Cultural background predicts sarcasm interpretation and use: Evidence from the UK and China

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Introduction

• This study investigated individual difference factors, such as theory of mind ability (ToM), empathy, sarcasm use tendency (indicated by scores on the Sarcasm Self-report Scale (SSS)), and cultural effects, in sarcasm interpretation in the UK and China.

• Research Questions: (1) Is sarcasm more aggressive or more amusing than literal criticism? (2) How does the perspective that participants take during reading affect criticism interpretation? (3) How do theory of mind, empathy, and sarcasm use tendency affect sarcasm interpretation? (4) Are UK participants more sarcastic than Chinese participants?

Method

Participants

Exp. 1: 221 adults from UK
[Age (Range =18-54, M = 21.98, SD = 7.01), 64 males]

Exp. 2: 221 adults from China
[Age (Range = 18-51, M = 22.43, SD = 6.99), 79 males]

Design (Same for Exp. 1 & 2)

2 (literal vs. sarcastic comment) x 3 (speaker, recipient, reader perspective), 48 stimuli and 16 fillers

Example stimulus (Reader perspective)

- Person A was building a very complicated structure out of Lego. Person B came over to help. Unfortunately, Person B unintentionally knocked some of it down. Person A said to Person B: “You are a good/bad helper.”

Procedure (Same for Exp. 1 & 2)

Part 1

• Scenario reading and rating. Rating measures: aggression (Agg.), amusement (Amu.), politeness (Pol.), sarcasm (Sar.).

Part 2 - randomized tasks

• Faux Pas test – to assess ToM
• Interpersonal reactivity index (IRI) - Empathy
• Sarcasm self-report scale (SSS)

Discussion and Conclusion

Both Experiments provided evidence that sarcasm was more amusing than literal statements, which seemed to support the Tinge Hypothesis [1]. However, Exp. 1 showed that sarcasm was also more polite whereas Exp. 2 showed that sarcasm was more aggressive. We suggest that sarcasm interpretation may vary across different cultures. Thus, the Tinge Hypothesis might need to be modified.

There seemed to be cultural difference in perspective effects in the interpretation of critical comments, specially for the ratings of politeness. That is, speakers from Eastern culture, but readers from Western culture, rated a critical comment as being more polite than the other perspectives.

The effects of individual difference factors also showed cultural differences. ToM negatively predicts ratings of aggression in the UK sample, whereas it has a marginally positive association with aggression in the China sample. Empathy was positively correlated with ratings of sarcasm in the UK sample only; SSS was positively associated with ratings of amusement and politeness in both samples, but had a negative correlation with ratings of aggression in the UK sample only. The interpretation of sarcasm as being more amusing, polite, and less aggressive also could be explained as their reasons of using sarcasm.

References


Results

RQ1: Is sarcasm more aggressive or more amusing than literal language?

RQ2: How does the perspective that participants take during reading affect criticism interpretation?

RQ3: How do ToM, empathy, SSS affect sarcasm interpretation?

Correlations between ratings of interpretation and individual difference factors

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<tr>
<th>ToM</th>
<th>Agg.</th>
<th>Amu.</th>
<th>Pol.</th>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>-.39***</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td>.15*</td>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
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<td>.11+</td>
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<th>SSS</th>
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<tr>
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<td>.24***</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<td>China</td>
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Higher ToM  more sarcastic, amusing, less aggressive
Higher Empathy  more sarcastic
Higher SSS  more amusing, polite, less aggressive

RQ4: Are UK participants more sarcastic than Chinese participants?

Sarcasm Interpretation across UK and China

UK participants rated sarcasm as more amusing, t (439.42) = 6.41, p < .001
Chinese participants rated sarcasm as more aggressive, t (434.23) = -9.96, p < .001

Sarcasm Use Tendency across UK and China

UK participants were more likely to use sarcasm than Chinese participants, t (433.94) = 12.60, p < .001