IS IRONY IRONIC?
THE ROLE OF SENSE OF HUMOUR IN THE PRODUCTION AND INTERPRETATION OF IRONY

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Abstract

The paper explores correlations between irony and sense of humour (HQ). Its questions are informed by functional cognitive pragmatics, with irony considered an emergent way of exploiting reflexivity (the meta-pragmatic awareness of discourse participants) as an essential feature of linguistic cognition. Accordingly, the research focuses on the folk category of irony, i.e. those utterances are treated as ironic, which informants so judged.

The initial hypothesis of the research was that HQ was in positive correlation with both the production and the interpretation of irony. Our study followed a two-step procedure: two consecutive questionnaire studies measured the correlation between HQ and the production and interpretation of irony. HQ was measured with the Humor Styles Questionnaire, whereas 15 visual stimuli elicited the production and recognition of irony. 397 subjects participated in the study. Performing statistical analysis, we found that participants judged utterances produced by above-average HQ significantly more ironic than those produced by average or below-average HQ. However, there was no significant difference between the below-average and above-average HQ groups in most cases about the interpretation of utterances. At the same time, utterances that contain an appropriate instance of irony were judged significantly more ironic by informants with higher HQ than by informants with low HQ.

Keywords: irony production, irony comprehension, sense of humor, humor styles, metapragmatic awareness, metapragmatic reflexivity

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen an upsurge of interest in the study of irony, and more particularly, the link between irony and sense of humour, not only in linguistic pragmatics but also in cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics (see, e.g. Attardo 2002; Gibbs–Colston eds. 2007; Gibbs et al. 2014; Brône 2012; Gurillo–Ortega 2013). The present paper joins this ongoing discourse by the empirical study of a relatively under-researched topic, namely the correlation between the processing of irony and the subjects' sense of humour.

1.1. Theoretical background assumptions

Our research is not aimed at justifying a pre-existing interpretation of irony, nor does it offer a new model for understanding the phenomenon. However, significant implications derive from the fact

that the study is grounded in cognitive linguistics, which puts a premium on the interplay between theory and empirical data (see, e.g. Langacker 1987 and 2008; Kemmer–Barlow 2000). Accordingly, we consider it essential to highlight the theoretical assumptions motivating our research, thereby facilitating a continuous re-assessment of the fundamental issues at stake in linguistically oriented research on irony.

Since we interpret irony as an integral part of socio-cultural praxis, we have based our research on the folk category of irony. Thus, those utterances are evaluated and interpreted as ironic, which are so regarded by everyday language users. In a previous study, we examined everyday attitudes to irony (Svindt 2007). In a questionnaire study involving 108 participants, the informants were asked to produce judgments on a five-point Likert scale about characteristic personality traits of people who often make ironic remarks and the key features of irony. The results showed that language users considered criticism and humour the two most crucial components of irony. Furthermore, people often resorting to irony were believed to have a good sense of humour, an advanced capacity for expressing themselves and high intelligence (on the correlation between intelligence and irony, see also Jacob et al. 2016). Adopting a corpus-linguistic analogy, we can characterise the present study starting with the folk category of irony as *usage-driven* in terms of its handling of data (instances of irony are identified based on informants' judgments) and *usage-based* when it comes to data analysis (which is also informed by theory-specific background assumptions) (cf. Simon 2018).

The other key feature of the research is that it treats irony as a fundamentally metapragmatic phenomenon. The notion of metapragmatic awareness pertains to the reflexive attitude of discourse participants to the linguistic activity they are engaged in and to dynamic meaning generation in the context of that activity (cf. Verschueren 1999; Verschueren–Brisard 2009; Tátrai 2017). We assume that in its particular way, irony draws on a unique opportunity inherent in linguistic cognition, namely people's ability to adopt a reflexive attitude to the use of various linguistic constructions and the cognitive processes as well as socio-cultural expectations they evoke. We intend to contribute to the development and implementation of a pragmatic theoretical framework that derives irony from the overriding of a linguistically overt representation (construed from a particular vantage point) by an implicit rather than explicit perspective which questions the adequacy of that vantage point under the contextual circumstances being processed by discourse participants (Tátrai 2010 and 2017). In short, irony exploits the opportunities inherent in perspectivization (in the displacement of one's vantage point, cf. Sanders–Spooren 1997) by functioning as a covert form of metapragmatic reflection. As a fundamental precondition and corollary of the ironic interpretation of a construction, the conceptualiser needs to be aware that the current speaker is deferring responsibility for the validity of what s/he is saying as far as that linguistic representation (and the underlying conceptualisation) is concerned. However, irony also demands awareness of a distance in interpretation and evaluation (cf. Livnat 2004; Curcó 2000; Sperber–Wilson 1981 and 1989) that separates the speaker's perspective from the perspective associated with the linguistic construction s/he is employing with regard to the object of conceptualisation (cf. Kotthoff 2002).

In terms of background assumptions, our research brings the following theoretical tenets to bear on the interpretation of irony.

(1) As an aspect of socio-cultural praxis, irony is a feature of linguistic cognition that can be acquired in a spontaneous way without explicit learning.

(2) Irony exploits reflexivity as a key component of linguistic cognition (more specifically, the metapragmatic awareness of discourse participants) in an emergent manner.

(3) The use of irony facilitates context-dependent implicit evaluation.

(4) The ironicity of a linguistic construction is a matter of degree.

(5) The metapragmatic reflexivity involved in the use of linguistic constructions is a crucial feature not only of irony but also of humour, among other phenomena *(*cf. Brône–Feyaerts–Veale 2006).

1.2. The link between irony and sense of humour

In recent decades of cognitive linguistic research, both irony and humour have been studied in great detail (see, e.g. Brône–Feyaerts–Veale eds. 2015), and in view of the frequent co-occurrence of the two phenomena, their link has also been addressed by several analyses (see, e.g. Attardo 2002; Gurillo–Ortega 2013; Hirsch 2011; Ritchie 2005; Brône 2012; Gibbs et al. 2014). However, only a few studies investigate the impact of the sense of humour on the production and interpretation of irony. Our previous study mentioned above (Svindt 2007) has shown that HQ constitutes an essential factor in the folk category of irony. We use empirical tests to examine this everyday impression and observation in the present research. Our goal is to learn about the extent to which an individual's sense of humour influences her production and interpretation of irony.

Sense of humour (HQ) is an umbrella term that therefore comes short of allowing for an accurate description of the variation found at both individual and (socio-)cultural levels. Several procedures have been proposed for its measurement (e.g. Feingold–Mazzella 1991; Köhler–Ruch 1996; Martin–Lefcourt 1984; Ruch 1996; Svebak 1996; Thorson–Powell 1993). In recent decades, several works have replaced the notion of the sense of humour with that of *humour style* (Craik–Lampert–Nelson 1996; Martin et al. 2003) to offer a more precise and detailed picture of an individual's humour and its social implications. In our research, we use our Hungarian translation of the Humor Styles Questionnaire, a standardised test adapted to a variety of languages. The test measures for two adaptive (affiliative and self-enhancing) and two maladaptive (aggressive and self-defeating) humour styles, regarded as crucial factors behind an individual's sense of humour (Martin et al. 2003). Affiliative humour is a humour style whose primary function is to entertain others and make them laugh without offending anybody. Self-enhancing humour is a positive form of an individual's problem-solving strategy, which consists of the use of humour for stress relief. Aggressive humour involves contempt for and the depreciation of others; it is sarcastic and offensive (for the link between sarcasm and irony, see Haiman 1998; Attardo et al. 2003). Finally, self-defeating humour is a humour style in which an individual tries to make others laugh by making herself the object of derision. Research data suggest that adaptive humour styles positively impact social relationships on an individual's well-being and reputation. It stands in positive correlation with the individual's level of self-confidence and negatively correlates with depressive behaviour and anxiety (Cann–Matson 2014; Dyck–Holtzman 2013; Martin et al. 2003). Researchers also found a positive correlation between adaptive humour styles and emotional intelligence and a negative correlation between maladaptive humour styles and EQ (Gignac et al. 2014; Yip–Martin 2006). Similar results have been produced for the link between humour styles and social competence as well as social skills (Yip–Martin 2006).

However, the present research is primarily motivated by our assumption that not only irony but also the sense of humour correlates with the metapragmatic awareness of language users, i.e. with their ability to have a reflexive attitude to various linguistic constructions and the cognitive processes as well as socio-cultural expectations they evoke (cf. Brône et al. 2006; Verschueren 1999; Tátrai 2017). Our central assumption is that the features of humour highlighted by various semantically or pragmatically oriented humour theories, such as *unexpectedness, unusualness, norm violation, incongruence* (cf. Attardo 2000a, 2000b and 2002; Nemesi 2015), *creativity* and *intelligence* (cf. Cann–Matson 2014) are fundamentally linked to the language users' reflexive attitude to context-dependent meaning generation (cf. metarepresentional reasoning abilities, Gibbs et al. 2014).

2. Material and methods

2.1. Aims and hypotheses

The goal of our research has been to learn how an individual's HQ influences the everyday use, production and interpretation of irony. In keeping with our functional cognitive theoretical perspective, we apply a reflexive attitude to the category of irony as it functions in the socio-cultural practice of speakers. As mentioned above, irony is a socioculturally-enhanced non-binary phenomenon whose meaning depends highly on the current circumstances. Consequently, the manner, the

forms, and the success of irony production and interpretation are fundamentally determined by the individual's − including the irony researcher − knowledge and schemes about irony and ironicity. Therefore, we took special care to avoid applying the typical examples of the phenomenon that are re-used repeatedly in the literature. To this end, we asked one group of participants to produce utterances themselves that they feel and think ironic. The other group of participants judged the degree of ironicity of these utterances.

Based on the theoretical assumptions discussed above, our hypotheses were the following. We assume that an individual's sense of humour (HQ) relates positively to producing and interpreting an ironic utterance. Therefore,

(H1) we expect a positive relationship between the HQ of the individual producing an ironic utterance and the judgements of other individuals about that utterance. That is to say, the higher the HQ of the individual producing an ironic utterance, the more ironic the utterance will be judged by informants;

(H2) we suppose that the individuals' HQ influences the interpretation and/or recognition of irony, i.e. those with below-average HQ are less perceptive of ironic utterances than those with average or above-average HQ. This fact could become conspicuous in at least two ways. One the one hand, we expect persons with below-average HQ to be less likely to make unequivocal judgments than those with high HQ. On the other hand, fewer utterances may be judged as ironic by individuals with below-average HQ.

2.2. Procedure

In our research, we used a two-step questionnaire study to find out about the processes of irony production and interpretation (Table 1). In the first questionnaire, we measured the production of irony, and in the second questionnaire, informants evaluated it. Both questionnaires were divided into two sections. The first section was the same in both questionnaires, with the registering of demographic data (gender, age, and education) followed by the measuring of HQ with the help of the Humor Styles Questionnaire. The second sections of the two questionnaires were different. The second section of the first questionnaire was an irony production task, whereas, in the second questionnaire, informants were asked to evaluate utterances intended to be ironic produced by those filling in the first questionnaire.

Table 1. The procedures of the study

	Questionnaire 1 The production of irony	Questionnaire 2 The evaluation of irony
Measuring of HQ	Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) Martin et al. 2003.	
Measuring of irony	Production of captions intended to be ironic for 15 press photos	Evaluation of the ironicity of 20 (5x4) captions

We translated the self-administered questionnaire for measuring HQ from English. The Hungarian version is not standardised, but its reliability is good (Cronbach's alpha = 0,862). The test consists of four modules, each containing 8 questions; it measures two adaptive (affiliative humour, self-enhancing humour) and two maladaptive humour styles (aggressive humour, self-defeating humour) on a seven-point Likert scale.

For the questionnaire about irony production, we selected 15 press photos depicting situations from human life. While selecting photos, we did not strive to find images that would elicit irony with a significant probability according to our judgments. On the contrary, we intended to select photos at random. In the second questionnaire focusing on evaluating irony, 5 of the 15 photos included in the first questionnaire were presented to each informant.

In the first questionnaire, informants were instructed to add ironic captions to each of the 15 photos as if they were image editors for a daily newspaper. Since participants had been explicitly asked to produce irony, we assumed they regarded the captions they had produced themselves as ironic. From the 130 informants, we received 1173 captions, which means that, on average, respondents captioned only 60% of the photos. We interpreted this result by assuming that informants typically left the space blank when they did not come up with an ironic utterance for a photo. These blank spaces support the assumption that the responses had been intended to be ironic by the informants themselves.

Informants were subsequently divided into three groups based on their HQ: those with below-average, average, and above-average HQ. Informants were attributed average HQ when they were within 1 standard deviation (SD) of the mean of the entire group of participants. Informants falling beyond this deviation were evaluated as having below-average or above-average HQ. Accordingly, informants' (supposedly) ironic utterances were also classified into three groups, namely those produced by informants with below-average, average, and above-average HQ. Finally, for the second questionnaire, all photos were assigned one caption (selected by the computer at random) from each utterance group so created.

To test our theoretical background assumptions about irony, we also selected for each photo an utterance that we regarded as ironic to the highest extent based on the theoretical assumptions discussed in the introductory section. We typically selected utterances for testing which did not foreground incongruence by semantic means (e.g. by the use of contrast or negation) but rather exploited the opportunities inherent in perspectivization without recourse to such devices in a less salient way.

In the manner just described, each photo was captioned by four (supposedly) ironic utterances according to the HQ of those producing them: (1) utterances produced by participants with below-average HQ; (2) utterances produced by participants with average HQ; (3) utterances produced by participants with above-average HQ; (4) utterances selected by ourselves.

Those filling in the second questionnaire and making judgments about irony had to evaluate the ironicity of these captions on a five-point scale. Since each of the 15 photos had 4 different captions, adding up to 60 utterances, evaluating all of them would have taken too long for the informants. Therefore each participant was asked to evaluate one-third of the total number of photos and utterances, i.e. 5 photos and the associated 20 (5×4) supposedly ironic utterances. Captions of the four types ((1)–(4)) appeared in random order under the photos.

Statistical analysis was performed by SPSS 22.0.

2.3. Participants

The demographic distribution of participants filling in the two questionnaires is shown in Table 2 below. A total of 397 people participated in the study.

Table 2. Participants

	1. Participants of the questionnaire measuring irony production (n=130)	2. Participants of the questionnaire measuring irony interpretation (n=267)
Gender male : female (%)	33 : 67	15 : 85
Age (mean, range)	37 [13–78]	43 [15–76]
Education in years (mean, SD)	15,7 ± 2,6	16,4 ± 2,5

3. Results

3.1. Results in humour style measurements

In our analysis of the questionnaire measuring HQ and humour styles, mean values in the subtests for particular humour styles were determined based on data from all participants (n = 397). The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of the measurement of humour styles

Humour style subscale (mean, SD)	All participants (n = 397)	Male (n = 81)	Female (n = 316)	F (1, 396)	p-value (95% C.I.)
Affiliative humor	44,3 ± 8,9	44,7 ± 8,02	44,2 ± 9,2	0,214	0,644
Self-enhancing humor	33,0 ± 8,3	33,1 ± 8,1	33,0 ±8,4	0,015	0,903
Aggressive humor	27,4 ± 8,4	30,2 ± 7,8	26,8 ±8,3	10,956	0,001*
Self-defeating humor	24,2 ± 8,03	26,9 ± 7,1	23,5 ± 8,1	11,246	0,001*

One-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences between men and women in adaptive humour styles. However, in maladaptive humour styles men had a significantly higher score than women (aggressive humor: U = 9678, p = ,001; self-defeating humor: U = 9876,5, p = ,002). Informants achieved higher scores in positive, adaptive humour styles than negative, maladaptive ones. Since previous studies (see Section 1.2) found the most remarkable correlations with the affiliative humour style, we focus only on this humour style in the following sections.

3.2. The effect of HQ on irony production

The results show that judgments about the ironicity of utterances are affected by the HQ of the individuals producing them (Figure 1).
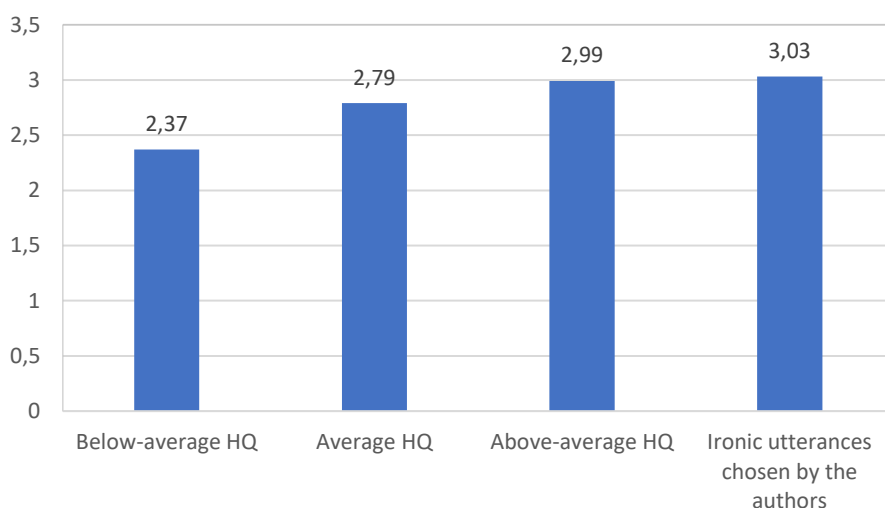

Figure 1. Mean values of judgments about the ironicity of utterances function as the HQ of the individuals producing them

Analysing the results by Friedman's Anova model, we found a significant difference in the evaluation of utterances as a function of the HQ of those producing them: the higher the HQ of the person producing an utterance, the more ironic it is considered to be by informants (n =267, $\chi^2(3)$ =131,02,

p <,001). According to the post hoc analysis with Wilcoxon signed-rank tests, only the judgments of utterances we selected and those produced by above-average HQ did not show any significant difference (z = -,821, p =,405); informants judged these utterances to be ironic to a similar extent. The utterances produced by participants with below-average HQ received the lowest scores; the informants considered the least ironic. Ironic utterances of participants with average HQ received significantly higher scores than those produced by participants with below-average HQ (z = -6,216, p < ,001), but significantly lower scores in comparison with the above-average group (z = -3,784, p < ,001) and the ironic utterances we had selected (z = -4,559, p < ,001).

3.3. The effect of HQ on irony interpretation

We expected that those with above-average affiliative HQ would judge utterances produced by above-average HQ to be more ironic than those with below-average HQ.

Table 4. Mean values of judgments (on a five-level Likert scale) sorted by the HQ of informants for caption types grouped by the HQ of the speaker producing the utterance

Caption type of the utterances	Judgements (mean)		
	Below-average HQ (n=39)*	Above average HQ (n=42)*	p-value
Below-average HQ**	2,47	2,38	0,704
Average HQ**	2,82	2,86	0.812
Above-average HQ**	3,13	3,18	0,770
Utterances chosen by the authors	2,98	3,17	0,261

Notes: *HQ of the individual *judging* the utterance
   **HQ of the individual *producing* the utterance

Contrary to our expectations, the informants made similar judgments about utterances produced by below-average, average or above-average HQ as well as about utterances we had selected ourselves, independently of their HQ (Table 4). Furthermore, one-way ANOVA did not reveal a significant difference for any caption type between the results of those with below-average and above-average HQ.

Independently of their degree of HQ, informants judge utterances similarly, with those produced by higher-HQ participants receiving significantly higher scores than those produced by lower-HQ ones (see Figure 1).

In addition, it is also worth examining how unequivocally the participants accepted or rejected particular caption types. Since in the second questionnaire exploring the interpretation of irony, participants were asked to what extent they regarded the captions as ironic, their answers do not give information on whether or not they interpret a given utterance as ironic. Rather, these answers show to what extent informants consider an utterance as a good (or not so good) example for irony; to what extent particular utterances invited or allowed an ironic interpretation.

Grouping (supposedly) ironic utterances according to the HQ of those producing them, we find significant differences in the proportion of firm judgments (Figure 2.). We consider the two extremes of the five-level Likert scale as representing firm judgments, i.e. when the respondent completely rejected (1: "not ironic at all") or completely accepted (5: "absolutely ironic") a given utterance. It seems that some utterances are rejected by a larger proportion of informants than others.
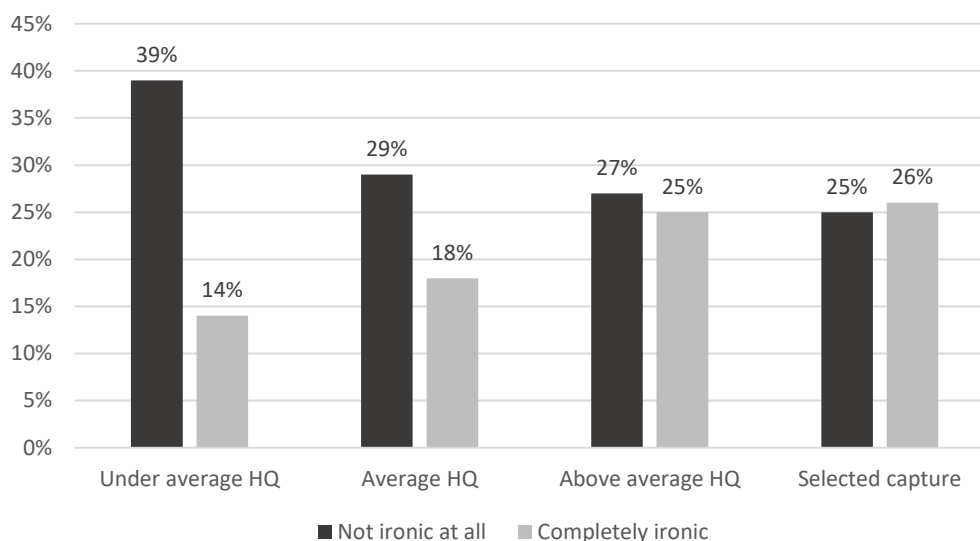
Figure 2. The proportion of firm judgments in the case of particular caption types

The results of the study performed in Friedman's Anova model shows that there is a significant difference between particular caption types in their degrees of being rejected ($\chi^2(3) = 63,05$, p <,001). The post hoc analysis with Wilcoxon signed-rank test has revealed a significant difference in the judgment of utterances produced by negative humour styles concerning other utterances. Utterances produced by below-average HQ are significantly more likely to be completely rejected than those produced by average HQ (Z = -4,470, p <,001) or above-average HQ (Z = -6,190, p <,001) and than those that we had selected ourselves (Z = -7,373, p <,001). Utterances produced by average HQ are significantly often rejected by informants than those produced by above-average HQ (Z = -2,137, p =,033) and those we had selected (Z = -3,159, p =,002). Finally, there is no significant difference between utterances produced by above-average HQ and the utterances we selected in the degree to which they are rejected (Z = -1,478, p =,139).

When it comes to the complete acceptance as ironic of utterances grouped according to the HQ of those producing them, Friedman's ANOVA test again detects significant differences ($\chi^2(3) = 80,557$, p <,001). Informants judged utterances produced by below-average HQ to be clearly ironic in significantly fewer cases than other utterances. The Wilcoxon test shows that utterances produced by below-average HQ differ significantly in terms of the degree of acceptance from those produced by average HQ (Z = -2,893, p <,001) or above-average HQ (Z= -6,853, p <,001) and also from the utterances we selected (Z= -4,743, p <,001). Utterances produced by average HQ were judged to be completely ironic in a significantly lower proportion than those produced by above-average HQ (Z = -4,743, p <,001) and then those that we had selected (Z = -4,917, p <,001). However, there is no significant difference between the degrees to which utterances produced by above-average HQ and our manually selected utterances were accepted (Z = -,618, p =,537).

Utterances produced by below-average HQ were rejected significantly more than accepted as ironic (Z = -8,102, p <,001). A significant difference is also found between the acceptance and rejection of utterances produced by average HQ (Z = -4,813, p <,001). However, no significant difference has been found between the acceptance and rejection of utterances produced by above-average HQ (Z = -,942, p=,346), and the same also holds for the utterances we selected (Z = -,277, p =,782). In the case of both utterance groups, approximately the same proportion of informants accepted and completely rejected a given utterance.

We expected that the higher the HQ of an informant was, the more firm judgements she would make about the ironicity of utterances, in contrast with those of below-average HQ.

Table 5. Mean number of the firm judgments (total number of utterances per caption type: 5)

Caption type of the utterances	How many judgments were firm? (mean)		
	Below-average HQ* (n=39)	Above-average HQ* (n=42)	p-values (QI: 95%)
Below-average HQ**			
not ironic at all	1,69	2,24	0,136
completely ironic	0,85	0,86	0,965
Average HQ**			
not ironic at all	1,39	1,76	0,169
completely ironic	0,79	1,29	0,072
Above-average HQ**			
not ironic at all	1,21	1,21	0,966
completely ironic	1,44	1,66	0,551
Utterance chosen by the authors			
not ironic at all	1,13	1,19	0,821
completely ironic	**0,97**	**1,62**	**0,012**
Number of total firm judgments	**9,41**	**11,79**	**0,007**

Notes: *HQ of the individual *judging* the utterance
　　　**HQ of the individual *producing* the utterance
　　　Bold: significant differences

A significant difference was found between persons of below- and above-average HQ in the judgment of utterances chosen by us: individuals with above-average HQ were significantly more likely to judge these utterances as "completely ironic" than individuals with below-average HQ. There was no significant difference in the firm judgments of other caption types. However, results show that individuals with above-average HQ made significantly more firm judgments in the whole questionnaire than those with below-average HQ.

4. Discussion

Our main study question was whether an individual's sense of humour affects the successful production and interpretation of ironic utterances. The results show that the relationship between irony and HQ are more complex than previously thought.

In our first hypothesis (H1), we assumed that the higher the HQ of the person producing an ironic utterance, the more ironic the utterance would be judged by our informants. This hypothesis was verified. The results indicate that one's sense of humour affects one's ability to produce an appropriate instance of irony. The higher a person's HQ who produces an ironic utterance, the more ironic her utterance is judged by people, and conversely, the lower a person's HQ, the less she can produce an appropriately ironic utterance.

The HQ of the person who produces the ironic utterance has a larger impact on the interpretation of irony than the HQ of the interpreter. In our second hypothesis (H2), we assumed that the interpreter's HQ would affect the manner of irony interpretation. Namely, we expected that individuals with lower HQ were less susceptible to irony and would make less confident decisions about ironicity than those with a higher HQ rate. Therefore, we considered that the higher a participant's HQ, the firmer her decisions would be about irony. Analysing the distribution of judgements, we found that utterances produced with below-average HQ were more likely to be judged as "completely non-ironic" – regardless of the interpreter's HQ – than utterances produced with average or above-average HQ. In contrast, those utterances that contained an appropriate instance of irony (utterances chosen by us) were judged significantly more ironic by informants with higher HQ than informants with low HQ.

Examining the proportions of clearly negative ("not ironic at all") or clearly positive ("completely ironic") judgments, we saw that 31% of all judgments were explicit rejections, whereas complete acceptance had a share of 21%. This result suggests that language users, independently of their

HQ level, made firmer judgments about what they did not consider to be good irony (as a sufficiently ironic utterance) than about what they did consider ironic. This result may indicate no consensus about what constitutes a fine example of irony in a particular context in everyday language use. The fact that utterances produced by above-average HQ received around the same number of completely rejecting and accepting judgments suggest that the answer to the question "What is irony?" may be much more complex than what a simple definition affords. Since in the present paper, we did not raise questions about the reasons underlying particular judgments, we cannot be sure what social, cultural, learning-related or personality-based differences (and clusters thereof) may account for the fact that some utterances receive rejecting and accepting judgments in the same proportions.

Although we took special care in examining the folk category of irony, i.e. what people *assume* to be ironic, we also wanted to measure the acceptance of our theoretically based irony definition (see chapter 1.1). Because of this, in the second questionnaire, informants also had to judge utterances that we considered clear-cut example of irony. These utterances mostly contained an implicit, less salient form of irony. That is to say, we selected captions from the first questionnaire that did not foreground incongruence by semantic means (e.g. by the use of contrast or negation) but rather exploited the opportunities inherent in perspectivization even without recourse to explicit contrast, highlighting a distance in interpretation and evaluation between the speaker's perspective and the perspective evoked by the construction. For example, for a photo showing a man as a tiny dot on a snowy landscape, shovelling snow by himself, we selected the following utterance: '*Charming, independent, rich man is looking for his life partner for social activities!' (Sármos, önálló, gazdag férfi keresi élete párját társas eseményekre!)*. Analysing judgments about the utterances chosen by us, we found the following results. Firstly, these utterances reached the highest overall score among utterances sorted by the HQ of the individual who produced them. People interpreted these utterances significantly more ironic than utterances produced with below-average or average HQ. This result suggests that the ironicity of an utterance is a matter of degree: there are more and less appropriate instances of irony. These outcomes seem to reinforce the relevance of the functional cognitive approach to irony, which derives the production and interpretation of irony from the metapragmatic awareness of discourse participants, thereby linking the phenomenon to the participants' HQ. In this framework, discourse participants' metapragmatic awareness indicates their capability of having a reflexive attitude to particular linguistic constructions and the associated cognitive processes and socio-cultural conventions, both as speakers and recipients (see Tátrai 2020).

This outcome also confirms the assumption that language users (typically irrespective of their HQ) have convergent preferences and expectations about what constitutes good irony. Secondly, we found that the higher an individual's HQ was, the more easily she made a clear decision about this type of irony. Results show that people with above-average HQ were significantly more likely to judge utterances selected by us as "completely ironic" than those with below-average HQ. However, people with above-average HQ were more confident in judging all types of utterances as ironic or non-ironic. Finally, we found significant differences between below-average HQ and above-average HQ groups in the rate of complete rejection or complete acceptance. Individuals with below-average HQ tended not to make a clear decision and they were less able to identify the most prominent instances of irony than did individuals with above-average HQ. This result aligns with Jacob and his colleagues (2016) study on correlations between emotional intelligence and irony recognition. They found that higher emotional intelligence induces faster decisions in recognition of irony and that with a higher EQ, less incongruent instances of irony were also more easily recognised. These results show that a finer-grained study based on more specific factors (e.g. only involving adaptive humour styles within the broader realm of HQ) may reveal certain trends so that the metapragmatic and socio-cultural factors underlying the production and evaluation of irony may be better identified.

To conclude, it seems that an ironic utterance can reach its goal in at least two ways. On the one hand, people identify an utterance as more ironic when the person who produced this utterance has a high HQ. On the other hand, irony as a phenomenon seems to have less and more clear-cut examples. Instances are identifiable regardless of the person's HQ, but they can be identified more efficiently with a high HQ.

Limitations

It was not the goal of the present paper to give a detailed analysis of sentence/photo pairs as a function of the participants HQ, although we are aware that the photos themselves may have affected judgments about the ironicity of supposedly ironic captions attached them. Instead, we plan to present a thorough analysis of sentence/photo pairs and the possible effects of visual stimuli in a separate paper.

A further limitation of the paper is that the questionnaires did not directly ask informants to provide a working definition of irony that they adhered to, hence we have gained no insight into what attitude, knowledge or other factors may have influenced the evaluation of particular, supposedly ironic utterances.

5. Conclusion

An important implication of the present study focusing on the folk category of irony is that irony, and the ironicity of a linguistic construction can hardly be articulated as a simple "yes or no" question. The complexity of the phenomenon is shown by the ironicity of utterances intended to be par excellence examples of irony are far from being evident for informants. The ironicity of a supposedly ironic utterance, its compliance with expectations regarding ironic utterances, is a matter of degree. The question as to what these expectations are (beyond high HQ) invites further investigations.

Declaration of interest statements

We declare that we have no financial or personal relationships with other people or organisations that could inappropriately influence the work reported in this paper. We have no affiliation with any organisation with a financial interest, direct or indirect, in the subject matter or materials discussed in the manuscript that might affect the conduct or reporting of the work submitted.

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