

Developing appreciation of irony in Canadian and Czech discourse

Eva Filippova *

Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic

Received 1 June 2012; received in revised form 17 November 2013; accepted 9 September 2014



Abstract

This empirical study investigates the development of children's understanding of an ironic speaker's mind and their appreciation of the pragmatic function of counterfactual irony in discourse. Canadian 7- and 9-year-old children and adults ($N = 72$) and Czech respondents matched on age ($N = 72$) reasoned about the mental states of an ironic speaker and evaluated the function of both critical and praise irony in short stories ending with statements expressing the meaning opposite to the speaker's intended meaning. Pronounced age differences were detected in children's representation of the mind of the speaker across the conditions and cultures. Evaluating the pragmatic function of irony, however, failed to show stable patterns in how nice, mean, and funny children and adults judged the given statements to be. While the maturation in the ability to represent a speaker's mind is argued to represent universal features of human ontogeny, an evaluation of the pragmatic impact of irony is argued to be largely influenced by the social and cultural milieu of language socialization. Ironic criticism shows stable traits in the development of its understanding and in the assessment of its function across the two cultures, whereas ironic praise displays substantial differences ascribed to the degree of conventionality of its usage in the context of the individuals' socialization.

© 2014 Published by Elsevier B.V.

Keywords: Critical irony; Praise irony; Social reasoning; Pragmatic function; Development; Culture

1. Introduction

The use of nonliteral language is pervasive in everyday communication across varying cultural and linguistic contexts. Verbal irony, more specifically, is a common communicative strategy and a universal conversational device (Booth, 1974), of which the surface-level meaning contrasts with what would normally be expected in a given context, under given circumstances. Most scholarly definitions of irony assume that ironic utterances deliver the opposite meaning of what the speaker believes to be true and imply that the speaker intends the expression to be recognized as untrue by the target audience (Colebrook, 2004; Hutcheon, 1994; Muecke, 1969). This paper investigates how language users decipher a correct interpretation of counterfactual ironic statements and how nice, mean, and funny they judge ironic statements to be. The primary goal of this paper is to examine children's developing skills at representing the aspects of an ironic speaker's mind, necessary for inferring his or her intended meaning behind the use of irony, along with their identification of the basic pragmatic functions of concrete ironic statements. The secondary goal is to uncover potential parallels in the

* Correspondence to: Institute of Czech Language and Theory of Communication, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, náměstí Jana Palacha 2, 116 38 Prague 1, Czech Republic. Tel.: +420 602120767; fax: +420 221 619 210.

E-mail address: eva.filippova@ff.cuni.cz.

cultural appreciation of irony of different valence, leading to a reexamination of the mechanisms used by listeners to infer the speaker's intended meaning.

According to Grice (1975), speakers can produce utterances with degrees of implied meaning either directly, by appealing to the maxims of cooperative principles (those of quantity, quality, relation, and manner) or by deliberately violating one or more of these maxims. Irony is an example of a deliberate violation of the maxims of cooperative principles of communication, creating a surface-level ambiguity between the states of affairs in the world and the actual ironic statement. Although not all identifiable ironies are deliberately fabricated and constructed as such (Gibbs, 2012), the point of intentionally produced ironic messages is to be recognized as expressions of a disbelief in the opinion expressed. Scholars have argued that irony provides indirect information by providing addresses with cues to the assumed attitude of the speaker (e.g., Kreuz and Glucksberg, 1989; Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995). For Wilson and Sperber (2012), the expression of an attitude to an attributed thought is one of three central features of discourse irony (along with norm-based expectations and ironical tone of voice). As the full appreciation of irony calls for a correct identification of the speaker's attitude, a listener and an interpreter needs rather sophisticated skills to represent complex mental states. This poses a challenge for younger listeners. An appreciation of irony is constrained by factors such as age, valence and the form of an ironic utterance, as well as by cultural and social context of discourse. Each of these factors is discussed in turn in the following sections (Sections 1.1–1.3).

1.1. Developmental constraints

Children's ability to reason about others' mental states—such as *emotions, intentions, desires, beliefs, attitudes* and so forth—limits their understanding of an ironic speaker's intended message (for a detailed review see Filippova, 2014). Although preschool children can correctly assess beliefs and intentions of people in unambiguous situations and correctly ascribe these to characters in hypothetical scenarios, they generally fail to reliably interpret irony even beyond the age of nine years (Demorest et al., 1983, 1984; Filippova and Astington, 2008, 2010). Authors of studies using diverse methodologies generally claim that children as young as 6 years of age grasp at least the incongruity between the spoken and intended speaker meaning and can correctly identify a speaker's beliefs (Ackerman, 1983; Glenwright and Pexman, 2010; Hancock et al., 2000; Harris and Pexman, 2003; Sullivan et al., 1995; Winner and Leekam, 1991) and detect some of the pragmatic functions of irony in social interactions (e.g., Andrews et al., 1986; Filippova and Astington, 2010; Harris and Pexman, 2003; Winner and Leekam, 1991). Dews et al. (1996) found that while 5- and 6-year-olds could identify the muting function of sarcastic statements relative to literal statements, they were less adept at perceiving the humorous function of ironic remarks. Harris and Pexman (2003) and Pexman et al. (2005) also demonstrated that children's understanding of the humor function of discourse irony continues to develop through middle childhood. Furthermore, Creusere (2000) reports that the form of irony affected children's interpretation of its meanness. Recent reports combining the investigation of social-cognitive and social-communicative (i.e., pragmatic) aspects of understanding document the early school years (7 years and onwards) as the most formative years in the developing appreciation of the meaning and function of non-literal communication (e.g., Filippova and Astington, 2008, 2010; Peterson et al., 2012; Pexman et al., 2005). As a result, this study investigates 7- and 9-year-olds' understanding of counterfactual forms of irony as compared to that of adult language users.

Importantly, understanding others' minds develops hand in hand with children's language competence and other cognitive abilities, including executive functions, memory, and attunement to expressive prosody. As acquiring all these skills follows a preset developmental sequence, older listeners will necessarily be at the advantage of a richer introspection and more accurate representation of the intended messages in ambiguous utterances.

A feasible existence of a sub-module for human mind-reading ability used in relevance-guided inferential comprehension of speech (Sperber and Wilson, 2002) fits the argument for an innate processing mechanism humans use to figure out the speaker's intended meaning. Development of children's abilities to represent others' mind occurs as the innate processing device, triggered by its various elements coming on line (Scholl and Leslie, 1999), matures.

Yet, in contrast to an accurate representation of a speaker's mind requiring certain biological and cognitive predispositions, even young children readily evaluate the impact of what others say (Filippova and Astington, 2010). This evaluation may or may not be contingent on mind-reading abilities developing gradually during ontogeny. It is plausible to speculate that other factors are at play when figuring out the function of irony in discourse. Social and cultural context (shaped by the history and traditions from within) and one's membership in specific groups of interactants are potential candidates for constraining one's appreciation of irony. Culture- and language-specific research has been called for by Attardo (2008), which seems to be vital for an elaboration of potential developmental landmarks. As well, while most of the developmental studies of irony investigated the ontogenetic milestones present on the road toward a correct interpretation of irony, little research thus far has examined the cultural parallels and differences in the developing appreciation of irony. The present study intends to fill in the existing gap by identifying potential cross-cultural parallels and cultural specifics in irony appreciation.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/932667>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/932667>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)