

Relevance Theory and political advertising. A case study

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Abstract

This paper aims to apply Sperber & Wilson's Relevance Theory (1986; 1995; 1987) and the two stage incongruity-resolution theory of humour (Attardo 1994) to explain how humorous interpretations are produced in a corpus of political billboards published by the Labour Party in the 1997, 2001 and 2005 British election campaigns. The intersemiosis (O'Halloran 2008) between the verbal and the visual will be taken into account in order to decode the meanings transmitted. It will be suggested that the viewers' access to background beliefs and assumptions in order to form a context against which new incoming information can be processed is also essential in order to decode meaning. The extraction of strongly or weakly implicated information is a good source of humorous effects. It will also be suggested that the interpretation depends on the viewer's ideology, as "relevance is always relevance to an individual" (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 142).

Keywords: Relevance Theory, Incongruity Theory, verbo/visual intersemiosis, political billboards.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explain how humorous interpretations are produced in a corpus of political billboards [1] published by the Labour Party in the 1997, 2001 and 2005 British election campaigns. In order to do so, I will apply Sperber & Wilson's (1986; 1995; 1987) Relevance Theory and the two-stage incongruity-resolution theory of humour (Attardo 1994). This paper will analyse the message encoded by the sender, how it is decoded, and all the strategies involved in this encoding-decoding process. Even though RT and the incongruity-resolution theory of humour mainly deal with verbal communication, the texts analysed in this paper have a high visual component which provides the input to the comprehension and resolution process. Therefore, there will be an insight into the multimodal nature of political

billboards, as they cannot be properly understood if the verbal/visual relationship is not taken into account. I will show that the decoding and interpretation of the billboards depend on several factors which include the *viewer's* [2] access to background beliefs and assumptions (Sperber & Wilson 1986; also Section 2.3 in the present paper) forming a context against which new incoming information is processed. The analysis will follow the distinction between explicatures, implicated premises and implicated conclusions and will take into account visual metaphors and semiotic spanning [3] in order to explain the explicatures.

The paper is organized as follows: after the present introduction to the topic of the paper, there is a section dealing with the theoretical background on which the study is based. Visual, political and humorous communication are defined and brought together in the context of political advertising. There is also an insight into the multimodal nature of political billboards and how Relevance Theory can be applied to their analysis. The last part in this section on the theoretical background is a brief introduction to the incongruity-resolution theory of humour. The next section introduces the billboards and the analysis itself. The paper ends with some conclusions and reflections for further research.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Model of Visual, Political and Humorous Communication

The data analysed combine visual and verbal elements which have two distinct yet interrelated purposes such as to convey a political message and to create a humorous effect. Therefore, I will briefly mention political and humorous communication and how they relate to visual communication. Political communication is, according to McNair (2003: 4), *purposeful communication about politics* which includes all forms of communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives, in this case the vote for their party. Visual communication is communication through visual aids. It is the conveyance of ideas and information in forms that can be read or looked upon. It includes signs, typography, drawing, graphic design, illustration, colour, electronic resources and also text. When these semiotic modes are brought together, the possible meanings are thus multiplied rather than simply added together (Lemke 1998: 92). Visual communication, therefore, explores the idea that a visual message with text has a greater power to inform or persuade a person (Messaris 1996), in our case the prospective voter.

In this context, political billboards are a form of communication undertaken by politicians conveyed in the visual mode. The main purpose is to transmit information about the campaign in order to win votes for their party. There are several possibilities in regards the encoding and decoding of the message transmitted in the billboards. They can be both encoded and decoded as humorous. Humorous communication is intended to elicit a response characterized by laughing or smiling. More specifically, it could be said that humorous communication is any intentional communicative instance which is perceived as humorous by any of the interacting parties (Martineau 1972: 114). However, it can turn out that political billboards are intended to be humorous but the viewers' response is not the expected one. In other situations they are decoded as being humorous even though the primary communicative purpose is not.

Constraints of space here do not allow us to revise all models of communication. My starting point will be Lasswell's model (1948), according to which communication theory is circumscribed by the following maxim: "(i) who (ii) says what (iii) in what channel (iv) to whom and (v) with what effect?" I have adopted Lasswell's model as he was primarily

concerned with mass communication and propaganda, categories which apply to political billboards. The sender (i) is the agency which designed the billboards, and, at the same time, the Labour Party who accepted their proposals. The question “Who?” has come to be associated with control analysis, as to what are the senders’ aims, political allegiances, legal constraints and so on. Regarding the message (ii), Lasswell was particularly concerned with content research. With regard to content, it could be argued that the messages in our corpus are intended to produce a smile or a laugh. However, I consider that the main aim is to transmit a political message and get the vote, but they are (also) decoded as being humorous. Thus, it will be shown that messages intended as enactments of humour are not always decoded as humorous and also that the messages which were not intended as enactments of humour are sometimes decoded as being humorous. Relevance Theory will help to explain the factors involved and the way humour is produced through the incongruity-resolution theory of humour. As for the channel (iii), billboards are placed in public places, such as alongside highways or on the sides of buildings, and the media tend to use them as a basis for communication. The message is directed to the electorate (iv) and for the communication to be successful it must have an effect (v), that is, voting for the party sending the message.

2.2. A Brief Introduction to Multimodality.

Relevance Theory is based mainly on the analysis of verbal texts. However, there is no doubt that nowadays we are surrounded by multimodal texts which need to be taken into account. This is certainly true of political billboards, where the use of images and words is equally important. In fact, multimodal analysis has gained great popularity in the last decade. Language –be it written or spoken- is only one part of the whole process of communication and therefore other ways and modes have to be explored (Kress 2010). In this paper, as mentioned above, attention will be focused on texts which are mainly visual but also contain language, and on how Relevance Theory can be applied to their analysis.

As Kress & van Leeuwen point out (2001: 20), multimodality is the use of several semiotic modes and their combination within a socio-cultural domain [4] which results in a semiotic product or event. In line with O’Halloran (2008), I consider that language and visual forms of semiosis greatly differ from each other. Whereas a linguistic text unfolds syntagmatically as a chain which is sequentially processed, visual processing reveals that perception of the whole visual image takes precedence over perception of the parts (O’Halloran 2008: 447-448). Several authors have developed theories of *intersemiosis* across language and visual imagery, that is, how the two semiotic modes –the visual and the verbal- complement each other and multiply the meaning of monomodal texts (Lemke 1998; Royce 1998; Iedema 2001; Cheong 2004; Martinec 2005; van Leeuwen 2005; O’Halloran 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Baldry & Thibault 2006; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006; Moya & Pinar 2008, 2009; Pinar 2008) [5]. Attention, then, will be drawn to the intersemiosis across language and visual imagery in the billboards.

2.3. Relevance Theory

Sperber & Wilson (1986; 1995; 1987) developed Relevance Theory in the 1980s, based on Gricean principles. They proposed, among other things, (i) a reduction of Grice’s conversational maxims to a single principle of relevance, (ii) two principles of relevance (cognitive and communicative) and (iii) the dichotomy *explicatures-implicatures*, which does not correspond directly to the difference between *what is said* and the *implicatures* proposed by Grice [6].

In addition, the traditional *code model* of communication, according to which messages are encoded and decoded, is rejected by Sperber & Wilson (1986; 1995), who opt for an inferential model “which underlies the importance of the addressee’s inferential appreciation of the speaker’s communicative intention” (Yus 2003: 1301). Both models should be combined in the study of language:

the coded communication process [...] serves as a source of hypotheses and evidence for the second communication process, the inferential one. If comprehension is defined as a process of identifying the speaker’s informative intention, linguistic decoding is better seen not as part of comprehension proper, but rather as providing the main input to the comprehension process.

(Sperber & Wilson 1987: 705)

It must also be born in mind that the texts analysed in this paper have a high visual component and it is this visual component which provides the input to the comprehension process. In addition, taking into account the fact that non verbal communication tends to be less explicit than verbal communication, then the visual elements in the adverts may lead to different inference processes in different viewers (Forceville 2005: 253). The verbal part of the ads normally has to be understood in conjunction with the visual element and there is no certainty that the intended interpretation will finally be the one picked up by the addressee.

Relevance Theory is based on four main assumptions (Wilson 1994: 44), which have to be adapted for the texts analysed in this paper: (i) every utterance has a variety of possible interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically (or *visually*, my emphasis) encoded; (ii) not all the interpretations occur to the viewer simultaneously [7]; (iii) viewers are equipped with a single, general criterion for evaluating interpretations; and (iv) this criterion is powerful enough to exclude all but a single interpretation, so that having found an interpretation that fits that criterion, the viewer looks no further (based on Yus 2003: 1308). However, the following analysis will show that this is not necessarily the case in political advertising.

Wilson & Sperber (2002: 261) propose three tasks in the comprehension process:

- a) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about explicit content (EXPLICATURES [8]) via (i) decoding, (ii) disambiguation, (iii) reference resolution, (iv) enrichment and (v) deriving implicatures.
- b) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual assumptions (IMPLICATED PREMISES).
- c) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual implications (IMPLICATED CONCLUSIONS), conclusions deducible from the input and the context together, but from neither input nor context alone.

Decoding is a complex phenomenon in political billboards, since the aim is not to yield an acceptable, grammatical string of words (Yus 2003), but to find a logical explanation for the visual and verbal elements. In relation to disambiguation, the context typically guides the hearer/viewer when selecting one of the possible interpretation of ambiguous (visual and verbal) texts in the relevance-searching process of comprehension. It may happen that all the interpretations are equally alternative. However, one of the meanings tends to be more accessible (Attardo 1994: 94; see Figure 2 and Figure 3 below). As for reference resolution, Yus (2003: 1305) proposes that “it involves determining the actual meaning of polysemous words or phrases and locating spatial-temporal referents for indexicals”. This notion also has to be applied to the visual part of the billboard, as sometimes the images may have different referents. The actual meaning of the image or text is typically determined by taking into

account the verbal or visual part (see Figure 2). In relation to enrichment, and following Yus (2003: 1306), viewers have to use contextual information in order to enrich the possible semantic incompleteness of a text, as the sender normally leaves implicit as much information as s/he thinks can easily be extracted by the viewer in the course of interpretation. Finally, Sperber & Wilson (1986: 383) define implicatures as “those contextual assumptions and implications which the hearer (viewer) has to recover in order to satisfy himself that the speaker (sender) has observed the principle of relevance”. According to Yus (2003: 1306), implicatures are not tied to linguistic decoding and can be stronger or weaker depending on the predictability of the contextual effects.

This does not mean that the viewer has to follow this sequence. As Wilson & Sperber (2002: 262) explain, comprehension is an on-line process, and hypothesis about explicatures, implicated premises and implicated conclusions are developed in parallel against a background of expectations (or anticipatory hypotheses).

In line with Forceville (2005: 251), I also assume that, for the purposes of this paper, there are two concepts in Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995: 176ff) which are important: (i) “relevance is always relevance to an individual” [9] and (ii) the distinction between strong and weak communication. Strong communication will typically lead to a single interpretation, whereas weak communication tends to create a degree of ambiguity. This seems to be the case with political advertising, where the sender of the message prefers to leave it open to a multiplicity of interpretations. This relates well with the fact that political billboards have a multitude of individual addressees with widely different cognitive environments (Forceville 2005: 253) and different ideologies, who will interpret the billboards according to these facts.

Forceville (1996: 99-104; 2005: 253) proposes four points of attention for the application of relevance theory to visual metaphors in print advertisements and billboards which are also valid for the analysis of political billboards: (i) their non-co-presence in time, (ii) the number of communicators involved, (iii) their multimodal character and (iv) the ambiguity of the verbal part of the billboard. Political billboards will be better and more quickly understood if they are seen in the election campaign moment itself, as the collective cognitive environment and the knowledge of the sociopolitical circumstances at the time will be easier to retrieve. The importance of the multimodal character of political billboards and the ambiguity of the verbal part of the billboard have already been mentioned and will be an important issue in the analysis in Section 3.

2.4. Theories of Humour

Theories of humour are attempts to explain what causes people to perceive humour in things, events or texts. There are several publications dealing with Superiority, Incongruity and Release Theories of Humour (Attardo 1994, 2001, among others). This paper follows the Incongruity Theory, which states that humour is perceived at the moment of realization of incongruity between a concept involved in a certain situation and the real objects thought to be in some relation to the concept. Since the main point of the theory is not the incongruity *per se*, but its realization and resolution, it is often called the incongruity-resolution theory (Attardo 1994: 143). As Attardo (1994: 144) states, “any humorous text will contain an element of incongruity and an element of resolution” and “the resolution does not have to be complete and does not have to be realistic or plausible”. The visual metaphors in the billboards entail innovative and unexpected comparisons between two entities: the political leaders, on the one hand, and the characteristics associated to them, on the other. This theory is useful in the context of this paper since the decoding of the billboards, the realization of the incongruities posed and their resolution are what will create the humorous effect.

3. Analysis

3.1. *The billboards to be analysed*

The corpus comprises 20 billboards published by the Labour Party. Constraints of space here allow for the analysis in detail of only four of them, even though the results take into account all of the adverts. The four billboards chosen come from the 1997, 2001 and 2005 British election campaigns. Figure (1) has been taken from the 1997 campaign and depicts John Major and Kenneth Clarke as if they were Oliver and Hardy. John Major was the Prime Minister at the time and Kenneth Clarke was Chancellor of the Exchequer and candidate in the 1997 general election. Figure (2) depicts William Hague before balding, as a youth, and Figure (3) depicts William Hague as if he were Margaret Thatcher. Both Figures have been taken from the 2001 campaign. Figure (4), published in 2005, depicts Michael Howard and Oliver Letwin as flying pigs. These four billboards will be analysed in detail in the following paragraphs. At this stage all the analyses are mine, therefore I will postulate ideas and derive implicatures which might not be shared by everybody. As stated before, “relevance is relevance to an individual” (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 142) and it will all depend on the background knowledge of viewers and the strong or weak communication transmitted by the addresser.

The billboards will be analysed following the ideas dealt with in Section 2.3, developed by Sperber & Wilson (1986; 1995), Yus (2003) and Forceville (2005), and the incongruity resolution theory of humour as developed by Attardo (1994, 2001).

3.1.1. *Billboard 1. Major and Clarke are Oliver and Hardy* [10]

Figure 1. John Major and Kenneth Clarke are Oliver and Hardy.



Word and Image Explicatures. The visual part of the billboard is a visual metaphor: JOHN MAJOR AND KENNETH CLARKE ARE OLIVER AND HARDY. The visual metaphor combines the physical traits of the two political leaders with those of Laurel and Hardy (cf. Tsakona 2009). Decoding this visual metaphor is essential in order to construct an appropriate hypothesis about the content of the billboard. Laurel and Hardy are known as comedians that used to be very popular some decades ago and whose adventures typically went wrong, making people laugh with their incongruous actions, dialogues and personalities in general (Pinar forthcoming; see also Tsakona 2009). Via enrichment, the viewer uses this background knowledge in order to complete the meaning of the text. Non co-presence in time and the number of communicators involved are important points of attention, as there is a significant number of young people, with widely different cognitive environments, who might not be able to make the associations between the political leaders and the comedians, since they do not share that “collective cognitive environment” necessary to identify Laurel and Hardy (Forceville, 2005:253) and the kind of situations they typically engaged in. Following Forceville (2005: 253), it can be argued that the verbal part of this billboard is ambiguous. “Another fine mess” is Laurel and Hardy’s catchphrase, with two possible interpretations. It may only be a reference to the duo’s catchphrase, but it may also refer to the remaining verbal part: “Britain has dropped to 21st in the world prosperity league”. Even though this is a positive declarative clause, the meaning transmitted by *drop* is negative. The viewer is guided through disambiguation and reference resolution to the interpretation that Major and Clarke are unable to make any progress –as Laurel and Hardy- and have caused Britain to fall to the 21st place in the world prosperity league – another fine mess, among others, for Britain. The implicatures, therefore, are clear as far as the viewer has access to background knowledge and assumptions to process the new information.

Once the meaning of the visual metaphor is clear, the verbal part is correctly decoded and the implicatures are derived, the humorous effect is produced through the incongruity-resolution process. The incongruity takes place when there is an overlap and contrast between, on the one hand, the seriousness of the slogan “Britain has dropped to 21st in the world prosperity league” and the seriousness the two politicians are expected to show in the run-up to the general election and, on the other hand, the comicality suggested by the actions and words of Laurel and Hardy. The incongruity is also shown in the slogan “Another fine mess”. Taken seriously, it is a bad thing that the Conservative Party has led Britain to such a situation, but the resolution of the incongruity, when the viewer accesses the background knowledge related to Laurel and Hardy, is what causes the humorous effect.

Implicated Premises. As Laurel and Hardy, Major and Clark are unable to make any real progress in even the simplest endeavours. Once again, knowledge of the duo’s films is needed in order to decode the intended contextual assumptions.

Implicated conclusions: There is no point in voting for the Conservative Party if you do not want your country in a mess. Vote for the Labour Party.

3.1.2. Billboard 2. William Hague is William Brown

Figure 2. William Hague is William Brown.



Word and Image Explicature. The decoding of the meanings transmitted in this billboard is not easy. The visual part is a visual metaphor: WILLIAM HAGUE IS WILLIAM BROWN. The incongruity is posed when the Conservative leader William Hague is endowed the characteristics of William Brown, the main character in the series of books *Just William* published by Richmal Crompton. The main character in this series is William Brown, an 11 year old boy, eternally scruffy and frowning. The effort on the part of the receiver is important, since first of all s/he must be able to identify the cultural reference and then associate William Brown with William Hague, who is depicted as a youth, before balding, making reference to the first time Hague took part in a Conservative Party conference. The intersemiosis between the visual and the verbal is essential, since the visual metaphor is complemented with the slogan “Someone didn’t do his homework”. Via explicature enrichment, “someone” refers to William Hague, but if the focus of attention is on the verbiage, then the logical answer would be “William Brown”. *Just William* is the title of the series of books but also an answer to the question “Who thinks the Tory manifesto sums add up?” The visuals lead the receiver to another interpretation. It is William Hague who has not done his homework, the Tory sums do not add up and only Hague considers they do. The resolution of this incongruity produces the humorous effect.

Implicated Premises: As I have previously mentioned, the verbal part is a reference to *Just William*. The implicated premises here are that Hague is inexperienced and too young, unable to rule the country. “Someone” could refer either to the Conservative Party or to a particular member. The intersemiosis between the verbal and the visual anchors the meaning, encouraging the viewer to deduce that “someone” is William Hague. It is also implied that the Conservative manifesto exposes vulnerabilities to economy and public services.

Implicated Conclusions. Don’t vote for the Conservative Party. Vote for Labour.

3.1.3. Billboard 3. William Hague is Margaret Thatcher

Figure 3. William Hague is Margaret Thatcher.



Word and Image Explicature: The visual metaphor in this billboard is WILLIAM HAGUE IS MARGARET THATCHER. This is relatively easy to decode, as Margaret Thatcher is a worldwide known political leader. However, the reference might not be so clear for certain people. The billboard shows Hague's head with Lady Thatcher's hair and pearl earrings superimposed and a hint of pink lipstick. The comparison between the two political leaders is unexpected and in some way innovative, therefore incongruous. This incongruity is resolved once the connection between Hague and Thatcher has been established. The resolution leads to the production of the humorous effect. The intersemiosis between the verbal and the visual is clear in this billboard. Via reference resolution, and taking the visual into account, "they" in the slogan "Get out and vote. Or they get in", relates to William Hague but also to the years of Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher.

Implicated Premises: This billboard was launched at one of the most important stages of the election campaign. People who were undecided were beginning to focus on the central questions the main parties had been putting forth. These issues were about the economy, public services and, crucially, about the leadership of their country. The visual metaphor seems to imply that William Hague was trapped by the right wing of his own party and had never escaped from the shadow of Margaret Thatcher. People tended to think that he had failed to set his own agenda. According to Labour, Hague had shown no vision for the future except a repetition of the past. Labour Party intended to show with this billboard that Hague was stuck in the shadow of an outdated ideology and offered no ideas or leadership of his own. Hague was the heir and son of Thatcherism and British people must be aware of it.

Implicated Conclusions: Following Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), this image is a close-up of a demand type where Hague is looking directly at the viewer. Close-ups create intimacy between the viewer and the represented participants while demand images encourage the viewer to enter into some kind of engagement and acknowledge the viewers explicitly addressing them with a visual "you" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 122). Both close-ups and demand images should imply closeness and engagement between the Party and the receivers of the message. However, contact between Hague and the viewers is difficult to establish in this billboard since the advert represents solely a head on its own, not as part of a person. This lack of engagement leads to the conclusion that communication with the Conservative Party is not easy, and that, from Labour's point of view, if you do not get out and vote, the Conservative Party will win the election.

3.1.4. Billboard 4. Michael Howard and Oliver Letwin are “Flying Pigs”.

Word and Image Explicature: Visual Metaphor: MICHAEL HOWARD AND OLIVER LETWIN ARE “FLYING PIGS”. Howard and Letwin are identified. Images of “flying pigs” are also identified, superimposed on Howard and Letwin bodies. An incongruity arises during the perception of the elements of the image, since pigs do not usually have politicians’ faces. This is an anomalous visual arrangement that alerts the viewer to an intended metaphoric interpretation beyond the simple depiction and perception of the visuals in the billboard (see also Pinar 2012: 219).

Figure 4. Michael Howard and Oliver Letwin are flying pigs.



Implicated Premises: Both politicians are Jewish [11]. Three possible meanings arise from the visual metaphor: firstly, pork is one of the best-known of a category of foods that are forbidden under traditional Jewish dietary law. Pigs are considered an unclean and inferior animal. It is then incongruent that target and source domain in this billboard are fused the way they are. Secondly, the negative connotations of the word *pig* are evident, not only under Jewish law but in many other cultures. These connotations would be applicable to all pigs and also metaphorically to Howard and Letwin. Finally, the image reminds us of the idiom “Pigs might fly”, especially together with the slogan “The day the Tory sums add up”, placed at the centre of the composition and in capital letters, which makes it salient. The slogan helps fix the polysemous meaning of the image (Barthes 1977), as well as the rest of the verbal part of the billboard, “Britain is working. Don’t let the Tories wreck it again”, which complements both the first slogan and the visual part. Reference resolution of the slogan is quite straightforward as *Tories* relates directly to Howard and Letwin and “it” to Britain and its current situation. The first referent is found in the visual part, whereas the second one in the verbal one.

Not all interpretations occur to the viewer simultaneously. As regards the three possible meanings mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the first one is possibly the most difficult to decode, as it is unlikely that every reader/viewer of this billboard is able to establish the semiotic spanning between the image and the meaning transmitted (Ventola 1999). The input will only be relevant if it connects with background information the viewer has available to yield conclusions that matter to him/her. There is weak communication between the addresser and the addressee. The meaning potential therefore is great and cannot be fully grasped if words and images are not analysed from a multisemiotic point of view.

Implicated Conclusions: With the Labour Party Britain is working, whereas the Conservatives are unable to rule the country. Howard and Letwin are represented through symbolism in a very negative way with clear references to their culture and other sociocultural topics common both to the British and the Jews.

4. Conclusions and further research

The analysis has shown that both Relevance Theory and the two stage incongruity-resolution theory of humour can be applied to political billboards to explain how humorous interpretations are produced. The visual metaphors in the billboards show unexpected comparisons between the political leaders and the attributes they are endowed, which are incongruous. The resolution of the incongruity produces the humorous effect. The multimodal nature of billboards and the intersemiosis between the visual and the verbal have proven to be an important source for meaning-making.

The analysis demonstrates that the interpretation of the billboards depends on the viewer's access to background beliefs and assumptions forming a context in which new incoming information is processed. This is the case in all the billboards analysed, where background knowledge is needed in order to decode the meanings transmitted. It has been shown, following Yus (2003), that many attempts to produce an implicitly communicated humorous interpretation rest upon assumptions of the viewer's ability to recover contextual information, essential in the comprehension process of political billboards. It is when the viewer recovers background information and the incongruity is resolved (for example, knowledge of Laurel and Hardy, or Richmal Crompton's book) that the humorous effect is produced. It has been shown that the viewers' involvement in the the extraction of (strongly or weakly implicated) information contributes to the humorous effect. In most cases, the information is weakly implicated and requires a considerable cognitive effort on the part of the viewer. Sperber & Wilson's (1986: 142) key idea that "relevance is always relevance to an individual" is demonstrated to function in multimodal texts. Differences in interpretation among individual viewers will depend on how both text-internal and contextual items are understood. As mentioned above, at this stage all the interpretations are mine. My intention for the future is to verify to what extent they are backed up in an experiment where all the variables presented here are controlled, checking the explicatures, implicated premises and implicated conclusions derived, taking into account age, social background, ideology and nationality of the individuals participating in the experiment. The variables of age and social background have been mentioned in the analysis above. The ideology variable, however, may not necessarily yield the anticipated results: a preliminary suggestion is that different political ideologies would interpret the billboard in a similar way, but the *evaluation* of its content and its humour in particular will be different for followers of the Labour Party or followers of the Conservative Party [12]. Furthermore, as Forceville (2005) points out, the non-co-presence in time is important, as the billboards are easier to understand if they are seen during the election campaign period and taking into account the socio-political circumstances at the time (Pinar 2008). The connection between the two terms of the metaphor would also be easier to make if they co-existed in time, which is not always the case: in the Laurel and Hardy or the William Hague is William Brown billboard, the comedians and William Brown were popular a few decades ago.

All in all, the use of innovative and unexpected visual metaphors has proven to be useful to create a humorous effect and both Relevance Theory and the incongruity-resolution theory of humour constitute good tools for the analysis of the metaphors and their meanings.

Notes

[1] A billboard is a panel for the display of advertisements in public places, such as alongside highways or on the sides of buildings. It is also the advertisement or message posted on such a panel. Therefore, in this paper both terms advertisement and billboard will be indistinctly used.

- [2] Italics my emphasis. I will use the term *viewer* instead of hearer, as the texts are mainly visual. Sperber & Wilson's examples are mainly verbal, as well as those proposed by the different theories of humour, this paper being an attempt to account for multimodal ones (see also Forceville 2005: 253).
- [3] Ventola (1999) uses the term *semiotic spanning* to describe the relationship which takes place between various kinds of texts independent of their generic qualities and their realizations modalities. She applies the term to conferences. Pinar (2008) applies the term to the relationship established between political cartoons, the billboards associated to them and the whole socio-political context in which they occur. Visual metaphors in this paper are considered as cognitive phenomena. They are basic interpretive frameworks for organising information about the world – election campaigns in this case, and making sense of experience (Kaplan 2005: 170). They shape how people come to understand unfamiliar or new ideas, and political issues (Gozzi 1999). For further information on visual metaphors, see Forceville (1996; 2009).
- [4] This socio-cultural domain is important not only for the producers of the semiotic product but also for the receivers, especially when it comes to decoding and understanding the message transmitted.
- [5] These theories are amply explained in O'Halloran (2008: 452-455).
- [6] For a more detailed discussion on the differences between Gricean principles and Sperber & Wilson's Relevance Theory, see Yus (2003: 1296).
- [7] Some of the interpretations take more time to think up. This is utterly related to the decoding of visual metaphor (Kaplan 2005; El Refaie 2003) and to semiotic spanning (Ventola 1999).
- [8] An explicature is a communicated proposition recovered by a combination of decoding and inference, which provides a premise for the derivation of contextual implications and other cognitive effects. An implicature is any other propositional form communicated by an utterance; its content consists of wholly pragmatically inferred matter (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 176-193).
- [9] According to Sperber & Wilson (2002), an input is relevant to an individual when it connects with background information s/he has available to yield conclusions that matter to him/her and yields a positive cognitive effect.
- [10] A similar example can be found in Tsakona (2009). She analyses a cartoon published in the newspaper *Ta Nea* in which the Greek Prime Minister, Kostas Karamanlis, and the Greek Leader of the Opposition, George Papandreou, are represented as Laurel and Hardy (Tsakona 2009: 1180)
- [11] Ethnic humour (Davies 1990; 2002) has to be mentioned at this point. According to Laineste (2008), ethnic jokes are dependent on a particular social, economic and cultural context. The fact that both Letwin and Howarth are Jewish in combination with the reference to pigs can clearly be considered as ethnic humour. This billboard is analysed from the point of view of ethnic humour in Pinar (2012: 220-221).
- [12] See also Pinar (2012) where a number of billboards are analysed from the point of view of ethnic humour.

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