

Dorota Jaworska-Pasterska

Selected aspects of irony comprehension in Polish monolingual and Polish-English bilingual children: A comparative study

Summary:

The focus of the project is irony comprehension in mono- and bilingual children. Prior research has identified three key aspects of understanding irony: speaker belief, speaker intent, and speaker attitude recognition. While these problems have been investigated in the monolingual setting, they have not received due attention in the bilingual context. The topic does merit attention, as ample findings are available pointing to bilinguals' superior language awareness, executive function, mentalising and perspective taking skills, as well as the ability to mitigate communication breakdowns. It is hypothesised that bilinguals may enjoy a similar advantage for irony comprehension.

The study investigates the three aspects of irony comprehension in Polish monolinguals and Polish-English bilinguals belonging to three age groups: younger children (aged 6-8), older children (10-12 years of age), and teenagers (ages 14-16). Ironies expressed by five types of speech acts – assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives – were employed in the study.

The results showed no difference between the mono- and bilinguals when it comes to speaker belief recognition. However, a significant difference was obtained for speaker intent recognition. Bilingual teenagers decoded ironic speaker intent significantly better than their monolingual peers in ironic comments expressed by assertive, commissive, expressive, and declarative speech acts. Thus, a bilingual advantage for irony comprehension has been found to emerge at a late stage of cognitive development.

Qualitative analysis demonstrated that young children's recognition of irony and their ability to appreciate the humour function of irony may emerge as early as at between six and eight years of age. The findings obtained for the older children and teenage bilingual groups, in turn, point to lack of highly emotionally-valenced negative perceptions of irony – a finding in line with the "foreign-language effect", according to which bilinguals experience a sense of detachment from the affective content presented in their second/foreign language (L2).

Taken together, the current findings are an important first step in expanding our knowledge of how mono- and bilingual children make sense of ironic content. They also point to the existence of a bilingual advantage for irony comprehension.