

Sarcasm and Joculariry in Adolescent Sibling and Friend Interactions

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Abstract

We examined the effect of interaction partner on two types of verbal irony (sarcasm and joculariry) in adolescents' sibling and friend interactions.

Adolescents used joculariry significantly more than sarcasm with both siblings and friends, but they tended to use sarcasm more with siblings than with friends.

Introduction

As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we analyzed the ways adolescents use verbal irony in their interactions. Although verbal irony is pervasive in adolescents' conversations, there has been little observational research on their use of verbal irony, with almost no attention to the influence of interaction partner. We analyzed two forms of verbal irony (sarcasm and joculariry) in the context of sibling and friend interactions. *Sarcasm* involves ridicule aimed at a specific target that appears to be hurtful, caustic or biting, whereas *joculariry* involves playful banter or teasing. Based on what we know about adolescents' social and linguistic behaviors with siblings and friends, we expected that interaction partner would make a difference in how adolescents used verbal irony; specifically, we predicted that they would use more sarcasm with siblings and more joculariry with friends. We were also interested in possible gender effects, although we did not have specific predictions for how boys and girls might use verbal irony differently.

Method

- 19 pairs of adolescents (11 same-gender, 8 mixed-gender) were videotaped at home in separate cooking sessions with a sibling and with a friend.
- Videos were transcribed, and the transcripts were coded for two forms of verbal irony: sarcasm and joculariry.
- Both sarcasm and joculariry were further coded for impact (*mitigation* or *intensification*), form of ironic statement (*hyperbole*, *contradiction*, *understatement*), communicative function (*affiliation*, *dominance*, *distancing*, *covering embarrassment*), and response of partner (*ironic*, *non-ironic*, or *no response*).

Results

Tables 1-5 show:

- Joculariry was used significantly more than sarcasm ($p = .01$)
- Siblings *tended* to use sarcasm and joculariry more than peers ($p = .088$)
- Hyperbole was used overwhelmingly more than the other forms of ironic statements, and both siblings and friends used it for joculariry more than for sarcasm ($p = .022$)
- Dominance was used more by siblings than by friends ($p = .02$)
- Siblings used sarcasm more than friends for covering embarrassment, but friends used joculariry more for that purpose ($p = .02$)

Discussion

As expected, joculariry was used more than sarcasm. However, we expected to see a partner effect as well and were surprised when it was only marginally significant. This can most likely be attributed to a low sample size. As we continue our research, we expect to see a more significant partner effect.

The biggest challenge found while studying joculariry and sarcasm turns out to be very large individual differences, which makes finding statistical significance difficult. The number of jocular and sarcastic utterances had a huge range, with some dyads having very few or no ironic utterances and others having dozens.

Table 1. Target adolescent sarcastic and jocular utterances per engaged and semi-engaged minute.

	Sibling Interactions	Friend Interactions
Sarcastic Utterances	.2074	.1371
Jocular Utterances	.7489	.5026

Table 2. Impact of ironic utterances.

	Sibling Sarcasm	Sibling Joculariry	Friend Sarcasm	Friend Joculariry
Intensification	98.8%	75.8%	93.5%	90.5%
Mitigation	1.2%	24.2%	6.5%	9.5%

Table 3. Form of ironic utterances

	Sibling Sarcasm	Sibling Joculariry	Friend Sarcasm	Friend Joculariry
Hyperbole	87.8%	94.2%	83.4%	93.2%
Understatement	0.0%	0.7%	3.9%	0.2%
Contradiction	12.2%	5.1%	12.7%	7.3%

Table 4. Communicative function of ironic utterances

	Sibling Sarcasm	Sibling Joculariry	Friend Sarcasm	Friend Joculariry
Affiliative	39.8%	75.5%	55.7%	71.3%
Distancing	0.0%	1.1%	3.9%	0.0%
Dominance	49.5%	12.9%	36.9%	11.9%
Covering Embarrassment	10.7%	10.5%	2.0%	15.0%

Table 5. Response of partner.

	Sibling Sarcasm	Sibling Joculariry	Friend Sarcasm	Friend Joculariry
Ironic Response	27.0%	29.6%	41.2%	30.1%
Non-Ironic Response	14.5%	40.6%	15.6%	39.0%
Non-Response	59.5%	32.8%	31.2%	31.7%