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Request Complexity is no More a Problem
When the Requests Are Ironic
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Although the topic has been extensively studied, many issues about understanding of indirect requests in children are still unsolved. Our contribution is to distinguish genuine and ironic hints, focusing on the latter. We examined the understanding of ironic hints and ironic imperatives in 5- to 9-year-old children and in adults, in various situational contexts (neutral or ironic). The main result of this study was that ironic hints were more difficult to understand than ironic imperatives only when the context was neutral. When the context was ironic, there was no significant difference. Discussion highlights how context enables young children to understand very indirect requests like ironic hints.

Keywords
Children, Understanding, Irony, Indirect request, Hint, Sarcasm, Figurative Language

1. Introduction
Highlighted by Searle’s work (1969, 1979), indirect requests were among the most studied forms of indirect speech acts at the end of the 70s to test the validity of the “standard pragmatic model”. Ervin-Tripp (1976) added her contribution to this research by suggesting a classification of the various linguistic forms of requests: imperatives ("give me a cookie"), imbedded imperatives ("could you give me a cookie?"), permission directives ("May I have a cookie?"), need or desire statements ("I'd like a cookie"), question directives ("Are there any more cookies?") and hints ("Boy, these cookies smell good"). In this nomenclature, only the imperatives are direct while the other five forms are indirect, that is the locutionary act does not fit with the illocutionary act. In this classification, no distinction was made between genuine and ironic requests.
However all the forms described can be genuine or ironic. Ironic hints are interesting material to test pragmatic abilities in children because those hints are indirect in two ways: because they are ironic and because they are hints. The purpose of this study was to assess the understanding of ironic hints in children.

1.1. Understanding hints in children

Following the work of Ervin-Tripp and Mitchell-Kernan (1977), research on developmental pragmatics investigated how children process direct and indirect requests (Carrell, 1981; Leonard, Wilcox, Fulmer & Davis, 1978; Shatz, 1978, 1979). Despite this focus on indirect requests, hints were rarely considered. The first study was published by Ackerman (1978) who asked 6- and 8-year-old children to read short stories containing a hint (e.g. “It’s 10 o’clock.”). Stories either biased children toward a literal reading of the utterance (here a statement about the time of day) or a non-literal reading (for instance that a child should prepare for bed). To determine whether or not the participants understood the meaning of the utterance, they were asked to respond “yes” or “no” to three questions related to the utterance. One response represented a literal interpretation of the story, one a non-literal interpretation and one was simply a distractor. Ackerman concluded that children as young as six years of age can respond appropriately to the hints and can infer the intention of the speaker. These results were extended by Elrod (1983) with children from 3 to 6 years old, but other studies showed that hints were less well understood than other requests in young children. Spekman and Roth (1985) investigated the full range of directive forms described by Ervin-Tripp (1976) and showed that the two less direct forms, question directives and hints, were less well understood than most direct forms in 3-, 4- and 5-year-old children during a sequence of interaction between the child and the experimenter. Elrod (1987) showed that the understanding of imperatives appears to be earlier and easier than hints in children from 3 to 6 years old. Moreover, younger children are more sensitive to the form of the request (imperative or hint) than older ones while the context does not play a significant role in understanding.

All these studies only focused on genuine requests. And yet a speaker can utter a hint in an ironical manner. Imagine two people in a car and the passenger wants the driver to slow down. He or she could say “Could you please slow down?” or “Could you drive faster?” Less explicitly, the speaker could genuinely say “I'm not comfortable with this speed...” or ironically say “I feel so comfortable at this speed...” In addition to the genuine hints identified in Ervin-Tripp’s classification, it seems important to consider ironic conventional requests (e.g., “Could you go even faster?”) and ironic hints (e.g., “I feel so comfortable at this speed...”). Ironic hints are more complex than genuine hints or ironic
imperatives because they are non-literal in two ways, they are hints and they are ironic (Gibbs, 1986a).

1.2. Understanding irony in children

Most authors agree that only a combination of different features can distinguish ironic from non-ironic utterances (Attardo, 2000; Colston, 2000; Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg, & Brown, 1995; Utsumi, 2000). Two important features are contextual incongruity and pretense. Contextual incongruity occurs in situations where reality does not match one’s expectations. For instance, one planned to have a walk in the forest but it is raining. Utsumi (2000) referred to those situations as ironic environment. On the other hand, pretense is the fact that the speaker refers to the contextual incongruity pretending not to be aware of it (e.g., “Uuh!!! What a beautiful day for a walk!!!”). The contrast between what is pretended and what really happened should be ironic.

Again, Ackerman (1982, 1983) was the first to investigate the topic in children. He showed that children from 6 years of age could understand irony with appropriate contextual cues and that this understanding improves until adulthood. Ackerman developed a methodology used afterwards in most of the researches on the topic: children were read short stories consisting of an utterance by a speaker and contextual information that was either biased towards an ironic or a literal interpretation of the utterance. Children’s comprehension of utterances was examined by the mean of question probes. Following studies confirmed that children begin to understand simple ironic utterances around 5 or 6 years old (Creusere, 1999, 2000; Dews, Winner, Kaplan, & Rosenblatt, 1996; Hancock, Dunham, & Purdy, 2000; Harris & Pexman, 2003; Laval & Bert-Erboul, 2005) but that understanding is not identical to adults’ understanding before adolescence (Capelli, Nakagawa, & Madden, 1990; Demorest, Meyer, Phelps, Gardner, & Winner, 1984).

Although a significant amount of studies was produced on the understanding of irony, these studies mainly focused on expressive speech acts. Traditionally, a speaker says something positive (“It’s so nice!”) to convey a negative intent (“It’s not nice!”). The expressive function of irony was emphasized by many scholars (e.g., Wilson, 2013), some of them claiming that irony tones the criticism down (Dews & Winner, 1995) while others argued that irony intensifies the criticism (Colston, 1997). If the expressive dimension of irony is clear, ironic utterances enable to achieve other illocutionary goals such as the directive one. Very few studies investigated ironic requests understanding. Gibbs (1986a) showed that adults process ironic hints (“I sure love a messy room”) faster than they comprehend either literal uses of the same sentences, or non ironic indirect requests, like “Would you clean up your room?”. In children,
Laval and Bert-Erboul (2005) showed that irony was understood as young as 5 years old. However these authors were interested in the cues available to understand irony (context or prosody) and not in the linguistic form of the request. They did not vary the kind of requests which were always negative imperatives of that kind: “Do not help me, for sure” uttered by a person who needs help. According to Laval and Bert-Erboul, investigating ironic requests understanding offers a methodological advantage. Unlike ironic assertives or ironic expressives, the understanding of ironic directives in children can be assessed by an external criterion based on the understanding of the action to be carried out. For example, if a mother says "keep it up" to her daughter who is drawing on the new bedroom wallpaper, the external criterion for concluding that the girl understood the ironic request would be the fact that she immediately stops drawing. In other words, the comprehension criterion provided by ironic requests is the satisfaction of the request.

The current study aimed to investigate understanding of ironic requests by children from 5 to 11 years old and adults. We compared two kinds of ironic requests: ironic imperatives (“Keep it up”) and ironic hints (“Dear, you’re such an artist!”). According to the Standard Pragmatic Model (e.g., Searle, 1979), genuine hints should be more difficult to understand than genuine imperatives because they are indirect and non-conventional. This prediction was verified by several studies in children from 3 to 6 years old (Bucciarelli, Colle, & Bara, 2003; Elrod, 1987; Spekman & Roth, 1985). However the requests in the current study are ironic. Because irony understanding depends first on contextual cues (Gibbs, 1986b; Ackerman, 1983, 1986), we also hypothesized that the complexity of the requests could be reduced by relevant contextual cues. That is why in addition to manipulate the linguistic form of requests (ironic imperatives versus ironic hints), we manipulated the situational context of the ironic request. The context was either neutral (no obvious incongruity between the situation and the utterance) or ironic (incongruity between the situation and the utterance).

2. Method
2.1. Participants

Ninety-six French-speaking children were divided into four groups on the basis of age. Each group was composed of 24 children of either five-year-olds (mean age: 5:0 years, range: 4:6–5:10 years, 13 boys and 11 girls), seven-year-olds (mean age: 6:11 years, age range: 6:4-7:5 years, 10 boys and 14 girls), nine-year-olds (mean age: 9:1 years, age range: 8:9-9:5 years, 13 boys and 11 girls), or eleven-year-olds (mean age: 11:3 years, age range: 10:8-11:11 years, 10 boys and 14 girls). All the participants were in the normal grade for their age. They
participated individually to the study in their school with the permission of their parents and school authorities.

2.2. Material

We created twelve stories containing an ironic request made by one of two characters. The stories were computerized with software designed to display interactions in context, cf. Figure 1.

The first picture provided the situational context in which the two characters (named Lea and Marie) interact. It was displayed in the upper left-hand quadrant of the screen, and an off-screen voice described the situational context. For half of the stories, the situational context was ironic: it induced a wide discrepancy between the situation and what the speaker was pretending. For the other half of the stories, the situational context was neutral: it induced no discrepancy between the situation and what the speaker was pretending. The contrasted “ironicalness” of the situational contexts was confirmed in a pre-test. The complete stories (i.e. speaker’s request embedded in situations) were submitted to a sample of 20 adults, who had to judge the speaker’s sincerity on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (very genuine) to 6 (very ironic). When contexts were ironic ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 0.46$), the speaker was judged more ironic than when contexts were neutral ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.59$), $t(19) = 14.51 ; p < .001$.

The second picture showed the two characters in interaction. The participants saw Lea talking to Marie and heard Lea producing a request. In half of the stories, the request was an imperative (e.g., “Go ahead, take some more!”). In the other half of the stories, it was a hint (e.g., “That’s a really good idea!”). Whatever the context, the speaker uttering the request had an ironic / insincere tone of voice, indicating an ironic intent. The speaker’s tone was pre-tested in 35 adults who heard every request twice uttered with sincere or ironic tones of voice, without any information about the context. They had to judge the sincerity of the speaker on a 6-point scale from 1 (very genuine) to 6 (very ironic). When the requests were produced with an ironic / insincere prosody ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 0.34$), the speaker was judged as more ironic than when the prosody was genuine ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.45$), $t(34) = 34.37 ; p < .001$. To avoid the effect of facial expression on the understanding of irony, the face of the speaker was never visible in the second picture (see Figure 1).

The participants were asked how they thought the story would end, by selecting one ending among three different. One of the endings was ironic since the addressee acted as if she understood the ironic request. A second ending was literal, since the addressee acted as if she understood the request literally. The third ending was a control ending and had no link with the request (see Figure 1). Choosing the ironic ending indicated that the participant understood the ironic
intent of the speaker. The three pictures representing each type of ending were simultaneously displayed at the bottom of the screen in random positions.

Figure 1. Screen capture of a story just before the participant answers (texts under the pictures were added to present the audio side of the story).

2.3. Procedure

Participants were first presented with a short interface-familiarization phase and two practice stories, then the twelve stories were displayed one by one in random order. The participants had to complete the stories by touching the screen to select the adequate ending.

3. Results

The dependent variable "number of ironic endings" was analyzed in a three-factor analysis of variance: age (5-, 7-, 9-, 11-years-old and adults) x request (imperatives vs. hints) x context (ironic context vs. neutral context). The following main results were obtained. The age effect was significant ($F(4,115) = 22.07$, $p < .001$, $r = .40$), indicating that the number of ironic endings increased with age. There was an effect of the request ($F(1,115) = 15.52$, $p < .001$,
indicating that imperatives were better understood than hints and an effect of the context \((F(1,115) = 72.26, p < .001, r = .62)\) indicating that irony was better understood when the context was ironic than when it was neutral. These main effects were qualified by an interaction between the request complexity and the situational context, \((F(1,115) = 22.86, p < .001, r = .41)\). Figure 2 shows the number of ironic endings by request and context. No other effect reached significance.

**Figure 2.** Number of ironic endings depending on the context and the request. Error bars show standard error.

Planned comparisons were performed in order to further specify the interaction. When the context was neutral, the number of ironic endings given by participants was higher for imperatives \((M = 2.1, SD = 1.14)\) than for hints \((M = 1.55, SD = 1.12)\), \(F(1,115) = 28.61, p < .001\). By contrast, the difference between the number of ironic endings given by children for imperatives \((M = 2.42, SD = 0.95)\) and for hints \((M = 2.47, SD = 0.86)\) was not significant anymore when the context was ironic, \(F(1,115) = 0.467, n.s.\)

4. Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the understanding of ironic hints in children. To this date this topic has been seriously under-researched first by scholars interested in directive speech acts understanding in children who focused
on genuine requests; second by researchers interested in irony understanding who focused on expressive speech acts even though irony can achieve directive illocutionary goals. Studying ironic hints is of interest both from a theoretical and a methodological standpoint. Theoretically speaking, ironic hints are the most indirect and non-conventional requests and should be very difficult to understand by children in the standard pragmatic model frame. Thus they are valuable to test Gibbs’ view (1979, 1986a, 1986b, 1994) according to which contextual information leads to the speaker’s intent rather than literal utterance meaning. From a methodological standpoint, ironic hints enable to assess irony understanding with an external criterion based on the request satisfaction.

Our results confirmed that ironic requests are understood as young as 5 years of age (Laval & Bert-Erboul, 2005). The number of requests understood increased gradually from 5 to 11 years of age and again until adulthood. We also confirmed that hints are more difficult to understand than imperatives when the context is neutral (Elrod, 1987; Spekman & Roth, 1985). More importantly, the main result of this experiment is that when the context made the utterance clearly ironic, the request was satisfied whatever its complexity (imperative or hint). It seems that request complexity is no more a problem when the requests are ironic. One could be surprised that such complex requests – indirect, non conventional, ironic – were easily understood as young as 5 years old, considering studies indicating that the linguistic form of the request matters at this age (Elrod, 1987; Spekman & Roth, 1985). One possible explanation is that irony, rather than complicating request understanding, makes it easier. Indeed irony fulfills its functions (making fun, teasing, criticizing) by making salient a discrepancy between expectations and reality (Pexman, 2008). By highlighting this discrepancy irony would call the addressee’s attention on the speaker’s expectations and on the directive illocutionary goal of his or her speech act. This hypothesis is in line with Gibbs’ results (1986a) according to which ironic hints are easier to understand than genuine hints in adults. Irony is the last form of non-literal language to be acquired (Bucciarelli et al., 2003; Sullivan, Winner, & Hopfield, 1995), presumably because irony understanding is closely related to the acquisition of a theory of mind in children (Filippova & Astington, 2008). However, once the theory of mind has developed enough to allow irony understanding, contextual incongruity would become a strong cue to focus on the speaker’s intent and not on what he is saying literally.

In agreement with the studies performed by Gibbs in adults both on indirect requests (1979, 1983), on irony (1986b) and on ironic requests (1986a), our results confirm that the understanding of indirect speech acts – irony, indirect requests and ironic indirect requests – mostly depends on the contextual information available to produce inferences about the speaker’s intent. Regardless
of whether a request is direct or indirect, conventional or non conventional, genuine or ironic, relevant contextual cues make the understanding possible by children as young as 5 years old.

References


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