Methods of studying verbal irony and sarcasm in conversations across cultures

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Verbal irony is typically understood as an utterance which is (a) overtly untruthful ("saying the opposite of what you mean") and (b) which implicitly expresses a certain evaluation (Dynel, 2017). It is a popular figure of speech, being part of every-day interactions (Gibbs, 2000) and frequently appearing in media and popular works of culture. In turn, sarcasm is variously conceptualized as an especially aggressive form of verbal irony (Dynel, 2017). In the last decades, a significant body of research has been produced on irony comprehension by children (Banasik-Jemielniak & Bokus, 2019; Zajączkowska & Abbot-Smith, 2020) and irony use by adults (Colston & Athanasiadou, 2017), with reference to socio-cultural and individual factors, such as personality traits, (Bruntsch & Ruch, 2017) gender (Colston & Lee, 2004, Milanowicz & Bokus, 2013), age (Philips et al., 2015), knowledge of cultural norms (e.g., Cafarra, Mitchell, & Martin, 2018), and second language proficiency (Tiv, Rouillard, Vingron, Wiebe, & Titone, 2019).

Researchers investigating irony and sarcasm use and comprehension have developed numerous quantitative and qualitative measures of these abilities in specific populations (adults, children, clinical groups). They vary from self-report questionnaires and comment elicitation, through experimental studies using comprehension and production tasks and/or eye-tracking, to natural observations and corpus studies. Sophisticated neuropsychological methods have also been successfully employed. With such variety, a consolidation of the findings with regard to the differences and challenges in data collection seems pertinent.

A particularly significant challenge is also the question of cross-cultural comparisons and generalizability. A range of studies indicates that cultural norms of communication impact both irony use and understanding in specific ways (Banasik-Jemielniak et al., under review; Blasko et al., 2021; Dress et al., 2008). Therefore, the cultural specificity and potential for cultural adaptation of non-observational measures must be considered.

To this end, this thematic session explores different approaches, methods, and operationalizations in studying verbal irony and sarcasm. We aim at discussing these issues in the context of various countries and cultures. Some of the questions we are open to considering are:

- How to reliably measure irony and sarcasm use as a quantitative variable?
- How to accurately capture and analyze real-life irony and sarcasm use in various contexts?
- How to effectively incorporate irony and sarcasm use in broader areas of research (emotional regulation and psychological well-being, interpersonal communication and relationships, online communication, etc.)?
- How to compare irony and sarcasm cross-culturally?
- How to effectively engage participants and collect valid and accurate data?