

find, in modern literary studies, a Romantic use of classical rhetorical terms: they no longer have ‘proper meanings’, but they suggest subtle distinctions and evoke scholarly sophistication and historical depth.

Let us make our position clear: we see nothing wrong with a free use of all the resources of language – poetic use or rhetorical terminology included – in interpreting particular experiences or texts. However, we do not believe that interpretations of particulars generalise into proper theories. Proper theories are not interpretive: they are descriptive and explanatory.¹ We realise that post-Romantic, post-structuralist sophisticates have even less faith in proper theories than they do in proper meanings. However, we are not sophisticates. We see it as a worthwhile goal to develop a theory of the kind of phenomena that classical rhetoricians tried to describe, but with an even greater explicitness than they aimed to achieve.

So here is the dilemma: it seems we must either hold onto the relative rigour of a rhetorical approach and miss an essential – maybe *the* essential – dimension of language use, or start from the Romantic intuition that linguistic creativity cannot be reduced to a mere set of combinatorial rules, and give up any ambition to produce an adequate scientific theory. More specifically: on the one side we have the view that an utterance or text has a literal meaning which it is presumed to convey in the absence of contrary indications. This makes it possible to provide a neat definition of semantics as the study of literal meaning, and of tropology as the study of departures from literal meaning. On the other side, we have the view of meaning as mishmash in motion, analytically unappealing, but true to life.

It is worth noting that both classical rhetoricians and their Romantic critics take for granted that if there is such a thing as literal meaning, then utterances come with a presumption of literalness. We disagree. We will argue that it is possible to hold onto a notion of literal meaning, which is analytically useful, while dropping the presumption of literalness, which is implausible, by appealing to a presumption of relevance. In this way, theory and intuition can be reconciled.

4.2 **Relevance theory**

The rhetorician’s dilemma is a special case of an even more fundamental problem in the study of human communication. From ancient rhetoric through to modern semiotics, communication was analysed as a coding–decoding process in which the communicator encodes a message into a signal that the audience then decodes. The existence of a common code has been seen as a necessary and essentially sufficient condition for communication. The code model of communication has an appealing simplicity; but it has become increasingly obvious that human communication cannot be fully explained in terms of this model alone.

Given a rich enough code – and human languages are certainly rich enough in the required sense – anything that can be encoded in one way can be encoded in another (i.e. whatever can be encoded can be paraphrased). The fact that communication achieves some unparaphrasable effects – which particularly interested the Romantics – strongly suggests that more is communicated than is actually encoded. Moreover, as modern pragmatics has repeatedly shown, communicators often succeed in conveying implicitly (i.e. without encoding it) information that they *could* have explicitly encoded.

How are (unencodable) poetic effects and (encodable but unencoded) *implicatures* communicated? In the case of implicatures, modern pragmatics suggests an answer: they are inferred by the audience using a combination of linguistic decoding, contextual information and general expectations about the communicator's behaviour. Inference, then, is seen as a supplement to encoding and decoding, designed to economise on effort. However, the special flavour and uses of implicit communication, and also of poetic effects, are just as mysterious in modern pragmatics as they were in classical rhetoric.

In *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (1986a), we have proposed a novel approach to human communication, grounded in a general view of cognition. We will try to show how this new approach helps resolve both the classical rhetorician's dilemma and its modern pragmatic counterpart.

Rather than seeing the fully coded communication of a well-defined paraphrasable meaning as the norm, we treat it as a limiting case that is never encountered in reality. Rather than seeing a mixture of explicitness and implicitness, and of paraphrasable and unparaphrasable effects, as a departure from the norm, we treat them as typical of ordinary, normal communication. We see communication not as a process by which a meaning in the communicator's head is duplicated in the addressee's, but as a more or less controlled modification by the communicator of the audience's mental landscape – his *cognitive environment*, as we call it – achieved in an intentional and overt way.

The cognitive environment of an individual can be modified by adding a single piece of new information, but it can equally well be modified by a diffuse increase in the saliency or plausibility of a whole range of assumptions, yielding what will be subjectively experienced as an *impression*. On our approach, between the two extremes – communication of specific information and communication of an impression – lies a continuum of cases. Thus, instead of contrasting 'meaning' with 'rhetorical effects', or 'denotation' with 'connotation', we subsume both under a single unitary notion of *cognitive effects*. The communication of cognitive effects is essentially inferential. Decoded meaning structures are not directly adopted by the audience as thoughts of their own; rather, they provide very rich evidence which can be exploited by largely unconscious inferential processes to arrive at comprehension proper. How exactly are these decoded meanings exploited? What guides the comprehension process? This is where considerations of relevance come in.

Human information processing requires some mental effort and achieves some cognitive effect. The effort required is an effort of attention, memory and reasoning. The effect achieved is to modify the individual's cognitive environment by adding new beliefs, cancelling old ones, or merely altering the saliency or strength of existing beliefs. We may characterise a comparative notion of relevance in terms of effect and effort, as follows:

Relevance

- (a) Everything else being equal, the greater the cognitive effect achieved by the processing of a given piece of information, the greater its relevance for the individual who processes it.
- (b) Everything else being equal, the greater the mental effort involved in the processing of a given piece of information, the less its relevance for the individual who processes it.

We claim that humans automatically aim at maximal relevance: that is, maximal cognitive effect for minimal processing effort. This is the most general factor that determines the course of human information processing. It determines which information is attended to, which background assumptions are retrieved from memory and used as context, and which inferences are drawn.

An act of communication starts out as a request for attention. People will not pay attention to a phenomenon unless they expect it to be relevant enough to them. Hence, to communicate is to imply that the phenomenon being displayed (the linguistic utterance, for instance) is relevant enough to be worth the audience's attention. Any utterance addressed to someone automatically conveys a presumption of its own relevance. This fact, we call the Communicative Principle of Relevance.

A communicator puts a conceptual structure into her audience's head – say, by a piece of mimicry that calls to mind a description of the act or object it resembles, or by producing an utterance which is automatically decoded into a semantic representation. If the presumption of relevance conveyed by this act of communication is to be satisfied, the effort needed to build this conceptual structure must not be wasted. In other words, the structure must yield enough cognitive effects to justify the effort: a request for effort amounts to a promise of adequate effect (how well the promise is kept is another matter).

The audience's task, then, is to identify the effects that the communicator could have both foreseen and used as the basis for guaranteeing the relevance of her communication. Those effects which are (or may have seemed to the communicator to be) sufficient to make the signal adequately relevant to the audience are the intended ones. Taken together, they make up an interpretation consistent with the fact that a presumption of relevance has been communicated: we describe this as an interpretation consistent with the communicative principle of relevance. Consistency with the communicative principle of relevance is the guiding criterion in the comprehension process. (Note, incidentally, that the interpretation selected by this criterion is not the most relevant one, but the one that is relevant enough to confirm the presumption of relevance.)

In *Relevance*, we work out in detail how the communicative principle of relevance guides inferential comprehension and enables the audience to identify

the explicit and implicit content of an utterance. Here, we will merely indicate how it gives rise to metaphorical or ironical interpretations.²

4.3 Literalness, looseness and metaphor

If verbal communication were guided by a presumption of literalness, every second utterance would have to be seen as an exception. If it is guided by a presumption of relevance (or, more precisely, by a criterion of consistency with the communicative principle of relevance), there are no exceptions: the interpretation of every successful act of communication, including utterances in particular, satisfies this criterion.

At a party in San Francisco, Marie meets Peter. He asks her where she lives, and she replies,

(3) I live in Paris.

It so happens that Marie lives in Issy-les-Moulineaux, a block outside the city limits of Paris. Her answer is literally false, but not blatantly so. If Peter presumed it was literal, he would be misled.

In normal circumstances, though, Marie's answer would be quite appropriate and not misleading at all. This is easily explained in terms of relevance theory. A speaker wants the hearer, as a result of her utterance, to take a certain set of propositions to be true, or probably true. Suppose these propositions are all easily derivable as implications of a proposition *Q*. *Q* has other implications which the speaker does not accept, and whose truth she does not want to guarantee. Still, as long as the hearer has some way of selecting those logical and contextual implications that the speaker intends to convey, while ignoring the rest, the best way of achieving her aim may be to express the single proposition *Q*.

We claim that such a selection process is *always* at work, and plays a role in the understanding of *every* utterance. Whenever a proposition is expressed, the hearer assumes that some subset of its implications are also implications of the thought being communicated, and aims to identify this subset. He assumes (or at least assumes that the speaker assumed) that this subset will yield enough cognitive effects to make the utterance worth his attention. He also assumes (or assumes that the speaker assumed) that there was no obvious alternative way of achieving these effects for less effort. His goal is to find an interpretation consistent with these assumptions (i.e. consistent with the communicative principle of relevance). When only a single interpretation (or a few closely similar interpretations with no important differences between them) satisfies this criterion, communication succeeds.

In our example, Peter can infer quite a lot of true or plausible information from Marie's reply: that she spends most of her time in the Paris area, that she knows Paris quite well, that she lives an urban life, that he might try to meet her

on his next trip to Paris, and so on. These (or similar) cognitive effects make Marie's utterance relevant enough to be worth his processing effort, in a way that Marie could manifestly have foreseen. Peter is therefore entitled to assume that Marie intended him to interpret her utterance along these lines. He would be misled only if he were to conclude from her utterance that she lives within the city limits of Paris. But it is clear that Marie had no reason to assume that he would have to derive such a conclusion in order to establish the relevance of her utterance. Hence, her utterance does not warrant it.

Typically, utterances such as Marie's are loosely understood. The loose interpretation is not arrived at by first considering a strictly literal interpretation, then rejecting it in favour of a looser one. In interpreting Marie's reply in (3), Peter would have no ground for rejecting the literal interpretation in the first place. In fact, at no point is literalness presumed.

Utterances can, of course, be literally understood, but in that case, the literal interpretation emerges only at the end of the comprehension process rather than at the beginning, and only when required by considerations of relevance. Suppose that Marie is asked where she lives, not at a party in San Francisco, but at an electoral meeting for a Paris local election. In that case, if she replies as in (3) above, the proposition that she lives in Paris will itself be crucially relevant; her utterance will therefore be understood literally, and Marie will have lied.

The same procedure – deriving enough cognitive effects to make up an interpretation consistent with the communicative principle of relevance – yields a literal interpretation in some cases, and a loose one in others. In still other cases, it yields a figurative interpretation. Suppose an author describing a character writes:

(4) Clarissa's face was a perfect oval.

If there were a presumption of literalness, the reader of this description would have first to consider the literal interpretation of (4), and then reject it, given that it is common knowledge that no human face is a perfect oval. He would then look around for a figurative interpretation, and would somehow recognise that in this case the utterance is a hyperbole: what the author presumably means is that Clarissa's face was remarkably close to being oval. It is obvious that (4) should be interpreted as a case of hyperbole rather than, say, a case of irony; but exactly why this is so is not obvious at all in the classical approach.

According to relevance theory, the reader does not first consider and then reject the hypothesis that the writer meant to assert that Clarissa's face was a perfect oval. He simply uses the idea the writer has expressed as a source of cognitive effects: that is, he builds a mental representation of Clarissa's face which contains enough of the implications of the idea of its being a perfect oval – the general shape, a striking degree of regularity and symmetry – to justify the presumption of relevance. Understood in this way, the utterance produces enough effects for a minimum of effort. If the author had spelled out an interpretation along these lines

instead of relying on her readers' abilities, the effect would have been roughly similar, but the processing effort would have been much greater, and so the relevance would have been much reduced.

Let us return to our example of a mundane metaphor (repeated here for convenience):

(1) MOTHER TO CHILD: You're a piglet!

While calling someone a pig is quite standard – the metaphor is *lexicalised* – calling a child a piglet puts the hearer to some extra processing effort, which justifies a search for added effect. For instance, young animals are endearing, even when the adults of the species are not; so the child may feel encouraged to derive not only the obvious contextual implication that he is dirty, but also the further implication that he is, nevertheless, endearing.

The wider the range of cognitive effects, and the greater the degree of initiative left to the hearer (or reader) in constructing them, the more creative the metaphor: 'piglet' is, if only marginally, more creative than 'pig'. In the richest and most successful cases, the hearer can do more than merely explore the immediate context and directly evoked background knowledge, accessing a wider area of knowledge, entertaining *ad hoc* assumptions which may themselves be metaphorical, and discovering more and more suggested effects. The result is a quite complex picture, for which the hearer has to take a large share of the responsibility, but whose discovery has been triggered by the speaker (or writer).

Take Prospero's words to his daughter Miranda:

The fringed curtains of thine eye advance
And say what thou see'st yond. (Shakespeare: *The Tempest* I ii)

Coleridge argues, against Pope and Arbuthnot, that these words should not be taken as equivalent in meaning to 'Look what is coming yonder'. They are uniquely appropriate to the characters and situation:

Prospero sees Ferdinand and wishes to point him out to his daughter not only with great but with scenic solemnity . . . Something was to appear to Miranda on the sudden, and as unexpectedly as if the hearer of a drama were to be on the stage at the instant when the curtain is elevated . . . Turning from the sight of Ferdinand to his thoughtful daughter, his attention was first struck by the downcast appearance of her eyes and eyelids . . . (Coleridge 1987: 527–28)

Coleridge's comments are indeed illuminating, but they invite an objection and a question. The objection is that it is possible to appreciate Shakespeare's metaphor without understanding it exactly as Coleridge does. The question is how such an understanding is arrived at.

Our answer to the question also deals with the objection. To understand Prospero's metaphor, the hearer must bring to bear his knowledge of the appearance of eyelids, on the one hand, and curtains – theatre curtains in particular – on

the other. But this is not enough, because merely selecting the most obvious implication – that Prospero is telling Miranda to raise her eyelids – would yield an interpretation that requires too much effort for too little effect. A more attentive hearer will invest a little more effort and get much more effect. This extra effort may involve creating a metaphor of his own – such as Coleridge’s metaphor of the hearer of a drama being brought on stage – and adopting some of the implications jointly derivable from Prospero’s metaphor and his own. In doing so, the hearer takes on a large share of the responsibility for the conclusions he arrives at. Different hearers, with different background knowledge and different imaginations, will follow somewhat different routes. However, they are all encouraged and guided by the text, and they all proceed by exploring the implications of the text as relevantly as they can.

How does this approach to metaphor compare with the classical and Romantic accounts? In many ways, we are on the Romantic side. If we are right, metaphors are based on fundamental and universal psychological mechanisms. They are in no sense departures from a norm, or, as modern pragmatics would have it, breaches of a rule or maxim of communication. We also reject the classical claim that tropes in general, and metaphor in particular, have a purely decorative function. For us, as for the Romantics, tropes have a genuine cognitive content which – particularly with the more creative metaphors – is not paraphrasable without loss. We have proposed to analyse this content in terms of a wide array of weak cognitive effects whose recovery is triggered by the speaker, but whose content the hearer actively helps to determine.

Despite our general sympathy with the Romantic view of metaphor, we differ sharply from the Romantics over the nature of language and meaning. For us, the existence of loose uses does not mean that language is irremediably vague, and the pervasiveness of metaphor does not make it an aspect of word and sentence meaning. Similarly, the fact that hearers approach utterances without fixed expectations as to their literalness, looseness or metaphorical character does not mean that literalness, looseness and metaphor cannot be distinguished from each other. However, we regard the distinction as one of degree, not of kind. Words and sentences have a literal meaning, but this literal meaning is a tool for communication, and does not itself constitute the content of communicative acts. What hearers expect is that the literal meaning of an utterance will help them infer, with a minimum of effort, the thought that the speaker intends to convey. This expectation itself derives from, and is warranted by, a more basic expectation of relevance, which is automatically encouraged by any act of communication.

4.4 Echoing and irony

Just as we reject the view that the literal meaning of an utterance constitutes its preferred interpretation, we challenge the view that the grammatical mood of an

utterance (declarative, imperative, interrogative, etc.) determines its speech-act type (assertion, request, question, etc.). What is encoded by grammatical mood is not an illocutionary force but a more abstract piece of evidence about the speaker's intentions, which points the hearer in a certain direction but is not conclusive on its own.³ Thus, the same imperative sentence might be used to express a request, as in (5),

(5) MOTHER TO SON: Be a good boy!

as the antecedent of a conditional assertion, as in (6),

(6) Be a good boy and you will become a good man.

to report someone else's utterance, as in (7),

(7) GIRL: What did Mummy tell you?
BOY: Be a good boy!

or to echo a preceding utterance, as in (8):

(8) MOTHER TO SON: Be a good boy!
SON TO MOTHER: Be a good boy! Be a good boy! I *am* being a good boy!

In a more extended sense of the term, it may also be used to echo someone else's utterance or thought (or the speaker's own past thoughts or utterances, or public opinion, etc.), however far removed in time, as in (9):

(9) SHE: What kind of an upbringing did you have?
HE: Oh, you know, be a good boy! and all that sort of thing.

In each case, the utterance will be taken to have whatever illocutionary force is required to arrive at an interpretation that is relevant in the expected way.

What makes an *echoic* utterance relevant? An echoic utterance indicates to the hearer that the speaker is paying attention to a representation (rather than to a state of affairs); it indicates that one of the speaker's reasons for paying attention to this representation is that it has been entertained (and perhaps expressed) by someone; it also indicates the speaker's attitude to the representation echoed. An echoic utterance achieves relevance by allowing the hearer to recognise, and perhaps to emulate, the speaker's interest in, and attitude to, someone else's thought.

The speaker may express any one of an indefinite variety of attitudes to the representation echoed. The attitude expressed may be one of approval, or even of reverence, as when a speaker echoes popular wisdom or holy scriptures, hoping thereby to command greater acquiescence than if she were merely to speak in her own voice. The attitude may be one of surprise, or even disbelief, as when a speaker echoes some amazing statement. There is also an attitude – or rather a range of attitudes – that may properly be called *ironical*: the representations

echoed with such an ironical attitude are worth paying attention to because of their very inappropriateness, falsity, or even absurdity, and, moreover, because they have been or are being entertained by someone (or some group) as true beliefs or as realistic expectations in spite of their inappropriateness, falsity or absurdity.

Irony, then, rests on the perception of a discrepancy between a representation and the state of affairs it purports to represent. This is true of all varieties of irony, from Socratic irony (where the discrepancy is between the self-confidence and sense of superiority that Socrates allows his interlocutor to indulge in and the true *rapport de force*) to Romantic irony (where all representations – and in particular the poet's own ambitions – are seen as illusory).

When verbal irony is viewed as the use of a linguistic expression to convey the opposite of its literal meaning, not only its value as a rhetorical device but also its relationship to irony as an attitude are obscured. The mystery dissolves when verbal irony is seen as the echoing of an utterance or thought to which an ironical attitude is expressed.

In verbal irony, the ironical attitude is tacitly rather than explicitly conveyed. As a result, the hearer who recognises and shares this ironical attitude will feel that he and the speaker are superior to the victims of the irony: those who accept the echoed representation at face value. In the special case where the echoed representation is a belief or expectation of the hearer's own, or a norm that he has failed to conform to, the hearer is not given the option of sharing a sense of superiority with the speaker: he is himself the victim of the irony.

Thus, the mother who says ironically, as in (2) above (repeated here for convenience),

(2) You're such a clean child!

is drawing attention to a discrepancy between the norm of cleanliness that the child is supposed to satisfy and his actual appearance. This, incidentally, explains why there are many fewer situations in which it would be appropriate for the mother to say ironically to a *clean* child:

(10) You're such a dirty child!

Unless the child had been expected to be dirty for some reason, there would be no antecedent representation to echo. What makes irony moralistic is not, as Muecke (1970: 63) suggests, that 'all literature is moral', but that an easy way of achieving relevance through the use of irony is to echo a moral norm at the precise moment when it is being violated.

Echoic utterances are a well-defined type. Ironical utterances, by contrast, are a loosely defined sub-class of echoic utterances: there is a wide variety of ironical attitudes, which shade off imperceptibly into other attitudes, such as anger or aloofness. As a result, the same representation can be echoed several

times in the same discourse, with slightly different attitudes: the utterance type and content remain the same, but the speaker's disposition evolves and relevance is renewed.

In a famous speech, Shakespeare's Mark Antony says four times, 'Brutus is an honourable man'. The first time, all are agreed that his audience is not intended to take the utterance ironically. The fourth occurrence, on the other hand, is blatantly sarcastic. What happens in between? Wayne Booth, despite his subtlety as an interpreter, is hampered by the classical model of irony (vastly enriched though it is in his treatment):

For the populace, when Mark Antony says for the first time that 'Brutus is an honorable man,' the invitation is simply to agree or disagree. If any of them takes the further step of judging that Mark Antony does not believe what he says, they will probably decide that he is a liar, not an ironist . . . (Booth 1974: 42)

Booth considers only two alternatives: either Mark Antony is making a literal assertion, or else he is being ironical; and since irony is excluded at that stage, it must be a literal assertion (and therefore a lie). For lack of intermediate forms between literalness and irony, a total reversal of meaning must take place at the second or third utterance of 'Brutus is an honourable man'. In order to provide a richer account of the passage than classical rhetorical tools allow, Booth has to resort to metaphor. Mark Antony's hearers, he writes,

do not just translate into the opposite conclusion: 'Brutus is really *dishonorable*.' They are forced to make the ironical leap in order to stand with Mark Antony on his platform (a good deal higher, one might say, than the literal one on which he stands) and they must feel themselves drawn to his conclusions by the acrobatic skill which they themselves have shown. (p. 42)

Relevance theory offers a more powerful analytical tool, which makes it possible to provide a more explicit and fine-grained account of Mark Antony's rapidly evolving mood. When he first says that Brutus is an honourable man, we do not have to describe him as *asserting* his own opinion, and still less as asking his audience to agree. They are already on Brutus's side (''Twere best he speak no harm of Brutus here', a citizen cautions). What Mark Antony does is *echo* their opinion with what they must see, at this stage, as a conciliatory attitude. Considerations of relevance lead Mark Antony's audience to understand him not as *telling* them that Brutus is honourable, but as *granting* them that Brutus is honourable (and granting what you do not believe is not lying, and may even be the moral thing to do).

Then, as he provides his audience with reasons for abandoning the favourable opinion of Brutus that he repeatedly echoes, Mark Antony conveys a more and more scornful attitude to that opinion (and to Brutus himself, who would like to be thought of as honourable). The utterance type remains the same: it is echoic

throughout. Only the attitude changes. Neither the fact that the utterance is echoic nor the speaker's gradually changing attitude is encoded, and neither can therefore be decoded: the audience recognises them by looking for a *relevant* interpretation.

Again, we are on the side of the Romantics: irony is not an occasional device, but a fundamental attitude. Unlike the Romantics, however, we believe that the linguistic expression of this attitude can be analysed and explained without appeal to further tropes, and in terms of an unambiguous and testable model.

4.5 **The relevance of rhetoric**

If relevance theory is right, it offers a solution to the rhetorician's dilemma: a way of being precise about vagueness, of making literal claims about metaphors and ironies, without abandoning any of the Romantics' intuitions. However, rhetoricians could not adopt this solution without jeopardising the foundations of rhetoric itself. For what our proposal implies is that metaphor and irony are not rhetorical devices involving codified departures from the ordinary use of language, but ordinary exploitations of basic processes of verbal communication. Moreover, metaphor and irony exploit quite different basic processes, and are more closely related to other forms of speech – metaphor to loose talk and irony to a variety of echoic uses – than to each other. The very notion of a trope is better abandoned. If so, then rhetoric has no proprietary subject matter to study, or to teach.

Rhetoric has no proprietary subject matter to study because the phenomena and issues it claims as its own amount to a disparate set of items rather than an autonomous category. The set should be dismantled and the individual items studied within the broader framework of a cognitive approach to human communication. Rhetoric has no proprietary subject matter to teach because its effects and procedures are familiar to every human communicator. Teaching metaphor or irony – or, for that matter, the more esoteric-sounding antapodosis or zeugma – has only one indisputable consequence: it makes people do self-consciously what they were already doing spontaneously. From an aesthetic point of view, no-one nowadays would argue that self-conscious use of rhetorical devices is an unmixed blessing. From a cognitive point of view, the teaching of rhetoric turns out to have been a source not so much of self-understanding as of self-misunderstanding.

Because rhetorical effects are achieved in the normal course of the ever-present pursuit of relevance, the institution of rhetoric as a separate subject for teaching and study defeats its avowed purpose. Of course, this makes the historical resilience of rhetoric all the more paradoxical. What covert role, what addictive power, what indirect relevance, should we attribute to rhetoric in order to resolve the paradox?