

USAGE TENDENCY AND ACCEPTANCE MATTER: EVIDENCE FROM SELF-PACED READING AND ERP DATA FOR IRONY PROCESSING

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Ironic criticism is a way of criticism, whose meaning is contrary to what is literally expressed. Existing theories of verbal irony have long ignored the roles of non-linguistic factors. To address this gap, the present study investigated how irony usage tendency and usage acceptance modulate irony processing via a self-paced reading task (Experiment 1) and the ERP technique (Experiment 2). As for irony usage tendency, the results showed that participants with low usage tendency spent more time processing ironic utterances relative to literal ones, while those with high usage tendency showed comparable reading times between literal and ironic conditions. Correspondingly, ERP results showed that those with high usage tendency elicited a smaller N400 relative to the literal condition. These findings could be accounted for by referring to the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora, 1997), given that irony usage tendency may largely reflect an individual's threshold salience level of ironic conceptual representations. As regards irony usage acceptance, a longer processing time of irony and a larger N400 were observed in those with high irony acceptance, suggesting that they might go through deep processing of irony and rationalize ironic criticism, according to the "two-stage process of emotional responding to irony" account (Filik et al., 2017). Moreover, though ironic utterances elicited a larger P600 than literal ones in grand average ERP waveforms, usage tendency and acceptance might not modulate the late processing of irony (i.e., integration operations), as indicated by lack of significant interactions with Utterance Type in the 500-800ms time window. The findings of this study shed light on the important roles non-linguistic factors play in irony processing, extending relevant theories and paving the way for further research.

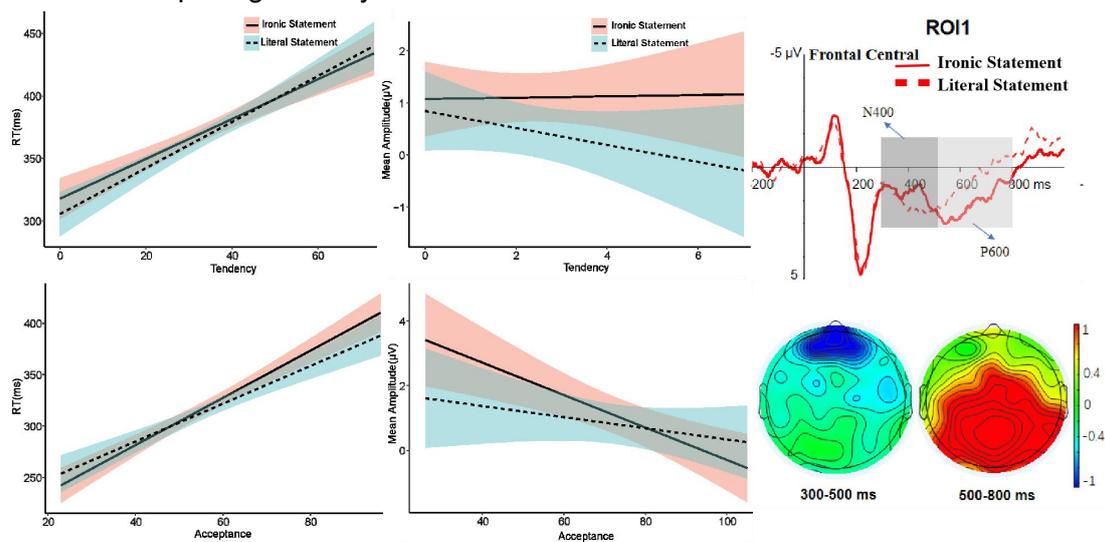


Figure 1. The moderating effect of Usage Tendency and Acceptance on RTs and mean amplitudes; grand average waveforms for the ironic and literal conditions in Frontal Central and topographic distributions of difference waves (amplitudes of ironic statements minus literal statements).