

## About the book

### **The distorted lens of irony and self-mockery: A gender comparison**

The everyday doctrine of communication is that one principally takes responsibility for what one says or implies, and not for how it is interpreted or what might be inferred. However, the question of why different audiences are inclined to make different interpretations is a valid one. This question seems especially important for the discussion of non-literal language exchange. An ironic statement presents a challenge to the audience, with its literal interpretation contradicting shared understandings or beliefs. The receiver is forced to select from these conflicting data inputs, using the context of the conversation, in order to resolve the contradiction. This implicit selectivity in irony, and how gender stereotypes affect the choice made, undoubtedly constitute an interesting field of study.

The aim of this research is to analyze how gender, self-esteem and anxiety play a role in the generation and perception of irony and self-mockery, and its effect upon self-image. The current theoretical models of irony, together with empirical research linked to those proposals have not, so far, resulted in a coherent and fully convincing concept of irony. Hence, the experimental studies (3) described in this monograph are of exploratory nature. On the sample of 240 participants, an original tool *Irony Generation and Perception Test* (Polish TTPI) was used to analyze different reaction patterns to verbal irony among adult men and women. The results were additionally correlated with: self-esteem measured by the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (SES); anxiety measured by the *State-Trait Anxiety Inventory* (STAI); and the psychological gender, for which the *Gender Assessment Inventory* (Polish IPP) was applied. The study was conducted on both genders under three pre-task priming conditions: activating a positive gender stereotype; activating a negative gender stereotype; and no priming (control group).

In Study 1, the gender effect was observed as to irony use in response to ironic criticism and in response to ironic praise. Men generated ironic responses more often than women. The results are discussed within the framework of the theory of social comparisons (Turner et al., 1987; Guimond et al., 2006; Wojciszke, 2010) and intergroup linguistic bias (Maass et al., 1996; Burgers and Beukeboom, 2016).

In Study 2, the gender effect was observed as to the use of implicit self-referential humor. Men turned out to use more (positive) self-mockery than women, while women referred more frequently to an explicit self-degradation and self-criticism. The importance of self-mockery in the image of one's self is discussed within the framework of the self-presentation strategies (Baumeister, 1982; Baumeister et al., 1989; Ungar, 1984).

In Study 3, the affective valence (positive/negative) and emotional arousal (high/low) were the subject of information flow analysis on the example of an ironic praise (a compliment with a negative overtone). The gender effect in valence was observed. The analysis of affect in irony, based on Russell's (1980) circumplex model of emotion and Parrott's (2001) tree-structured classification of emotions, showed that men were more likely to experience positive emotions, whereas more women reported negative affect. It is believed therefore that affective valence ascribed to a non-literal message acts as the principal mechanism delineating the use of irony. What might make irony more popular among men than women is their more positive attitude towards it. On the other hand, as irony seems among women to be associated with more negative attitudes, they simply use it less.

Following the experimental research and analysis, a new approach to irony and self-mockery is proposed, labeled as a self-defense mechanism of self-regulation.

The search for meaning and importance of non-literal communication presented in this research work, reflecting on the *individual differences* (sex, gender, fear and self-esteem) as well as *contextual variables* (specific situation and configuration of its participants), becomes the first integrated research attempt of this kind in the field of the theory of irony.

**Key words:** irony, self-mockery, sex, gender, stereotype, self-esteem, anxiety, humor, emotions

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The monograph we present to readers is based on the doctoral dissertation of Anna Milanowicz (2019). The dissertation, entitled "Stereotyp płci w odniesieniu do języka niedosłownego. Z badań nad ironią" [*Gender stereotypes related to non-literal language: The case of irony*], was produced (under the supervision of Barbara Bokus) at the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Warsaw. We would like to take this opportunity to

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