

"You won't get it unless you're bilingual, kid"

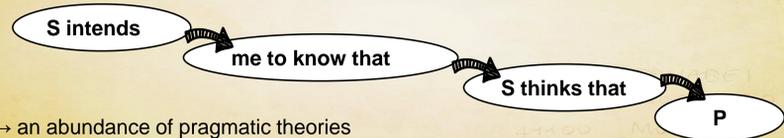
ON IRONY COMPREHENSION IN POLISH MONO- AND POLISH-ENGLISH BILINGUAL CHILDREN

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introduction

What we know about irony

- the most complex type of figurative language
- traditionally: the opposite of an utterance's literal meaning³
- comprehension requires second order theory of mind⁴:



- an abundance of pragmatic theories
- experiments help us learn about comprehension processes
- the role of developmental studies

What we do NOT know

- when do children begin to understand verbal irony?
- when do children master irony comprehension?
- are there any critical periods?
- which types of irony are basic and which are complex?
- are bilingual children more apt at understanding irony?
- do social factors (gender, status, etc.) influence one's comprehension and perception of irony?

POSSIBLE PITFALLS

- the very concept of verbal irony is fuzzy
- how to classify ironic utterances so as to get mutually exclusive categories?
- how to decompose the process of irony comprehension?

Solutions

- irony can be expressed by all types of Searle's Speech Acts^{5,6}
- three basic components of irony comprehension reappear in the literature⁷

Set	Type	TYPE OF SPEECH ACT				
		Assertive	Directive	Commissive	Expressive	Declarative
1	CONTEXT	Peter and Sebastian were to go to the cinema. When Sebastian was very slow and couldn't leave the house on time, Peter said:				
	IRONIC	"You are a really quick person"	"Go on and have some coffee"	"I'll make you some coffee"	"Good that you don't want us to be late"	"I declare you the quickest man"
	LITERAL	"You are really slow with it"	"Move on, or we'll be late"	"I'll go and buy the tickets"	"Sad that we'll be late because of you"	"I declare you the slowest man"

Pretest

- originally: 51 Polish contexts
- pretest: 5-point Likert irony scale; 200 adult speakers of Polish
- only the most salient 40 sets remained [$<1;2> <u <4;5>$]
- translated into English & checked by 2 professional translators and 5 natives
- both conditions (PL and ENG) recorded with proper ironic intonation⁸

method

Participants: 58 mono- and bilingual children

- 2 age groups
- younger (7-9 years: understanding most basic aspects of verbal irony⁹)
- 15 mono- (7M, 8F) and 15 bilinguals (7M, 8F)
- older (11-12 years: 2nd order ToM seems to be fully developed¹⁰)
- 14 mono- (8M, 6F) and 14 bilinguals (9M, 5F)
- analysis in progress: adolescents (13-14 years: the formal operational stage of development¹¹)

Control group: 16 adult mono- and bilinguals

- Faculty of English and Technical University students

Experimental stimuli

- 40 contexts with comments (20 literal; 20 ironic)
- situations familiar to children
- speakers have the same status
- all comments have similar form and length
- 4 questions to each target string, probing:

1. surface/ context comprehension

Was Sebastian quick?

2. Theory of Mind/ speaker belief

Does Peter think that Sebastian was quick?

3. speaker intention

In his comment, Peter: A. wanted to deceive Sebastian;

B. wasn't speaking seriously; C. made a mistake; D. none of the above

4. speaker attitude/ irony perception

How do you think Peter was behaving towards Sebastian?



Procedure

- auditory presentation of stims
- after exposure to each target string, participant answers 4 questions
- visual aids used
- participants tested individually (younger children) or in groups (older children, teenagers and adults), at schools

Data analysis

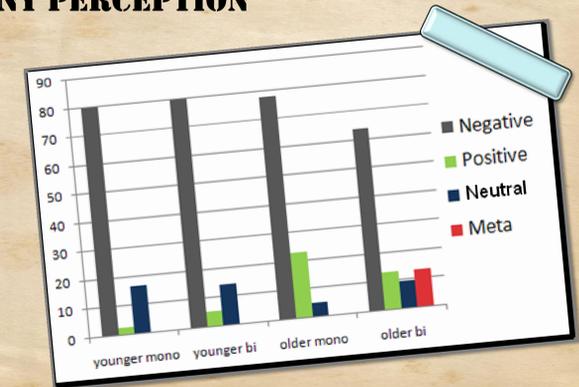
- a series of t-tests (age, gender, status, utterance type)
- 5 - 2 - 4 - 2 - 2 ANOVA
- factors:
 - type of speech act
 - utterance type (ironic x literal)
 - age
 - language of the test
 - factor (mono x bilingual)

results AND discussion

Irony comprehension

- Three components analysed together:
 - context, ToM, and speaker intention ("was not speaking seriously" instead of "made a mistake"/ "wanted to deceive"/ "none of the above")
- YOUNGER GROUP
 - no significant difference in how mono- and bilinguals understood irony (47,7% and 60,7% respectively; $F=0,085$, $p>0,05$; t-test for two independent groups, $N=30$)
- OLDER GROUP
 - **bilingual children understood significantly more ironic stims** (60%) than did monolingual children (32,5%); $F=4,04$, $p<0,05$ (t-test for two independent groups, $N=28$)
 - Theory of Mind results: no significant difference in the performance of mono- and bilinguals (for both age groups; 2 t-tests for two independent groups);
 - in the older group, bilinguals' performance slightly better than monolinguals'
 - further analysis will demonstrate whether this difference increases with age
 - data from further age groups are being analysed

IRONY PERCEPTION



Conclusions

- young bilinguals are not better at understanding irony than their monolingual peers
- **the bilingual advantage** kicks in at an older age (a **statistically significant** result)
- children tend to have a **negative** perception of irony
- older bilingual children are not just better at understanding irony, but also seem to be more apt at identifying and labelling it
- further analyses needed (esp. gender differences and differences in irony perception among adolescents)
- possible applications: teaching methodology (pragmatics) and language rehabilitation

¹ Covington, Michael A. – Congzhou He – Cati Brown – Lorina Naci – Jonathan T. McClain – Bess Sirmon Fjordbak – James Semple – John Brown. 2005. "Schizophrenia and the structure of language: The linguist's view", *Schizophrenia Research* 77, 1: 85-98.
² Thoma, Patrizia – Irene Daum. 2006. "Neurocognitive mechanisms of figurative language processing: Evidence from clinical dysfunctions", *Neuroscience and Behavioral Reviews* 30, 8: 1182-1205.
³ Gibbs, Raymond W. Jr. and Herbert L. Colston (eds.). 2007. *Irony in language and thought: A cognitive science reader*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
⁴ Curc6, Carmen. 2007. "Irony: Negation, echo, and metarepresentation", in: Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. and Herbert L. Colston (eds.), *Irony in language and thought: A cognitive science reader*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 269-293.
⁵ Searle, John R. (ed.). 1979. *Expression and meaning: Studies in the theory of speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
⁶ Kumon-Nakamura, Sachi – Sam Glucksberg – Mary Brown. 1995. "How about another piece of pie: The allusional pretense theory of discourse irony", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 124, 1: 3-21.
⁷ Creusere, Marlena A. 1999. "Theories of Adults' Understanding and Use of Irony and Sarcasm: Applications to and Evidence from Research with Children", *Developmental Review* 19, 2: 213-262.
⁸ Anolli, Luigi, Rita Ciceri and Maria Gialele Infantino. 2007. "From 'blame by praise' to 'praise by blame': Analysis of vocal patterns in ironic communication", in: Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. and Herbert L. Colston (eds.), *Irony in language and thought: A cognitive science reader*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 361-380.
⁹ Harris, Melanie – Penny M. Pexman. 2003. "Children's perceptions of the social functions of verbal irony". *Discourse Processes* 36, 3: 147-165.
¹⁰ Liddle, Bethany – Daniel Nettle. 2006. "Higher order Theory of Mind and social competence in school-age children", *Journal of Cultural and Evolutionary Psychology* 4, 3-4: 231-246.
¹¹ Piaget, Jean. 1983. "Piaget's theory" in: Paul Mussen (ed). *Handbook of Child Psychology*. 4th edition. Vol. 1. New York: Wiley.