



The role of humor-related traits and broad personality dimensions in irony use[☆]



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ABSTRACT

As humor has pervasively been postulated as a function of irony, humor-related traits such as the joy of laughing at others (i.e., katagelasticism) or trait seriousness can be assumed to predict who is more and who is less inclined to use verbal irony—even beyond the possible effect of broad personality dimensions. For the present study, $N = 153$ subjects made responses in two different irony use measures and completed personality questionnaires. As expected, irony use scores were higher among individuals who tend to break with social conventions, joyfully expose others' transgressions, or aggressively use ridicule (i.e., individuals scoring high in psychoticism, katagelasticism, or the aggressive humor style). Moreover, irony use was more prevalent among playful individuals who tend to entertain others by joyfully exposing themselves as the butt of jokes or engaging in as-if behaviors (i.e., low-serious individuals, scoring high in gelotophilia or the histrionic self-presentation style). Using a hierarchical regression analysis, it was found that over and above redundancy katagelasticism and—unexpectedly so—the self-defeating humor style predicted irony use beyond the influence of psychoticism. Accordingly, irony may also be seen a way to hide negative feelings behind humor and to avoid dealing constructively with problems.

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1. Introduction

When we use verbal irony, we typically utter something different from what we actually want to say, for example by using counterfactual utterances or stating the opposite of what we mean (e.g., Haverkate, 1990). Characteristically, we expect the addressee to see through this dissimulation and detect what we actually want to express nevertheless (cf. Groeben & Scheele, 2003). Initial studies have investigated cultural or situational factors predicting irony use—for example by comparing the prevalence of irony use between groups from collectivist and individualist cultures (e.g., Rockwell & Theriot, 2001) or between different experimental conditions (such as computer-mediated vs. face-to-face communication, i.e., Hancock, 2004). However, the investigation of irony use as an enduring tendency—stable across different settings or situational contexts—and its relation to personality traits has not been targeted yet.

Introducing an individual differences perspective in irony research, Bruntsch, Hofmann, and Ruch (2016) advocate that the tendency to use irony can be expected to systematically differ between individuals, depending on personality traits. Previous findings indicate that indeed

(a) there is interindividual variance in irony use in terms of considerable standard deviations (e.g., Matthews, Hancock, & Dunham, 2006), and (b) this variance is meaningful (rather than negligible “noise”) as it can be explained by trait variables relating to the utility of irony. That is, Averbeck and Hample (2008) found that individual differences variables related to interpersonal aggression, such as verbal aggressiveness, were associated with irony use.¹

The role of aggression as a function of irony—foremost in its sarcastic form—is well established in irony research (e.g., Dews, Kaplan, & Winner, 1995). Likewise, the notion that *humor* is a function of irony is pervasive in the existing literature. For example, laypersons were found to view humor as a reason why irony is used (e.g., Roberts & Kreuz, 1994). Furthermore, indicating that humor is a motive for irony use, Matthews et al. (2006) found that humorous ironic options were chosen more frequently than less humorous ironic options in their irony use measure. From a theoretical stance, if humor is considered also in the disparaging part of its spectrum (cf. Zillmann, 1983), irony can be seen as related to humor because it is suitable for victimizing others while having a humorous effect on bystanders (cf. Garmendia, 2014).

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¹ In the course of evaluating the German adaptation of the irony use measure introduced by Averbeck and Hample (2008), we found that the irony use scale of this instrument (consisting of ten items) had a sufficient internal consistency to support the assumption that irony use varies (a) systematically between individuals and (b) to a relatively small extent within individuals in terms of an enduring tendency to use irony ($\alpha = 0.83$, $N = 97$).

Accordingly, Brunsch et al. (2016) hypothesized that a range of humor-related personality traits may be associated with the use of irony. Namely, these are *trait seriousness* and *trait bad mood* (Ruch, Köhler, & van Thriel, 1996), certain dispositions to laughter and ridicule (i.e., *katagelasticism* and *gelotophilia*; Ruch & Proyer, 2009), *the histrionic self-presentation style* (i.e., the inclination to engage in *as-if* behaviors; Renner, Enz, Friedel, Merzbacher, & Laux, 2008), and *the sense of humor* (in terms of stable interindividual differences in the way people react to and produce humor and a cheerfully composed attitude toward life; see Ruch, 1998).

As an approach to conceptualize the sense of humor, Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) introduced four humor “styles” relating to individual differences humor use: the affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor style. As irony was reported relate to aggression and humor, the *aggressive humor style* presumably is relevant for the present research question. Furthermore, as irony can be seen as a means of interpersonal bonding when used in ironic teasing (cf. Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001), the *affiliative humor style* (as the tendency to use humor to enhance one’s relationship with others in a benign and self-accepting way; Martin et al., 2003) is expected to be positively associated with irony use. We did not have any hypotheses for the other two (i.e., *self-enhancing*, *self-defeating*) humor styles.

Eysenck’s personality dimensions may be used to control for the influence of broad personality dimensions (i.e., extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism; cf. Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991). They were preferred to the Big Five dimensions of personality in the present study because psychoticism is not entailed in the Big Five model but may have a special importance for our research question. A person scoring high in psychoticism is characterized as aggressive, cold, egocentric, impersonal, impulsive, antisocial, unempathic, creative, and tough-minded (cf. Eysenck, 1992). Hence, individuals with higher (vs. lower) scores in psychoticism may be less (vs. more) inhibited by social norms (such as kindness and sympathy) and hence be more (vs. less) prone to use irony in order to expose and ridicule others’ transgressions. Extraversion can be seen as relevant for the present research question because humor behaviors (including irony use) involve positive emotions, which are typically more frequent in extraverts than in introverts (cf. Ruch & Deckers, 1993). Likewise, emotionally stable individuals may be more inclined to risk offending others by using playful provocation in terms of ironic teasing (cf. Keltner et al., 2001) than neuroticistic individuals.

The aim of this paper is to explore whether (a) broad personality dimensions and humor-related traits predict irony use and, if this is the case, whether (b) humor-related traits have an incremental value over broad personality dimensions in this prediction. As a prerequisite, it is expected that there is systematic interindividual variance in irony use in terms of an enduring tendency manifesting itself in a substantial inter-correlation between scores of different measures of irony use. It is hypothesized that traits facilitating humor-related behavior (i.e., *gelotophilia*, *katagelasticism*, the aggressive and the affiliative humor style, and the *histrionic self-presentation style*) as well as *trait bad mood* will predict irony use in a positive direction, just as traits impeding humorous behavior (i.e., *trait seriousness*) will predict the use of irony in a negative direction. Furthermore, it is expected that irony use correlates positively with extraversion and psychoticism but negatively with neuroticism. Due to the ubiquitous assumption that humor and irony overlap, the relevant humor-related traits are expected to explain incremental variance in irony use behavior beyond the possible influence of Eysenck’s personality dimensions.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Participants were recruited via university mailing lists and social platforms. The sample consisted of 153 German-speaking subjects (39 male [25%]; age: 18 to 69 years, $M = 26.4$, $SD = 10.4$).

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Irony use measures

2.2.1.1. Forced choice irony use measure. The forced choice measure for the assessment of irony use is taken from Matthews et al.’s (2006) materials, translated into German (using a translation and back-translation procedure), and adapted. Participants have to give a response to each of eight different situations by choosing between four (i.e., one ironic and three non-ironic) options. There are two response options added to the original method by Matthews et al. (2006, Experiment 4), which serve as distractors: one is designed as a non-ironic aggressive response and one designed as a non-ironic humorous response. With only two options provided, it can be seen as hard to distinguish whether participants choose a response because they are appealed by this response or because they reject the other response. There are four situations providing a mock positive evaluation of negative circumstances (ironic criticisms), and four situations that provide a mock negative evaluation of positive circumstances (ironic praise) as the ironic response option. Participants have to indicate what they most likely would say in place of the respective person in the given situation. Scenarios were also adapted to be eliciting the use of irony by including “antecedents” (cf. Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989) in the scenario descriptions that hinted at violations of positive expectancies or norms that give reason for conveying a critical attitude via an ironic remark (cf. Garmendia, 2014). It may be illustrating to take a look at the following scenario used in the present study: “*You and Chris have been friends all through university. As long as you’ve known him, Chris has always been very careful about his appearance and often wears designer clothes. At your graduation ceremony, no one was surprised when Chris showed up wearing a new Armani suit under his gown. During the ceremony he kept fumbling around with his tie knot, discontented, to adjust it to perfect fit.*”. The last sentence was added to Matthews et al.’s (2006) original scenario in order to make the ironic response option occur more characteristically (as in this case vanity can be seen as a transgression of a social norm that is suitable to be addressed by ironic praise in a teasing manner). The response options provided for this scenario read as follows: “*Gosh Chris, you’re looking a little scruffy for the big ceremony.*” (ironic praise), “*That’s really a great suit, Chris.*” (non-ironic praise), “*Gosh Chris, don’t be such a peacock!*” (non-ironic aggressive criticism), and “*I wish I was able to tie a tie knot like this in the first place!*” (non-ironic humorous response). A total score counting participants’ choices of ironic responses (with a minimum possible value of zero and a maximum possible value of eight) was computed.

2.2.1.2. Rating-based irony use measure. The rating-based measure for the assessment of irony use is taken from Averbek and Hampe (2008) and translated into German (using a translation and back-translation procedure). Participants are provided with a detailed scenario in which they are asked to assume the perspective of a person who shares a flat with a friend who—among other misconducts—is messy and does not pay the bills for the flat. Participants are asked to indicate on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“not likely at all”) to 4 (“very likely”) how likely they were to use each of 20 utterances. Among the utterances each of ten criticisms (e.g., regarding noise in the flat or unpaid bills) is communicated once ironically and once non-ironically. In the total score, the responses to the ten ironic items were corrected for the general tendency to utter criticisms by subtracting the average endorsement of the ten literal criticisms ($\alpha = 0.79$) from the average endorsement of the ten ironic criticisms ($\alpha = 0.81$).

2.2.2. Personality and trait measures

The *Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised (EPQ-RK)* in the German adaptation and short form by Ruch (1999) of the English version (*EPQ-R*; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991) was used for the assessment of psychoticism, extraversion, and neuroticism in terms of Eysenck’s model of personality. The 50-item questionnaire contains the three

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