



Perspective-taking and frugal strategies: Evidence from sarcasm detection

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Abstract

Prior research suggests an egocentric bias in the ability to adopt a third-person perspective in sarcastic statements. However, it remains unclear whether (1) this bias is genuinely due to egocentric anchoring or to the cost of the activation of the sarcastic interpretation; (2) context-based, allocentric processing of sarcasm can be by-passed by cheaper strategies, such as prosody processing. To settle the first question, two sarcastic conditions were compared: one, 'egocentric', where the favored interpretation was sarcastic only from the participant's perspective, and another, 'allocentric', where the sarcastic interpretation was salient from both the addressee's and the participant's perspectives. To address the second question, performance in the egocentric and allocentric conditions were compared when salient prosodic cues were added. To show direct evidence for serial adjustment and to minimize the possibility of parallel processing of prosodic and contextual cues, we compare two experiments: In the first experiment, French-speaking participants had no time limit to respond, while time pressure was added in the second experiment. Results confirm that perspective-shifting is egocentrically anchored (i.e. slower reaction times and poorer accuracy for egocentric condition than allocentric one); furthermore, this egocentric bias is already evident in early stages of processing (within 3 s). We also show that perspectival assessment of contextual cues is not triggered in the presence of salient prosodic cues. Since perspective-taking is time consuming, using the non-contextual, prosodic cue is an efficient strategy to make an accurate judgment with the least processing effort.

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1. Introduction

Daily conversations are peppered with innuendo, hints and irony, requiring listeners to reach beyond the literal meaning of the words. Sarcasm, understood as a critical form of irony,¹ is probably one of the clearest examples of language use that involves a discrepancy between the literal content of an utterance and the meaning the speaker actually intends to convey. For example, if a friend tells you how he just got his bag stolen and concludes by saying 'It's a lovely day!', you will probably notice the discrepancy between the conversational context and this last utterance, and, in all likelihood, perceive it as sarcastic. In addition to its importance for social dynamics, investigating sarcasm detection allows crucial insights into complex perspective-taking mechanisms. There is a consensus in the literature that in order to

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¹ Irony is, of course, a broader category than sarcasm, and encompasses features as jocularity, hyperbole, rhetorical questions, and understatements (Gibbs, 2000). In the current study, all ironical stimuli consisted in praise being intentionally used to blame the interlocutor.

fully grasp sarcastic meanings one must master complex mental-state attribution skills (Akimoto et al., 2012; Bryant, 2012; Kissine, 2013). After all, both lies and sarcasm involve the production of a false statement; in order to detect sarcasm, the addressee thus needs to determine whether the speaker believes that he, the addressee, realizes that the message is blatantly false. In other words, sarcasm requires interpreters to adopt the speaker's perspective; from the addressee's own, egocentric perspective both lies and irony are indistinguishably false assertions.

What remains debatable is whether taking the other's perspective, or, in other words, shifting toward an allocentric perspective, is an automatic, effortless process or whether it is a cognitively costly mechanism, triggered only in special occasions, such as irony interpretation. As far as models of utterance interpretation go, both assumptions are found in the literature. Some authors posit that all pragmatic processing is necessarily grounded in the attribution of complex communicative intentions, so that (adult) processing of linguistic communication inherently involves adopting the speaker's perspective (e.g. Brown-Schmidt, 2009; Sperber and Wilson, 1995, 2002). Others, by contrast, conceive of pragmatics as a suite of distinct processes—some of which independent of perspective-shifting—that may be selectively activated depending on the interpretative task at hand (Kissine, 2013, 2016; Recanati, 2004). Such non-modular models are consistent with the idea that linguistic processing is subject to cognitive economy considerations (Ferreira and Patson, 2007), and by default relies on frugal, egocentric strategies (Shintel and Keysar, 2009), even though context may prompt more complex, allocentric processing.

Prior research suggests that the ability to infer the addressee's interpretation of ironic statements is egocentrically biased (Epley et al., 2004; Keysar, 1994; Nilsen et al., 2011). In these studies, participants were presented with privileged background information (e.g. *A thief has stolen Alice's handbag in the morning*) and had to judge whether the intended interpretation of a target statement (Alice says: 'It is a lovely day!') was sarcastic or not. In the 'literal' condition, the background information (e.g. *This morning, Alice received a nice handbag as a gift from her mother*) favored a literal, non-sarcastic interpretation. Assuming that literal is the default interpretation mode, in this condition, the message is literal both from the addressee's and the participant's perspective. In the 'sarcasm' condition, background context was inconsistent with the target statement, and thus favored a sarcastic interpretation of the message. However, this relevant background information was not available to the addressee, but only to the participant (who was in the position of a privileged eavesdropper, so to speak). In the sarcastic condition, then, while the intended meaning was literal, it interfered with the sarcastic reading, which was salient from the participant's perspective. Even though participants' performance is generally good in such tasks, they are also slower and more error prone when they do not have the same contextual background as the addressee, viz. in 'sarcastic' than in 'literal' conditions (Epley et al., 2004). These results suggest that it is cognitively costly to adopt somebody else's perspective, while inhibiting an egocentrically salient ironic reading. This interpretation can be framed within the broader *anchoring and adjustment heuristic* (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974), according to which people adopt others' perspectives by using their own point of view as an anchor and then adjusting away from it to account for their partner's epistemic state.

Two important questions, however, are still outstanding. First, on closer inspection, Epley et al.'s findings do not allow to firmly conclude that perspective-shifting is really egocentrically grounded. Second, it remains unknown whether context-based, allocentric processing of irony can be by-passed by cheaper strategies. These questions, to be addressed in the two studies presented below, are of great importance to cognitive theories of irony processing, but also to broader models of epistemic perspective-shifting.

The first issue is mostly methodological. While quite intuitive, the difference between 'sarcastic' and 'literal' conditions, reported by Epley and colleagues, may be explained away by the competition between two interpretations: literal and ironic. Most models of figurative language processing, such as, for instance, Gibbs's (1994) *Direct Access* or Giora's (2003) *Graded Salience*, predict a priority activation of ironic meanings when these are rendered particularly accessible and/or salient by the context. In the same vein, in Pexman's (2008) parallel constraint satisfaction model prosodic and contextual cues are processed in parallel; the interpretation that receives the highest activation—ironic or literal—is then selected. Accordingly, one may object that in both Epley et al.'s 'literal' and 'sarcastic' conditions participants started from the speaker's perspective, but that performance in the 'sarcastic' condition was influenced by the cost of parallel activation of ironic interpretation, triggered by the incongruence between the context and the target sentence.

A straightforward way to settle this question is to create two types of sarcastic conditions: one 'egocentric', where, as in Epley et al.'s paradigm, the favored interpretation is sarcastic from only the participant's, and not the addressee's, perspective, and another, 'allocentric', where the sarcastic interpretation is favored from both the addressee's and the participant's perspective. To begin with, since sarcastic interpretation is triggered by incongruent contextual cues, one should expect both allocentric and egocentric sarcastic conditions to be costlier to process than literal ones. More importantly, if perspective-taking is egocentrically anchored, participants should dispense with accessing the addressee's perspective in the sarcastic allocentric conditions, where the sarcastic reading is salient from both their own and the addressee's points of view. That is, one should expect egocentric sarcastic scenarios to be more difficult to process than allocentric ones, as the former involves inhibition of an egocentrically-consistent sarcastic interpretation. By contrast, if the difference between Epley et al.'s 'literal' and 'sarcastic' conditions were simply due to the cost of sarcastic interpretations,

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