

## **Irony Acquisition: Children's Emerging Sense of Sarcasm**

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### **Abstract**

One of the challenges children face in learning to navigate the social world is created by the fact that people often speak indirectly, for example, with sarcasm or verbal irony. Research has shown that typically developing children don't usually begin to convey and appreciate ironic intent until the early school years. Children's use and appreciation of ironic language develop over a fairly long developmental window, and are related to their cognitive development and social experiences. Most of these insights have come from research that is focused on the product of interpretation: the understanding that children convey through verbal descriptions, ratings, or yes/no decisions. In a series of studies, we developed methodology that allows us to explore the process of children's irony interpretation. Using a variant of the visual world paradigm, we track children's eye gaze and reaching behavior as they judge speaker intent for ironic language that unfolds in real time in short puppet shows. We have used this paradigm to identify factors that make irony particularly challenging for children. Most recently, those studies have helped us to devise a training paradigm to teach children about sarcastic speech. I'll discuss what our findings tell us about theories of pragmatic development, and how we can help those who struggle with sarcasm.

### **Bio**

Penny Pexman is currently Professor of Psychology and Associate Vice-President (Research) at the University of Calgary. Penny earned her PhD in Psychology at the University of Western Ontario in 1998 and joined the University of Calgary the same year. Her research expertise is in psycholinguistics, cognitive neuroscience, and social-cognitive development. In broad terms, she is interested in how we derive meaning from language, and how those processes are changed by context or experience. Her research investigates several aspects of language understanding, ranging from lexical-semantic processes to figurative language. Penny has published over 150 journal articles and book chapters on those topics. An award-winning mentor and researcher, Penny is an elected Fellow of both the Canadian Psychological Association and the Association for Psychological Science.