

OSCAR WILDE'S HUMOROUS MANIPULATION OF DISCOURSE WITH "ELABORATE POLITENESS" IN *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST**

Cristina Rodríguez Ravelo

Universidad de Vigo

crisrora@gmail.com

In this article we intend to demonstrate that Oscar Wilde's humorous discourse in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) relies mainly on the combination of comicality and what the author calls "elaborate politeness," which is a phrase used in a stage direction at the end of act II. The effectiveness of Wilde's humour is significantly achieved through this type of discourse, which is also used as a formal strategy to convey ideological subversion. We will explore Wilde's humorous strategy of "elaborate politeness" within the frame of discourse analysis, with the support of some theoretical approaches to humour both classical and contemporary, and bearing in mind Victorian theories of comedy.

Keywords: Humour, laughter, Victorian comedy, discourse, politeness, *Oscar Wilde*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Este artículo tiene como objetivo demostrar que el discurso humorístico de Oscar Wilde en *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) se basa principalmente en la combinación de comicidad y lo que el autor denomina "elaborada cortesía," que es una frase utilizada en una acotación al final del segundo acto. La eficacia del humor de Wilde es lograda significativamente a través de este tipo de discurso, el cual es utilizado igualmente como estrategia formal para transmitir subversión ideológica. Estudiaremos la estrategia humorística de Wilde de "elaborada cortesía" desde la perspectiva del análisis del discurso, apoyándonos en algunos enfoques teóricos del

humor, tanto clásicos como contemporáneos, y teniendo en cuenta teorías victorianas de la comedia.

Palabras clave: Humor, risa, comedia victoriana, discurso, cortesía, Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of the second act of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Gwendolen and Cecily discover that they are both engaged to marry Ernest Worthing. Their witty repartee achieves a high level of comicality which raises laughter in the audience, because, although extremely angry, those two characters are forced to restrain themselves according to the Victorian code of politeness. When the tension between both women is almost unbearable, Gwendolen is forced by the stage direction to answer Cecily "with elaborate politeness." In this article I aim to demonstrate that Wilde's humorous discourse in the play relies particularly on this notion of elaborate politeness, and that the effectiveness of his humour is significantly achieved through this type of discourse, which also serves as a formal strategy to convey ideological subversion. This article explores Wilde's humorous strategy of elaborate politeness within the frame of discourse analysis, with the support of some theoretical approaches to humour both classical and contemporary, and bearing in mind Victorian theories of comedy.

2. A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPROACH TO WILDE'S *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*

2.1. Preliminary considerations

When Wilde wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest* his intention was to amuse his audience and provoke their laughter. However, he allows himself to criticize his audience through the manipulation of his characters' discourse, which is firmly placed in the framework of condescending upper-class *polite* comments. In his study about comedy

and farce, Jerry Palmer (1994: 126) points out that “polite manners dictate a certain decorum which excludes those forms of humour or mirth creation which come to be regarded as vulgar because excessive...” Wilde was conscious that a certain use of language was central to his comedy, since it was the usage of his *polite audience*, and that employing linguistic forms that derived from outside the group in question should be excluded. Wilde enjoyed playing with nonsense humour, using tricks which reverse the audience’s expectations. Reversal of standards is a common strategy throughout the play and Wilde treated serious issues such as marriage and social position humorously. As Koestler (1989: 79) claims, Wilde is considered a master of a variety of nonsense humour called pseudo-proverb. As Koestler points out: “two logically incompatible statements have been telescoped into a line whose rhythm and syntax gives the impression of being a popular adage or golden rule of life”, “I can resist everything except temptation” is an example of Wilde’s comic device. Nonsense humour, as Max Eastman has pointed out, is only effective if it aims to “make sense” (qtd. in Koestler 1989: 79). And Wilde tried to “make sense” of nonsense as a humorous strategy to raise the audience’s laughter.

As will be observed, Wilde’s humorous discourse implies ideological subversion. Richard Allen (2000: 23) points out that by leading Victorian stereotypes towards absurdity, Wilde tried to subvert Victorian values. In this sense, we will explore Wilde’s political strategy and its effects on the Victorian audience with the help of an ideological and critical discourse analysis approach. According to Van Dijk (2008: 329), ideologies are both social systems and mental representations. This means that they not only have a social function but also cognitive functions of belief organization. Ideologies are the mental representations that form the basis of social cognition and, by social cognition, Van Dijk means “the shared knowledge and attitudes of a group.” In order to analyse the effects produced by Wilde’s humorous discourse on the social cognition of the Victorian spectators and identify its ideological manipulation, we will explore some background information about their social context, beliefs and traditions.

The present analysis will discuss Wilde’s language of humor in context, how the inferences of meaning are provided to the audience

not only by the conventional meanings that are linguistically encoded, but also by the operation of the cooperative principle -a kind of tacit agreement by speakers and listeners to cooperate in communication- in conjunction with background and situational knowledge. Many terms or expressions used in Wilde's theatrical discourse have a referring function which depend on mutual knowledge; thus, the process of referring to an entity is not strictly semantic or truth conditional; it is also pragmatic. Many authors have defined pragmatics in different ways, but in most definitions it can be seen that elements such as context, meaning beyond literal meaning, speech acts or illocutionary acts, understatement, and implicature, are considered important components of a pragmatic analysis. A Gricean pragmatic approach to discourse analyses the way speaker meaning is dependent upon a cognitive context of shared beliefs and assumptions. In the analysis of the play I shall present a view of pragmatics as *meaning in interaction*, since this takes into account the different contributions to the making of meaning of both speaker and hearer as well as that of utterance and context. In this sense, I will also take an interactional socio-linguistic approach which incorporates situational analyses into its view of context. This approach provides a "richly textured view of social interaction and social situations, including the way participation frameworks and presuppositions arise from situated interaction" (Schiffrin 2006: 369). Some interactional elements to be analysed are such mimetic props and cues to humor as body language (as indicated by stage directions) and the use of an inappropriate discursive mode (e.g. excessive seriousness). According to Hymes, it is not only the code-like properties of language that allow people to "render experience intelligible" (qtd. in Clark 2008: 781). In this humorous text, it is not just the code *per se* that enables experience to be intelligible: it is interaction between the narrator and the audience that allows language a sense-making capacity, the capacity so central to culture itself. Larkin Galiñanes (2000: 101) maintains that in long humorous texts "there is a strong dependence [...] on the reader's external, cultural context for the effect of the narrator's illocutionary acts." It may be observed that in Wilde's play most of the jokes rely on this dependence, and that the effectiveness of his humorous discourse is based on the assumptions of presuppositions shared by Wilde and his Victorian audience. It is precisely the representation of Victorian society in Wilde's play that amuses his audience; the spectators laugh

at the characters' witty conversation on the stage because they feel comically mirrored by them. Wilde identified comedy with wit and laughed at the ridiculous sentimentality of Victorian melodramas. Curiously, in *The Triumph of Wit*, the critic Robert Bernard Martin (1974:31) explores how in an age of "considerable sentimentality, the Victorians believed that the highest form of sympathy and love consisted of shared tears (...) Amiability, sympathy, naturalness, pathos: these had become the identifying characteristics of humour." In this respect, George Meredith criticises Victorian comic writing and its sentimental humour in his *Essay on Comedy* (1877). He tacitly identifies comedy with wit, so he assumes that comedy is dependent upon incongruity, and that the elements necessary for the resolution of incongruity are intelligence and common sense. Later Bergson would agree with some of Meredith's ideas mentioned above. Both thinkers find new "social" meanings in the comedy of manners and both see comedy as a game played in society (*cf.* Sypher 1980: 2), as Wilde also does in his plays. Bergson believed that one can only laugh in the presence of others, a remark which matches with his theory of laughter as an act of social correction: "You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo.(...). Our laughter is always the laughter of a group" (2009: 576). Bergson's interpretation of laughter as "the laughter of a group" is frequently present in current discussions on the matter. Likewise, Victor Raskin (1985:16) maintains that "[I]t is only people with the same social heritage who laugh easily at the same kind of jokes. That is why laughter so often balks at national frontier, and dies away with the passage of time." That we laugh with others who share our values and world view is considered as being at the basis of current theories of humour, as we will see later in the analysis of Wilde's play.

2.2. *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*: Humour, politeness and Victorian society

The Importance of Being Earnest, Oscar Wilde's most successful play, was first produced by George Alexander at the St James's Theatre on 14 February 1895. As Russell Jackson (2009: 162) observes "this was a theatre as well ordered as a drawing-room, with acting and

staging whose quality was achieved with the expenditure of immense craft and care but which never drew attention to the effort it required.” That is to say, the setting of the play closely mirrors the class and social standing of the audiences who made up the spectators of the play’s original performance. John Sloan (2009: 6) notes that “Wilde’s lifelong performance was actually that of an Oxonian, which meant a distinct feeling of cultural superiority to the rest of society.” Wilde’s knowledge of the classics is reflected in the play where he seems to follow Cicero’s theories in *De Oratore* on the appropriate use of humour (Figuroa-Dorrego 2009: 33-40). Wilde associated his characters with a kind of speech which never goes beyond the limits of dignity or decorum, that is, Cicero’s *gravitas*. Likewise, the incisive one-liners and sarcastic shafts of wit he uses intermittently may have their source in Cicero’s *dicacitas*. Wilde’s witty associations of humour with weaponry and attack in his characters’ sharp-pointed comments, may be identified with Cicero’s *aculeus* as we can see at the end of the second act when Cecily and Gwendolin engage each other in a witty repartee:

Gwendolin: Are there many interesting walks in the vicinity, Miss Cardew?

Cecily: Oh! Yes! A great many. From the top of one of the hills quite close one can see five counties.

Gwendolin: Five counties! I don’t think I should like that; I hate crowds.

Cecily [*sweetly*]: I suppose that is why you live in town?
[Gwendolin *bites her lip, and beats her foot nervously with her parasol.*]

In this sense, it seems that Wilde endowed his characters with innate elegance and wit and cultivated *urbanitas*, and obliged them to respect the limits that *gravitas* sets to the use of humour, as Cicero maintained.

The play opens in Algy’s London rooms in Half Moon Street. The stage directions emphasise the room’s luxurious and artistic furnishings, and place the scene in the upper-class London of the 1890s. When the curtain rises, Lane, the butler, is alone on stage, arranging things for tea, and Algy is offstage playing the piano in

another room. The comic “elaborate politeness” of the play is set in the opening exchanges between Algy and Lane. The response the butler gives to Algernon’s initial question, and which conforms a joke based on a reversal of expectations, presents a sort of challenge to make sense of nonsense: “Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?” Lane, who plays the role of the loyal servant who sees and hears nothing of his master’s faults, answers: “I didn’t think it polite to listen, Sir” (295) referring to Algy’s piano playing. Lane’s locutionary act flouts the Gricean Maxim of Quality which is concerned with truth-telling (Cruse 2004: 368). According to Grice’s theory, interlocutors operate on the assumption that, as a rule, the maxims will be observed. When this expectation is confounded and the listener is confronted with the blatant non-observance of a maxim once the possibility that the speaker may be trying to deceive, or is incapable of speaking more clearly has been discounted, he or she is again prompted to look for an implicature. Flouting which exploits the maxim of Quality occurs when the speaker says something which is blatantly untrue or for which he or she lacks adequate evidence. In the dialogue under analysis, an implicature is generated by the butler’s saying something which is patently false. Since the butler does not appear to be trying to deceive Algernon (and, therefore, the spectators) in any way, the listeners are forced to look for another plausible interpretation. Thus the spectators will draw on the conventional meaning of the word *polite* and recognize that Lane’s comment is incongruous and completely improper. In this context, and on an ideological basis, Wilde subverts the social system and the mental representations of the cultural norm of decorum among servants, by making the norm the butt of the joke. As a matter of fact, the social cognition of the audience interacts with the joke and it provokes the desired effect of laughter. Taking into account that by *social cognition* Van Dijk (2008: 357) means “the shared knowledge and attitudes of a group” (in this case on the proper/improper), the joke is immediately responded by the audience’s cooperation due to its common encyclopedic knowledge, which implies the recognition of the fact that listening to piano playing is by no means *impolite* behaviour in a servant.

In *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), Immanuel Kant maintains that laughter follows from something absurd and “*is an affection arising*

from sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (2009: 433, emphasis in original). Kant locates humour and laughter in incongruity and Kant's idea of *sudden transformation* may be identified in the punch line of a joke (Raskin 2008: 308). Likewise, Hazlitt (1921: 7) considers that incongruity is no doubt the reason most commonly given to explain why we laugh: "The essence of the laughable", says Hazlitt, "is the incongruous, the disconnecting of one idea from another, the jostling of one feeling against another." Similarly, John Morreall (1983:73) maintains that: "Sometimes the witty comment achieves its effect by looking at a situation from an incongruous point of view. To understand the comment we have to shift to that point of view from our ordinary one; doing so amuses us and we express our amusement in laughter." Thus, it seems incongruous that a respectable young gentleman should ask his servant about his musical performance and that the servant, who was supposed to praise his master's abilities properly, should answer with a comic and artificially polite answer which, therefore, would have taken the audience by surprise because it seemed to reverse their normal expectations. Indeed, the incongruous and the comically *elaborate politeness* of the character provoke the audience's laughter. Moreover, we may find in this joke a second interpretation which implies Lane's critique of Algy's musical performance. Algy says himself: "I don't play accurately (...) but I play with wonderful expression." Lane appears "arranging afternoon tea on the table" (as indicated by stage directions), he seems quite indifferent to the music he is listening to and he does not give any hint of emotion at all. However, he is extremely *polite* in his answer to avoid his master being offended. Thus, Lane uses an off-record strategy, characterized by the use of mitigating elements which convey certain meanings in an indirect way. By being vague and ambiguous, Lane flouts the Gricean maxim of manner (Cruse 2004: 369); he intentionally chooses an off record strategy to avoid losing face and leaves the interpretation of his utterance to Algernon's own consideration. Significantly, the sociocultural context shapes the comic world in the play. The character's speech and behaviour maintain the proper level of *politeness* required by the social conventions of the Victorians. We might say that Wilde's use of *politeness* represents a comic device which provides the play with an essential element for the production of humour, as we have identified in the dialogue between Algy and Lane.

2.3. Humorous irony as a politeness strategy

Lady Bracknell's speech is very proper, she carefully observes the norms of self-control and restraint in her language, as is reflected in her authoritarian control of the situation; the length of her speech and her deployment of power surprise the audience:

Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it is high time that Mr Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life. I am always telling that to your poor uncle, but he never seems to take much notice (...) as far as any improvement in his ailment goes. (Wilde 2000: 304)

As we may observe, Lady Bracknell's speech about Bunbury's illness, exemplifies Bergson's theory that says: "To express in reputable language some disreputable idea, to take some scandalous situation, some low-class calling or disgraceful behaviour, and describe them in terms of the utmost *respectability*, is generally comic. The English word is here purposely employed, as the practice itself is characteristically English." (2009: 609, emphasis in original). Lady Bracknell's concern about Bunbury relies entirely on the fact that his illness might disrupt her own social schedule because it takes Algy away from town. What underlies her speech, and has an evident satirical force, is her rage about Algy's "selfishness". Her suspicions about Algy's lie provoke her disappointment, which she is not allowed to expose overtly, according to upper class manners, but to manifest it in her ironical speech. Her majestic presence on the stage (as indicated by stage directions) and her comic deployment of the reasons for which she does not "in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids", convey a highly ludicrous scene of restrained *politeness*, at which eccentricity the spectators laugh. A parody of *politeness* in form and content seems to be constructed. In this respect, we will analyse how Wilde makes use of irony as a *politeness* strategy.

Salvatore Attardo (2001: 118) has pointed out that in humorous texts “an irony marker alerts the reader to the fact that a sentence is ironical”. In Lady Bracknell’s speech, we identify some clear markers which alert the spectator about the presence of irony. As Haiman (qtd. in Attardo 2001: 119) describes, at a morphological level, there are some expressions (for example such as the ones uttered by Lady Bracknell, “I must say” or “Nor do I in any way”), which may indicate irony. Haiman goes on to say that we may even identify typographical means such as dots (“...”) as indices of irony. In this way, at the end of the speech, I have found that Wilde strategically includes dots in Lady Bracknell’s line about her husband’s health: “I am always telling that to your poor uncle, but he never seems to take much notice... as far as any improvement in his ailment goes.” As we clearly recognise, dots mark a suspended utterance, thus alerting the audience to potential other meanings left unsaid, and which could be exploited in a stage version for humorous effect. When inferred, these other potential meanings implied by the dots, will enhance Lady Bracknell’s ironical intention and arouse the audience’s laughter at the recognition of Lord Bracknell’s reasons for being ill. Victorian fiction abounds in invalid women; Lord Bracknell’s ill health represents a comic reversal of the presumption of feminine invalidity. As a matter of fact, the spectators may suspect that Lord Bracknell is a henpecked husband who has gone off into retreat rather than have to face his wife. That Lord Bracknell is a comic invalid whose incapacity reverses gender stereotypes is something that the spectators perceive and identify within their own cultural background and social conventions. Therefore, at the end of the speech, and at the allusion of Lord Bracknell’s ailment, the male spectators would burst into laughter at having got a new joke. This joke speculates with the idea that Lady Bracknell suspects that her henpecked husband’s invalidity is the result of the modern epidemic of Bunburysm, which curiously wreaks havoc among gentlemen, and that this is the reason why she “in [no] way approves of the modern sympathy with invalids”, and “considers it morbid.” Thus, Lady Bracknell intentionally chooses irony to tell Algernon that he cannot fool her and, therefore, to express an evaluative judgment about the situation that she “in [no] way approves.” In this respect, in Brown and Levinson’s Theory of Politeness, politeness is interpreted as a strategy employed by a speaker to achieve a variety of goals, such as maintaining harmonious relations (Thomas 1995:157). By being ironic,

Lady Bracknell uses an off-record strategy which allows her to criticise Algernon without causing undue offence and, at the same time, to avoid “losing face”. Goffman (1967:5) defines face as: “...the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes, albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself.” Wilde’s discursive humorous strategy forces Lady Bracknell to address two different audiences at the same time, one (the persons on stage, particularly Algernon) who is essentially the “butt” of the irony and another audience (the spectators) who is “in” on the ironical intent and appreciates the irony, and therefore, laughs at it. Indeed, Wilde’s use of irony in the construction of Lady Bracknell’s Victorian discourse is highly significant. Wilde created a parody of Victorian *politeness* through Lady Bracknell’s comic speech: by being ironic, Lady Bracknell maintains her “reputation” and *behaves* according to the conventional norms of Victorian society, by which she was not supposed to expose her feelings in public.

In terms of what is said, Lady Bracknell’s speech overturns conventional assumptions about illness, seeing it as something that the invalid wills on himself, and about which he can make up his mind. She deploys in her speech her own logic of the absurd, which is the violation of a logical principle, and which provokes the audience’s surprise. Thus, the spectator feels Lady Bracknell’s speech as incongruous and needs to reinterpret her discourse according to his encyclopedic knowledge; therefore, it is a mixture of surprise, appreciation of the incongruity and satisfaction at having solved the problem that accounts for the pleasurable effects which give rise to laughter in the audience, as psychological theories of humour describe. Curiously, in his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle argues that the orator should pepper his speech with humorous devices, by creating expectation in the listeners and then surprising them with something they did not expect, and in this way he hints for the first time at the Incongruity Theory of Humour (*cf.* Morreall 1983: 16, and Figueroa-Dorrego 2009: 28-30). As Morreall (1983: 72) observes while describing verbal humour and the kind of incongruity it employs, “we find another rich source of incongruity in the violation of logical principles. What seems

to work best here is not a complete lack of logic in a piece of reasoning, but rather a violation of some logical principle in a piece of reasoning that is just logical enough to sound somewhat plausible.”

2.4. Humorous politeness in despair

Wilde’s comic representation of the “foundling” becomes very funny on account of Lady Bracknell’s comments on the matter. Because Jack is a foundling, then, Lady Bracknell assumes that he must be the result of “a social indiscretion.” The code in which the joke in act III is emitted is common to both Wilde and his audience. In this scene, Jack wrongly identifies Miss Prism as his “Mother!”, and makes a sentimental and melodramatic speech about the sexual double standard that punishes women and their illegitimate children: “But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for woman? Mother, I forgive you. [*Tries to embrace her again*]” (355). As Richard Allen argues in his notes to the play: “The reference is to Christ’s defense of the woman taken in adultery, whom he saved from a public stoning by asking if there was anyone present among her accusers so totally guiltless that he could act with god-like impunity (John 8)” (Wilde 2000: 429 n.16). Thus, Jack’s assumption, in desperation, is a funny subversion of the trope of the woman with a past. As we may observe, Jack “echoes” the Bible by uttering a locution attributed by cultural norm to a specific context. In this sense Jack’s words “who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered?” are echoed in circumstances which render it incongruous in view of the audience’s encyclopaedic knowledge. Thus, two or more scripts are in this way brought into the spectator’s mind, and humour is created through the incongruity between the actual context of the echoed locution, and the original context suggested. In the context of a Victorian audience, those who laugh at Jack’s speech about the fallen woman share the stereotype, belong ideologically to the same social system and share the same values and world view. Thus, the joke is closely related to the audience’s social cognition and encyclopedic knowledge which help them work out the “strong implicatures” (Larkin-Galiñanes 2005: 89) generated by Jack’s illocutionary acts, provoking, hence, interaction and the arousal of

laughter. As Larkin-Galiñanes claims, “strong implicature..., limits the range of possible interpretations accessed by the reader through the accumulation of statements whose salient connotations reinforce each other and thus guide the reader’s search for relevance in a given context, eliminating secondary interpretations through the pressure of the implicatures previously generated.” Social-Behavioural approaches to humour, which rely on the “Superiority Theory”, consider that when the plots of the jokes are based on stereotypes that are culturally determined, laughter is aroused with a minimal mental effort; to use Sperber and Wilson’s terms of relevance theory, the maximum contextual effect is derived from the minimum processing effort. As has been observed, most jokes in the play are based on stereotypes, and as Larkin-Galiñanes (2005:107) maintains “[I]t is necessary for producer and receiver to share the stereotype and resulting attitudes concerned, so in funny novels the attainment of the desired perlocutionary effect depends in a fundamental way on whether or not the two parties share the same values and world view.” As we have seen, this works similarly in plays.

At the end of the play, the tension of the plot grows comically while Jack tries to demonstrate his origins and rushes upstairs to fetch the hand-bag in which he had originally been found. Wilde invites the audience to track Jack’s moment-by-moment movements and perceptual experiences, intensifying their complicity. Tracking the protagonist requires following a deictic center (Clark 2008: 774), the I, here and now of Jack’s point of view. Thus, the spectators feel as if they were actually on the stage and interact with a mixture of amusement and suspense, until laughter is aroused at the expense of “the foundling”, who, in a state of desperation and “ [after a pause] ” as Wilde indicates in stage directions, is obliged to restrain himself and to construct an *elaborately polite request*: “Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am?” (356).

3. CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have argued that Wilde’s use of *elaborate politeness* provides the play with an essential element for the production of humour. As we have seen, Wilde’s humorous discourse is largely based

on form and stylistic effects. Thus, the characters we have analysed (Algernon, Lane, Lady Bracknell and Jack) are defined by the *elaborate politeness* of their speech, carefully manipulated by the author for humorous purposes: they are forced to keep up the level of politeness required by the social conventions of the Victorians so as to represent comically the proper manners and *gravitas* expected by the audience. At the same time, and combined with the use of *elaborate politeness*, there are elements such as incongruity and irony which seem to be of essential importance to create humour in the play. In the pragmatic analysis of these elements I have tried to provide a reasoned explanation of their contextual meaning, force and perlocutionary effects. As we have seen, the desired perlocutionary effect is achieved when the spectators and the author share the same values and world view. This article analyses how meaning in language is highly context-sensitive, this means that words in Wilde's discourse are shapes of potential meaning which alter in different meaning environments, and which are highly dependent on context, on tone, on placement. Finally, I might say that this is a play which takes a certain ideological position. As I have argued in this article, Wilde's humorous discourse implies a political strategy: it constructs a social critique and subverts Victorian conventions; systematic inversions of common values such as moral/immoral, proper/improper, serious/trivial, have been explored throughout this work. However, the ideological subversion of the play, I think, is always disguised behind a parody of decorum. Curiously enough, it was through the manipulation of a humorous discourse of *elaborate politeness* that Wilde, masterfully, addressed *A Trivial Comedy for "Serious People"* and raised their laughter.

WORKS CITED

- Allen, R. 2000. "Introduction." *Oscar Wilde. The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*. Penguin Books. vii-xxvi.
- Attardo, S. 2001. *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Bergson, H. 2009. "Laughter." In J. Figueroa-Dorrego and C. Larkin Galiñanes, eds. *A Source Book of Literary and Philosophical Writings about Humour and Laughter*. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press. 575-623.

- Cicero, M.T. 2009. "De Oratore". In J. Figueroa-Dorrego and C. Larkin-Galiñanes, eds. *A Source Book of Literary and Philosophical Writings about Humour and Laughter*. Lewiston, N. Y.: Edwin Mellen Press. 96-118.
- Clark, H. H. 2008. "Imagination in Discourse." In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, and H. Hamilton. *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell. 772-786.
- Cruse, A. 2004. *Meaning in Language. An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Figueroa-Dorrego, J. 2009. "Writings on Humour and Laughter from Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Introductory Notes." In J. Figueroa-Dorrego and C. Larkin-Galiñanes, eds. *A Source Book of Literary and Philosophical Writings about Humour and Laughter*. Lewiston, N. Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 17-66.
- Goffman, E. 1967. *Interaction Ritual: essays on face-to-face behavior*. Garden City, New York.
- Hazlitt, W. 1921. *The English Comic Writers & Miscellaneous Essays*. Ed. Ernest Rhys Everyman's Library. London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd.
- Jackson, R. 2009. "The Importance of Being Earnest." In P. Raby ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge University Press, 161-180.
- Kant, I. 2009. "Critique of Judgement". In Figueroa-Dorrego and Larkin-Galiñanes, eds. *A Source Book of Literary and Philosophical Writings about Humour and Laughter*. Lewiston, N. Y.: Edwin Mellen Press. 431-437.
- Koestler, A. 1989. *The Act of Creation*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964.
- Larkin Galiñanes, C. 2000. "Relevance Theory, Humour, and the Narrative Structure of Humorous Novels." *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 13:95-106.
2005. "Funny Fiction; or, Jokes and Their Relation to the Humorous Novel." *Poetics Today*. 26:1, 79-111.
- Martin, R. B. 1974. *The Triumph of Wit. A Study of Victorian Comic Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Meredith, G. 2009. "An Essay on Comedy". In Figueroa-Dorrego and Larkin-Galiñanes, eds. *A Source Book of Literary and Philosophical Writings about Humour and Laughter*. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 547-561.

- Morreall, J. 1983. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- ed. 1987. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Palmer, J. 1994. *Taking Humour Seriously*. London: Routledge.
- Raskin, V. 1985. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour*. Dordrecht and Boston: Reidel.
- ed. 2008. *The Primer of Humour Research*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Schiffrin, D. 2006. *Approaches to Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Sloan, J. 2009. *Authors in Context. Oscar Wilde*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford University Press.
- Sypher, W. 1980. "Introduction." *Comedy*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, vii-xvi.
- Thomas, J. 1995. *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Van Dijk, T. A. 2008 "Critical Discourse Analysis". In *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Eds. D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, and H. Hamilton. Oxford: Blackwell, 352-356.
- Wilde, O. 2000. *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*. Penguin Books.