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Vocal signals and indirect language use

Abstract:

When producing indirect speech such as verbal irony, speakers often produce accompanying nonverbal signals. Slowed speech rate is one of the few consistent prosodic features associated with spontaneous and scripted ironic speech, but no work has examined perceptual effects. Laughter often accompanies ironic speech, but has also not been examined for its effect on interpretative judgments. During conversation, people laugh to achieve a variety of pragmatic goals, and laughter plays a complex role in negotiating relationships that goes well beyond its connection to humor. For example, people tend to laugh immediately before and after using indirect speech in which speaker intentions are not explicitly stated but rich meaning is strategically conveyed. Laughter is ubiquitous in human social interaction and homologous to play vocalizations in many nonhuman species. Ironic language use has often been characterized as a form of pretense and play, and thus constitutes an excellent trope to test the predicted play functions of human laughter.

Verbal irony utterances that included adjacent laughter were culled from natural conversations between friends, and then manipulated to either include the laughter or not. Speech portions were isolated from laughter segments, and manipulated in duration (33% decrease and increase). Manipulated utterances (fast and slow) were presented to listeners either paired with laughter or not, and they were asked to rate the indirectness of the speakers’ meaning (Exp. 1). As expected, there were main effects for both speed and laughter, with slowed utterances paired with laughter receiving the highest ratings of indirectness. The isolated laughs from these recordings were then played to a different group of listeners and rated for playfulness (Exp. 2). Judgments of playfulness were positively associated with the degree to which laughter increased judgments of indirectness across utterances in the first experiment. These data suggest that spontaneous laughter functions to signal play in social interaction, and prosodic contrasts such as slowed speech rate might enhance the signal’s effectiveness. Overall these results reveal one possible connection between linguistic pragmatics and nonhuman animal communication.