

## The Process of Irony Comprehension in Young Children: Evidence from Monolingual and Bilingual Preschoolers

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**Abstract :** Comprehension of verbal irony is an example of pragmatic competence in understanding figurative language. The knowledge of how it develops may shed new light on the understanding of social and communicative competence that is crucial for one's effective functioning in the society. Researchers agree it is a competence that develops late in a child's development. One of the abilities that seems crucial for irony comprehension is theory of mind (ToM), that is the ability to understand that others may have beliefs, desires and intentions different from one's own. Although both theory of mind and irony comprehension require the ability to understand the figurative use of the false description of the reality, the exact relationship between them is still unknown. Also, even though irony comprehension in children has been studied for over thirty years, the results of the studies are inconsistent as to the age when this competence are acquired. The presented study aimed to answer questions about the developmental trajectories of irony comprehension and ascribing function to ironic utterances by preschool children. Specifically, we were interested in how it is related to the development of ToM and how comprehension of the function of irony changes with age. Data was collected from over 150 monolingual, Polish-speaking children and (so far) thirty bilingual children speaking Polish and English who live in the US. Four-, five- and six-year-olds were presented with a story comprehension task in the form of audio and visual stimuli programmed in the E-prime software (pre-recorded narrated stories, some of which included ironic utterances, and pictures accompanying the stories displayed on a touch screen). Following the presentation, the children were then asked to answer a series of questions. The questions checked the children's understanding of the intended utterance meaning, evaluation of the degree to which it was funny and evaluation of how nice the speaker was. The children responded by touching the screen, which made it possible to measure reaction times. Additionally, the children were asked to explain why the speaker had uttered the ironic statement. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were applied. The results of our study indicate that for irony recognition there is a significant difference among the three age groups, but what is new is that children as young as four do understand the real meaning behind the ironic statement as long as the utterance is not grammatically or lexically complex also, there is a clear correlation of ToM and irony comprehension. Although four-year olds and six-year olds understand the real meaning of the ironic utterance, it is not earlier than at the age of six when children start to explain the reason of using this marked form of expression. They talk about the speaker's intention to tell a joke, be funny, or to protect the listener's emotions. There are also some metalinguistic references, such as "mommy sometimes says things that don't make sense and this is called a metaphor".

**Keywords :** child's pragmatics, figurative speech, irony comprehension in children, theory of mind and irony

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