

Boys will be boys, and what of girls? On gender differences in teenage irony comprehension

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The comprehension of irony, considered to be the most difficult type of figurative language (Leinonen and Ryder 2008), is a complex process dependent on a number of factors. A lot of these are related to the ironic remark itself or to its delivery – these include affective valence (Bromberek-Dyzman 2012, 2014, 2015), utterance conventionality (Burnett 2015), the prominence of context-utterance discrepancy (Ackerman 1982; Ivanko and Pexman 2003), intonation (Capelli et al. 1990; Glenwright et al. 2014), as well as the availability of nonverbal cues (Rockwell 2001). There are, however, factors of a different type that have been identified as significant for how people use irony: research has demonstrated that certain social categories and personality traits are linked with a greater likelihood of an individual making an ironic comment, or recognising such. One of these factors is gender.

Research has demonstrated that men and women differ considerably with regard to how and why they use irony. Men make ironic comments more often (Gibbs 2000) and report a greater likelihood of being ironic (Colston and Lee 2004; Milanowicz 2013) than women do. Although both sexes tend to consider irony and sarcasm to be “more malelike” (Colston and Lee 2004), they have very disparate perceptions of the communicative goals attainable by means of irony (Milanowicz 2013): men use it to entertain, while women – to criticise (Recchia et al. 2010; Milanowicz 2013). Whether similar differences would be observable for the comprehension of irony has not been studied extensively – the only exploration known to the present author is the work of Spyra (2011), who found that women were faster and more accurate than men comprehending ironic stimuli in an on-line reading task. Interestingly, no study as yet has sought to investigate gender differences in irony in younger populations – a particularly intriguing research topic given the temporal difference in how girls and boys acquire Theory of Mind ability and the role that ToM skills have for irony processing (Caillies et al. 2012; Massaro et al. 2013).

The current study has been conducted in order to address these issues. 60 teenager participants (age range 14-16) – 30 boys and 30 girls – were presented with 40 recorded scenarios whereby one character engaged in some activity and the other commented on it. Half of the comments were ironic, and the other half – literal. After the presentation of each target string, participants answered four questions probing their comprehension of the context, as well as speaker belief, intention and attitude, respectively. The results, obtained with a series of t-tests for independent samples, demonstrate that girls were significantly more accurate recognising the communicative intent of the ironist ($p < 0,01$). No significant difference was found between the boys and girls' perceptions of the ironic speaker's attitude, though the girls' responses demonstrate slightly more negative interpretations. These findings are discussed in the light of ToM and social competence skills development.

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