

# COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS OF VERBAL IRONY IN ADOLESCENTS' SIBLING AND PEER INTERACTIONS Gina L. Ottolia, Corrin L. Pudlewski, Michael A. Vizzi, Lawrence P. Bellomo, Mary V. Van Voorhis, Sana A. Shakeel, Leslie M. Cohoon & Ganie B. DeHart

#### <u>Abstract</u>

As part of a longitudinal study, we examined adolescent girls' and boys' use of verbal irony in interactions with siblings and peers. In the past, verbal irony has been primarily examined using hypothetical situations. In this study, verbal irony was assessed using observational coding measures. Partner, target child gender, and sibling gender all had impacts on adolescents' use of verbal irony. These results are preliminary in nature and require further investigation.

# **Introduction**

Research on irony in adolescence has focused on judgments about meaning and intent in hypothetical situations; less is known about how adolescents actually use irony in naturally-occurring conversations. This study seeks to understand the normative use of irony by using observational data. As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we examined adolescent girls' and boys' use of verbal irony in interactions with siblings and peers.

Verbal irony is defined as non-literal utterances in which a speaker intentionally says one thing but means another; in other words, the underlying meaning of an utterance differs from its surface meaning in order to convey meaning indirectly (Hancock, Dunham, & Purdy, 2000). Irony can serve various defensive functions for adolescents, especially in uncertain social situations; it can provide deniability for potentially hurtful or affiliative utterances by leaving their intent open to interpretation.

We examined two types of verbal irony: *sarcasm* and *jocularity*. Sarcasm involves ridicule aimed at a specific target, either the partner or a third party, that appears to be hurtful/caustic/biting. Jocularity involves speakers teasing one another in humorous ways, with no hurtful intentions (Gibbs, 2000).

Verbally ironic utterances can take various forms, including hyperbole, understatement, and *juxtaposition*. Speakers can express non-literal meaning by exaggerating the reality of the situation or overstating the obvious (hyperbole). Alternatively, speakers can state far less than is obviously the case (understatement). Lastly, speakers can state the opposite of what they actually mean (juxtaposition). Adolescents' verbal irony has varying communicative functions, including affiliation (attempts at humor or entertainment, as well as mocking a third party to increase solidarity with the interaction partner), *distancing* (separation of the speaker from the underlying meaning of the utterance), dominance (putting down the partner or attempting to increase one's own social status), and covering embarrassment (attempting to counteract feelings of social awkwardness). Lastly, irony can make potential impacts of an utterance less or more intense by using *mitigation* or *intensification*, respectively.

# **Method**

#### Participants

• 22 white, middle-class 17-year-olds living in western New York (11 boys); paired with a sibling and same-age, same-sex peer. Sixteen of the sibling pairs were same-sex; six were mixed-sex.

#### Procedure

• Sibling and peer pairs were videotaped separately making brownies or pizza at the target adolescent's home.

• Videotapes were transcribed and coded for instances of sarcasm and jocularity, which were further coded for form, communicative function, impact, and partner response (ironic, non-ironic, or no response).

#### Analyses

• For the purposes of this poster, we included only families who used either sarcasm or jocularity in both the sibling and the peer session (15 out of 22 families).

• Relative rates of various types of verbal irony were analyzed using 2 (partner: sib vs. peer) x 2 (target child (TC) gender) x 2 (sibling gender) repeated measure ANOVAs and MANOVAs.









FF= Female TC with Female Sib: FM= Female TC with Male Sib: MF= Male TC with Female Sib: MM= Male TC with Male Sib

# Rate (Figure 1)

• There was a TC gender x sib gender effect in which target children with a sibling of the opposite sex used more sarcasm per engaged minute for both sibling and peer sessions as opposed to target children with a sibling of the same sex (p = .013).

# Form (Figures 2a-2c)

• A partner x TC gender x sib gender effect was found for jocular understatement. Target children with a sibling of the opposite sex used understatement more with siblings than with peers, while target children with a sibling of the same sex used understatement more with peers than with siblings (p = 0.019).

# Impact (Figure 3)

• For jocularity, there was a partner x TC gender x sib gender effect; girls with brothers were more likely to use mitigation with siblings than with peers, while boys with brothers were more likely to use mitigation with peers than with siblings (p = 0.037).

peers (p = 0.09).

# *Communicative Function (Figures 4a-4b)*

• For affiliative sarcasm, there was a TC gender x sib gender effect; girls were more likely to use affiliative sarcasm with both siblings and peers if they had a brother, whereas boys were more likely to use it if they had a sister (p = 0.13). Affiliative jocularity was used more with peers than with siblings (p = 0.001).

• For sarcastic dominance, there was also a TC gender x sib gender effect; girls used sarcastic dominance more if they had a sister than if they had a brother, but sibling gender made no difference for boys (p = 0.067). For jocular dominance, there was a partner x TC gender x sib gender effect, in which girls used dominance more with peers if they had a sister and more with siblings if they had a brother; male target children use jocular dominance more with siblings if they had a sister and more with peers if they had a brother (p = 0.062).

# Response (Figure 5) utterances (p = 0.008).

This preliminary study suggests that observational coding of verbal irony can provide insight into adolescents' normative use of verbal irony. Despite our relatively small sample, our results indicate that both partner and gender seem to influence adolescents' use of verbal irony. Although our results concord well with previous research on related topics (e.g., relational aggression, assertive and affiliative use of language), we intend to follow up this preliminary analysis by coding additional families with a more refined coding scheme to further test the reliability and validity of our measures of the different dimensions of verbal irony.



### <u>Results</u>

• Girls used more sarcastic juxtaposition than boys did (p = .009).

• Target children used more jocular hyperbole with peers than with siblings (p < .001).

• For sarcasm, target children were marginally more likely to use mitigation with siblings than with

• Peers were more likely than siblings to give an ironic response to both sarcastic and jocular

# **Discussion**