



THE ROLE OF ECHO IN UNDERSTANDING VERBAL IRONY

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Abstract

In order to clarify the role of echo (Sperber, Wilson, 1992) in verbal irony, I conducted three studies with children aged 5 to 8. In the first study, short stories containing a simple true or false statement, true or false delusion and true or false irony were shown to the children. I found that subjects understood the beliefs of the speaker better in case of false irony than in case of false delusion, even though understanding of both communicational situations requires second-order mentalization. In the second study, half of the false ironic and false delusive utterances were echoic, and half of them were not. The results showed that the echoic nature of an utterance facilitates its understanding, even if the utterance itself is not ironic. In the last study, I analyzed the children's capacity to understand echoic and non-echoic irony and delusion, related to their performance in first- and second order mentalization tasks. Logistic regression did not show any relationship between second-order mentalization skills and the understanding of explicitly echoic verbal irony.

Participants

- 64 (26 boys, 38 girls), 49 (17 boys, 32 girls) and 64 (28 boys, 36 girls) kindergarten and elementary school children in the 3 studies

Method

- Short stories told by the experimenter, accompanied by the projection of 3 to 6 pictures

False irony with and without echo

Marci was given an assemblable toy car as a present.

(When he saw how many pieces it had, he said to Anne sadly, "I can't assemble it by myself!")

Anne went to the park with her friends. They were playing the ball there all the afternoon, while Marci was working on the car. However, he didn't manage to assemble it. Finally, his father helped him, they finished the car together.

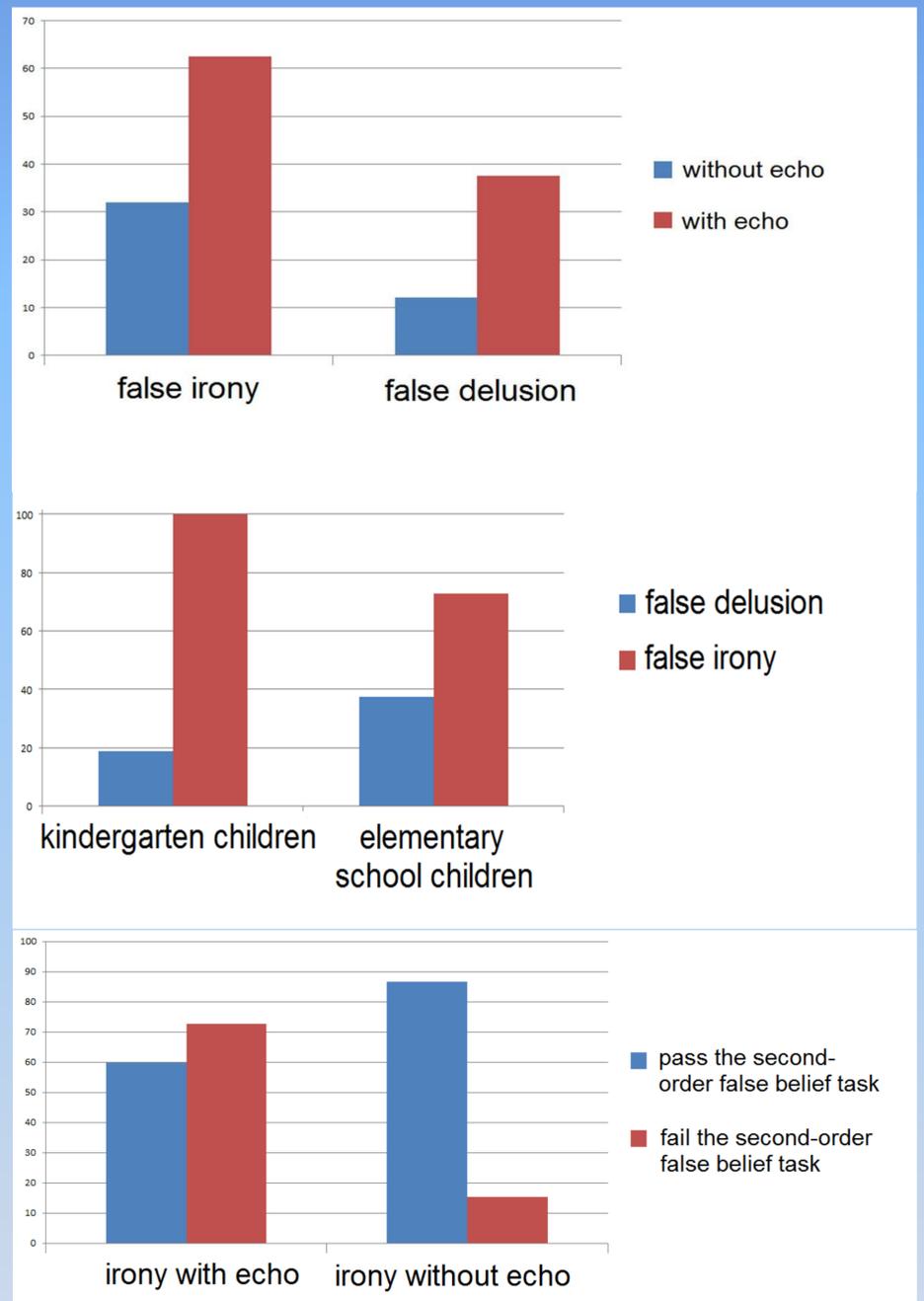
When Anne arrived home and saw the assembled car on the table, she said to Marci, "Well, I see you really can't assemble a car by yourself..."



- The belief of the speaker was either true or false (discordant with reality)
- Questions after the projection:
 1. Is the speaker's statement true?
 2. Is his/her belief true?
- In the 3rd study: first- and second-order false belief task among the stories

Results

- **In case of true belief:** no significant difference between the children's performance in the irony and delusion tasks
- **In case of false belief:** the majority of the participants understood the belief of the speaker when his/her utterance was ironic but failed when it was a delusion → **The echoic nature of ironic utterances could be the base of a heuristic interpretational strategy!**
- **In case of echoic false delusion:** 62% of the children understood the speaker's belief, so **the echoic nature of an utterance could help children identify the belief of the speaker, even if his/her utterance is not ironic.**
- Logistic regression **did not show any relationship between second-order mentalization skills and the understanding of the speaker's belief if his/her utterance was explicitly echoic.** (In case of non-echoic utterances, there is a significant relationship between second-order mentalization skills and the understanding of the speaker's belief; $p_i=0,032$).



Understanding of the speaker's false belief

Discussion

These results show that children tend to apply an echo-based, heuristic interpretational strategy, and therefore are able to interpret (explicitly echoic) ironic statements, even if they are not yet capable of higher-order mentalization. This notion questions the methodology of researches which utilize the performance registered in irony-understanding tasks as the obligate indicator of second-order mentalization skills. Furthermore, it could be the developmental base of Gibbs' findings (Gibbs, 2007), that adults understand irony without processing the literal meaning of ironic utterances.

References:

- [1] Gibbs, R. W. (2007): On the Psycholinguistic of Sarcasm. In: Gibbs, R. W., Colston, H. L. (2007): Irony in Language and Thought. Routledge, 173-200
[2] Sperber, D., Wilson, D. (1992): On verbal irony. Lingua 87, 1/2, vol. 1: 53-76. Special issue on Relevance Theory