"You won't get it unless you're bilingual, kid!":
On irony comprehension in Polish mono- and Polish-English bilingual children.

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Irony, claimed to be the most complex type of nonliteral language, is believed to require more processing than do other types of figurative utterances (Leinonen and Ryder 2008). A plausible explanation could be that irony, involving the attribution of mental states, requires higher-order Theory of Mind skills (Curcó 2000). A unique way to verify this hypothesis is offered by developmental psychopragmatic research. Testing the comprehension of irony by children, whose brain structures critical for mentalising are not yet fully myelinated (Liddle and Nettle 2006), creates an opportunity to see how the capacity for irony unfolds in time. Testing bilinguals, in turn, makes it possible to verify whether it constitutes a more general cognitive ability, available regardless of the language spoken, or whether it develops for each language separately.

To check whether there would be a difference in the performance of mono- and bilingual children on an irony comprehension task, a set of forty scenarios was devised. In each scenario, one character always did something and the other commented on this activity. Half of the comments were ironic utterances, and the other half were literal fillers, all phrased so as to represent Searle's (1969) five major categories of speech acts. The stories were recorded and played to each child. The participants' task was to listen to each scenario and to answer a set of simple questions probing context comprehension, and testing the recognition of three major elements of irony comprehension: speaker belief (Theory of Mind), intention and attitude (Demorest et al. 1984; Creusere 1999; Pexman and Olineck 2002; Harris and Pexman 2003; Pexman et al. 2005; Glenwright and Pexman 2010; Pexman and Whalen 2010). Before the experiment, the participants' parents were introduced to its aim and form, and gave written consent for their child to take part in the study. Each child was tested individually, in several sessions whose duration depended on the subject's willingness to engage in the experimental task. To get the children's attention and help them focus, forty pictures illustrating the scenarios were prepared. Later, a control group of sixteen bilingual adults was tested using the same stimuli.

Initial analyses have demonstrated lower error rates for ironic comments in bilingual children than in monolingual children. No significant difference has been found in the performance on the literal stimuli across the groups. These data indicate that bilingual children are more apt at comprehending ironic utterances. Further analyses are expected to shed more light on the issue, putting the difference down to either better developed mentalising skills or more effective recognition of speaker intention. An interesting finding is beginning to emerge from the data concerning the participants' perception of speaker attitude: while monolingual children frequently gauge ironic utterances as negative and hurtful, bilinguals are more inclined to judge them as jocular. One reason for this difference may be bilinguals' better developed metalinguistic skills (Goldin-Meadow and Galambos 1990), but their higher social status may also be an important factor (Pexman et al. 2000).

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