



GENDER, PARTNER, MITIGATION, AND VALENCE IN ADOLESCENTS’ USE OF VERBAL IRONY AND ASSERTIVE/AFFILIATIVE LANGUAGE



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Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study, we examined connections in adolescent girls’ and boys’ usage of verbal irony and assertive/affiliative language in interactions with siblings and friends. In the past, these variables have been primarily examined using hypothetical situations. In this study, both verbal irony and assertive/affiliative language were assessed using observational coding measures. Several significant correlational patterns emerged that differed according to the gender of the target adolescent. These results are preliminary in nature and require further investigation.

Introduction

Verbal communication is an integral part of everyday life. It is fundamental to analyzing and understanding the dynamics of a relationship. There are many different ways in which communication can be expressed verbally. This study examines two particular subsets of this expression in sibling and friend pairs: verbal irony and assertion/affiliation. Our research group has previously found differences in how adolescents use both verbal irony and assertive and affiliative language with siblings and friends. The purpose of the current study was to compare and explore connections between the use of verbal irony and assertive and/or affiliative behavior as demonstrated in both sibling and friend adolescent pairs.

Verbal irony is when the underlying meaning of an utterance differs from the literal meaning. Two major forms of verbal irony are sarcasm (ridicule aimed at a specific target that appears intentionally hurtful) and jocularly (humorous teasing with no hurtful intentions). Both sarcasm and jocularly can be used for assertive or affiliative purposes in social interaction—i.e., to accomplish individual objectives or to maintain social interaction.

Method

Participants

- 57 white, middle-class 16- and 17-year-olds living in western New York, paired with a sibling and with a same-sex, same-age friend.
- Roughly half of the target adolescents were males, half females.
- Roughly half of the sibling pairs were same-sex, half mixed-sex.

Procedure

- Sibling and friend pairs were videotaped separately making brownies or pizza at the target adolescent’s home.
- Videotapes were transcribed and coded for instances of sarcasm and jocularly, and for assertive and affiliative utterances.
- Each instance of assertive and affiliative behavior was further coded as positive or negative, mitigated or unmitigated.

Analyses

- Relationships between forms of verbal irony and forms of assertive and affiliative language were analyzed using Pearson bivariate correlation coefficients.
- The current study focused solely on utterances by the target adolescent.

Results

As shown in Table 1, correlations between target adolescents’ use of sarcasm and assertive/affiliative utterances varied, depending on partner, gender, and valence of the assertive or affiliative utterances:

- Overall, sarcasm toward siblings was associated with negative assertive language, both mitigated and unmitigated. Sarcasm toward friends was associated with positive mitigated affiliative language and (marginally) with negative unmitigated assertive language.
- For boys, the overall pattern more or less held for siblings. Boys’ sarcasm toward friends was significantly correlated with positive mitigated affiliative language and marginally correlated with negative unmitigated affiliative utterances.

Table 1

Correlations Between Target Adolescent Sarcastic and Assertive/Affiliative Utterances

Overall	Unmitigated Assertive		Mitigated Assertive		Unmitigated Affiliative		Mitigated Affiliative	
	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
with Sib	.028	.476***	-.060	.365**	.072	-.081	.013	—
with Friend	.069	.261 ^a	.119	.296	-.059	.248	.715***	—
Male Target								
with Sib	-.188	.542**	-.032	.363 ^a	-.011	-.107	.079	—
with Friend	.041	.305	-.025	.194	.148	.330 ^a	.615*	—
Female Target								
with Sib	.462*	.527**	-.124	.505**	-.391 ^a	—	-.030	—
with Friend	.142	.245	.454	.102	-.252	—	.777***	—

Table 2

Correlations Between Target Adolescent Jocularly and Assertive/Affiliative Utterances

Overall	Unmitigated Assertive		Mitigated Assertive		Unmitigated Affiliative		Mitigated Affiliative	
	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
with Sib	.301*	.150	.214	.223	.419**	.038	.120	—
with Friend	.028	.176	.145	.143	.210	.005	.797***	—
Male Target								
with Sib	.178	.183	.531**	.333	.368 ^a	.084	.443*	—
with Friend	-.010	.339	.132	-.018	.354 ^a	.013	.722**	—
Female Target								
with Sib	.424*	.129	.030	.170	-.062	—	-.053	—
with Friend	.112	.087	.320	.101	.068	—	.824***	—

Notes. ^ap < .10, * p ≤ .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

- For girls, sarcasm toward siblings was correlated with unmitigated assertive language and with negative mitigated assertive language. There was also a marginal negative correlation with unmitigated affiliative language.

As shown in Table 2, a different pattern emerged for jocularly:

- Overall, jocularly toward siblings was associated with unmitigated assertive and affiliative language. With friends, it was strongly associated with mitigated affiliative language.
- For boys, jocularly toward siblings was significantly associated with mitigation of both assertive and affiliative language. It was marginally correlated with unmitigated affiliative language.
- For girls, jocularly was associated with unmitigated assertive language toward siblings and with mitigated affiliative language toward friends.

Discussion

Our results suggest differences in the purposes for which boys and girls use verbal irony in interactions with siblings and friends. Sarcasm and jocularly can both potentially be used to accomplish individual objectives (assertion) and to maintain social interaction (affiliation), but exactly how that happens appears to vary with gender and partner.

Both boys and girls seem to use sarcasm to push their own agenda with siblings, often in a negative way, and to distance themselves from expressions of affiliation with friends. When it comes to jocularly, boys seem to use it to mitigate both assertive and affiliative language. Girls appear to use it to push their own agendas with siblings and to distance themselves from affiliative expressions toward friends.

Our results report only associations between overall levels of verbal irony and various forms of assertive and affiliative language. These associations may reflect the purposes for which verbal irony is being used, but they may also indicate adolescents’ reactions to partners’ use of verbal irony and assertive/affiliative language. For example, adolescents may use sarcasm as a means of negative assertion, but they may also respond to partners’ use of sarcasm with negatively assertive utterances. More fine-grained analyses will be needed to determine the exact connections between verbal irony and assertive/affiliative language in adolescents’ interactions with siblings and friends.

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