

# AGE-RELATED DIFFERENCES IN IRONY COMPREHENSION: THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL LANGUAGE USE ON PRESCHOOLERS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study explores how parental language use influences preschool children's comprehension of verbal irony. Irony, as a form of indirect language, requires not only linguistic understanding but also sensitivity to context, social norms, and speaker intentions (Grice, 1975; Kreuz & Roberts, 2017).

Building on earlier findings (Szabóné Habók, 2024), this research examines Hungarian preschoolers aged 3–5, focusing on age-related differences and the role of parental attitudes and irony use. The study employs a children's irony comprehension test and a parental questionnaire to investigate whether exposure to ironic utterances at home contributes to children's pragmatic development.

By integrating sociocultural and cognitive perspectives, this paper aims to clarify how family interactions shape children's emerging ability to interpret irony. The findings extend previous work by including a broader age range and identifying specific patterns of parental influence.

### 1.1 COGNITIVE FOUNDATIONS

Understanding irony requires more than lexical or syntactic knowledge. It depends on multiple interrelated cognitive resources: metapragmatic awareness, emotion recognition, perspective-taking, epistemic vigilance, and mentalising. These contribute to the capacity to recognize ironic intent and distinguish literal from non-literal meanings.

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Metapragmatic awareness, the ability to reflect on language use in context, is a crucial skill in irony comprehension (Clayman, 1992). It enables children to recognize the social functions behind indirect utterances. Garfinkel *et al.* (2023) showed that children with more advanced metapragmatic insight were better at detecting ironic contrasts between intended and literal meanings.

Emotion recognition plays a similarly central role. Irony is often accompanied by non-verbal signals – such as tone of voice, facial expressions, or gestures – that contradict the literal content. Nicholson *et al.* (2013) found that children with higher empathy levels and better emotional sensitivity were more successful in interpreting ironic utterances, suggesting that irony comprehension is closely tied to the ability to decode affective cues.

Perspective-taking is also essential. Köder and Falkum (2021) demonstrated that children's success in irony comprehension correlates with their ability to recognize norm violations and interpret speaker intent in light of contextual expectations. These findings suggest that irony comprehension benefits from an emerging awareness of the social and pragmatic functions of speech.

Epistemic vigilance, the capacity to evaluate the reliability and intention behind a message, is another relevant mechanism. According to Sperber *et al.* (2010), children gradually learn to assess whether a speaker's words should be interpreted literally or with caution. This vigilance supports their ability to consider whether an ironic interpretation is appropriate.

Finally, Theory of Mind (ToM) or mentalizing – the understanding that others may hold beliefs and intentions different from one's own – is repeatedly identified as a foundational skill for irony comprehension. While research findings are somewhat mixed regarding the extent of its role (Szűcs & Babarczy, 2017), several studies confirm that children with more advanced ToM tend to perform better on irony comprehension tasks (Filippova & Astington, 2008). Importantly, Filippova and Astington emphasise that language ability and ToM are not interchangeable; both independently contribute to children's performance.

Together, these abilities form a complex cognitive infrastructure that supports the nuanced interpretation of ironic statements. Yet they do not develop in isolation; rather, they are fostered through interaction in specific social and cultural contexts.

## 1.2 SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

According to sociocultural theories of language development, pragmatic competencies such as irony comprehension emerge through participation in culturally patterned interactions. Vygotsky (1986) posited that language development is rooted in social experience, especially within the Zone of Proximal Development, where learning is guided by more knowledgeable others. Rogoff (2003) extended this notion through the concept of guided participation, in which children internalize social and communicative norms by engaging with parents or caregivers during routine activities.

Within this framework, the family environment plays a central role. Parents model and scaffold pragmatic skills – including indirect speech, figurative expressions, and irony – during everyday interactions. Holzman (1997) notes that children often adopt their parents' language styles, including their preferred ways of expressing criticism, praise, or humor. Repeated exposure to ironic utterances within supportive and familiar contexts can enhance children's pragmatic sensitivity and promote a better understanding of complex communicative intentions.

The sociolinguistic context also matters. Cultural attitudes toward irony, the functions it serves in everyday conversation, and the typical age at which it is introduced all shape how children encounter and process ironic language. As Banasik-Jemielniak *et al.* (2020) argue, both individual-level variables (e.g., parental communicative style) and cultural-level factors (e.g., national communication norms) must be considered to understand irony acquisition cross-linguistically.

### 1.3 PRIOR RESEARCH

A number of studies have investigated how children's irony comprehension develops and how parental input might influence this process. Several have focused on how cognitive readiness interacts with contextual support to shape children's performance on irony tasks.

In Hungary, Szűcs and Babarczy (2017) tested children aged 4 to 7 and found that ToM, grammatical competence, and vocabulary did not fully predict irony comprehension. Interestingly, metapragmatic training – providing children with explicit interpretive strategies – significantly improved performance, suggesting that environmental support is important. Similarly, Schnell (2015) and Schnell (2021) emphasised that irony acquisition must be seen as both a developmental and socially embedded process.

In Poland, Banasik (2013) tested preschoolers' irony comprehension using visual scenarios and found that only children with more developed ToM were able to consistently interpret ironic intent. Her results aligned with those of Banasik-Jemielniak *et al.* (2020), who conducted a combined child assessment and parental questionnaire. Their study demonstrated a moderate positive correlation between mothers' use of irony and children's irony comprehension, pointing to the potential importance of maternal language input. Fathers' use of irony was less predictive, highlighting possible gendered differences in communicative styles.

Other studies have examined irony in more naturalistic contexts. For example, Recchia *et al.* (2010) observed 39 Canadian families and found that mothers tended to use irony more in conflict situations, while fathers used it more playfully. Their findings emphasise the diversity of parental functions of irony. Similarly, Wainryb and Recchia (2014) proposed that everyday parent-child conversations create spaces for children to acquire complex social reasoning skills, including the interpretation of indirect or evaluative language.

Taken together, these findings suggest that irony comprehension depends not only on internal capacities, but also on the linguistic and emotional input children receive through social interaction – particularly from caregivers.

#### 1.4 RATIONALE FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

The present research builds on these theoretical and empirical foundations to examine Hungarian preschoolers' irony comprehension in relation to parental input. It focuses specifically on children aged 3–5 years and investigates whether exposure to irony at home correlates with children's performance on a comprehension task. By incorporating a parental questionnaire and comparing two age groups, the study also explores how age-related differences interact with parental language use.

Given the cultural parallels between Hungary and Poland – where traditional family roles and maternal caregiving are prominent – this study aims to examine whether the findings reported by Banasik-Jemielniak *et al.* (2020) in a Polish context can be extended to Hungarian families. It also seeks to identify whether mothers' and fathers' communicative roles differentially impact children's ability to interpret ironic utterances – a question that remains underexplored. While cultural similarities between the two contexts provide a basis for comparison, broader cross-cultural data would be needed to confirm the generalisability of such patterns.

## 2. PILOT STUDY: IMPACT OF PARENTAL IRONIC LANGUAGE USE ON HUNGARIAN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S IRONY COMPREHENSION

### 2.1 PARTICIPANTS

The study involved 30 typically developing, Hungarian-speaking preschool children (14 girls and 16 boys) and their parents. The participants were organized into two age groups – each consisting of 15 children – to evaluate the development of irony comprehension: ages 3 to 4 years (average age: 3 years, 4 months) and ages 4 to 5 years (average age: 4 years, 4 months).

These age ranges were specifically chosen because they represent pivotal stages in cognitive and linguistic development, crucial for the comprehension of irony. According to Harris (2006), during these early years, children experience significant advancements in social cognition, including the ability to understand diverse mental states. It is fundamental for recognizing the discrepancies between literal meanings and speaker intentions inherent in ironic utterances, making these age groups ideal for investigating the development of irony comprehension.

## 2.2 PARTICIPANTS' BACKGROUND AND POTENTIAL BIASES

All children were Hungarian monolingual speakers without diagnosed developmental or language delays. None of the participants were bilingual. All were attending state-run kindergartens at the time of testing, having entered institutional care between the ages of 1;7 and 3;6 years (mean: 2 years, 8 months).

Data were collected on parental caregiving patterns from birth and during the testing period. Across all families, mothers were consistently reported as the primary caregivers from birth, staying at home full-time during early childhood. Fathers typically spent time with the children in the evenings and on weekends. At the time of testing, the reported ratio of time spent with the child was skewed toward mothers, with most children spending between 60% and 80% of their time with their mothers. In a few cases, this ratio was balanced (50:50) or reversed.

Although these figures align with general trends in Hungarian family structures, it is important to note that no formal time-use diary or observational check was employed. Therefore, the time distribution data represent parental self-report and may reflect estimation biases. Future studies should include more precise documentation of daily caregiving patterns, such as time-use diaries or observational logs, to validate self-reported parental involvement.

Potential sources of bias in this study include the possibility of social desirability effects in parental responses regarding their use of irony, which may have led to more favorable self-reports. The researcher was not previously known to the children, which, despite efforts to establish rapport, may have influenced the children's comfort and performance. Testing took place in home environments, which, while familiar, varied across families and may have introduced inconsistencies in attention or engagement. Although informal reports suggest that most parents had completed at least secondary education and some held university degrees, no formal records of educational attainment were collected. Furthermore, while all participating children were monolingual Hungarian speakers, future studies should investigate how bilingualism might influence irony comprehension, particularly in multicultural or multilingual contexts.

## 2.3 PROCEDURE AND MATERIALS

The study employed two measures: an irony comprehension test for children and a self-report questionnaire for parents about their use and attitudes toward irony. Both assessments were adapted from Banasik-Jemielniak *et al.* (2020) and took place in the children's homes, a familiar and comfortable environment that likely enhanced the reliability of the data collected. They lasted between 12 and 15 minutes and were completed in one session overseen by the same researcher. While the parents filled out the questionnaire, the researcher administered the test to the child in a different room. The methodology was the same as the one employed in the previous experiment, ensuring consistency in data collection across studies (Szabóné Habók 2024).

The children's test began with a traditional false belief task based on Wimmer & Perner's (1983) unseen transfer paradigm to evaluate cognitive skills. It involved a short narrative followed by questions to assess cognitive skills and short-term memory. The second part of the test, which measured irony comprehension, was a modified and simplified version of the assessments used in Banasik's (2013) and Banasik-Jemielniak *et al.*'s (2020) studies. It included eight short stories: four concluded with an ironic utterance (see Figure 1) and four with a non-ironic (control) utterance (see Figure 2).

The outcomes of studies examining how children understand irony can be considerably affected by the cognitive demands of the activities involved. To decrease these demands, illustrations were employed, and the activities were contextualized. In order to reduce the memory load, the narratives were kept short (no more than 34 words) and utilized only vocabulary that was well-known by the children. Additionally, the ironic utterances used in the assessments were based on a prototypical form of irony. They were contextualized hyperboles. As they are frequently heard in real-life discourse situations (Schnell 2021), their use could aid comprehension.

The researcher narrated each story to the children, aiming for the same tone every time. All eight stories featured a central character, a child named Máté, interacting with an adult – either a mother, father, or kindergarten teacher. Each story was accompanied by 2–4 custom drawings displayed on a tablet, with the number of images matching the story's progression. After hearing each story, the children responded to two questions: (1) "*Does XY really think...?*" and (2) "*Why? / What makes you think so?*".

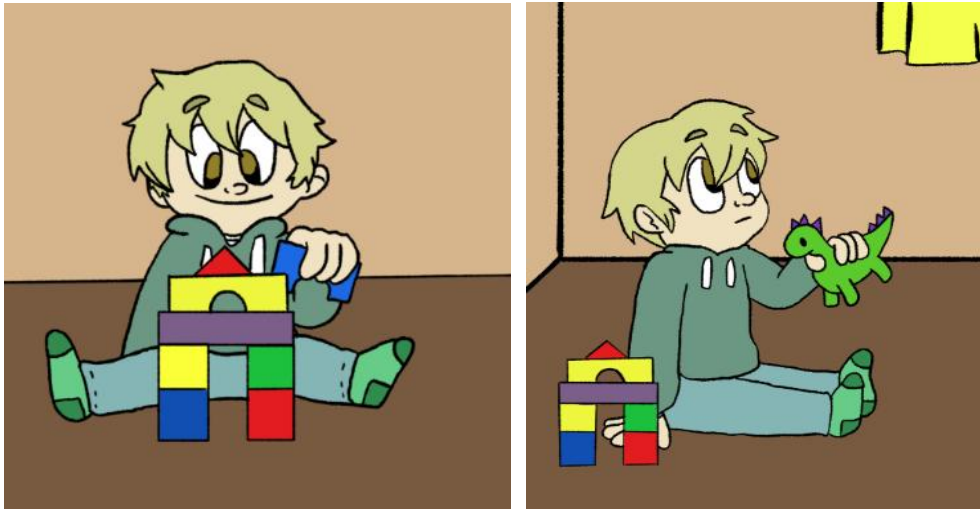


Figure 1. Sample ironic item.

Máté alvás után az építőkockákkal játszik. Uzsonnaidő van, be kell fejezni a játékot. A többi gyerek és az óvó néni nekikezd elpakolni a kockákat. Ekkor Máté elővesz egy dinót, és azzal kezd el játszani. Te aztán nagy segítség vagy! - mondja erre az óvó néni. **1. kérdés:** Az óvó néni szerint Máté tényleg nagy segítség? **2. kérdés:** Miért? / Miből gondolod?

*'Matthew is playing with the building blocks after his nap. It's time to finish the game. The other children and the kindergarten teacher start to put the blocks away. Then Matthew takes out a dinosaur and starts playing with it. "You're a great help!" says the kindergarten teacher. Question 1: Does the kindergarten teacher think Matthew is a great help? Question 2: Why? / What makes you think so?'*



Figure 2. Sample non-ironic (control) item.

Odakint hull a hó. Máté felveszi a meleg kabátot, a sapkát és a sálát. Apa nem találja a kesztyűt. Máté kihúzza egy fiókot és kiveszi onnan a kesztyűt. Apa erre azt mondja: Megtaláltad a kesztyűt? Milyen okos vagy Máté! **1. kérdés:** Máté apukája szerint Máté tényleg okos? **2. kérdés:** Miért? / Miből gondolod?

*'It's snowing outside. Matthew puts on his warm coat, hat and scarf. Dad can't find his gloves. Matthew pulls out a drawer and takes the gloves out. Dad says: Did you find the gloves? How clever you are, Matthew!'* **Question 1:** Does Matthew's dad think Matthew is really clever? **Question 2:** Why? / What makes you think so?'

The second part of the study evaluated parents' use and attitude towards irony using an expanded version of the questionnaire from Banasik-Jemielniak et al. (2020). This questionnaire included 11 questions and was completed by 28 parents (14 mothers and 14 fathers).

Before completing the questionnaire, parents were briefly introduced to the study's focus in an informal setting. Although no formal definition of irony was provided, the concept was illustrated through examples drawn directly from the

children's comprehension test (e.g., "You're a great help!" in a clearly ironic context). These examples were intended to ensure a shared understanding of the type of irony under investigation. While efforts were made to clarify the function and tone of such utterances, the possibility remains that some parents – particularly those with limited exposure to academic or psychological concepts – may have associated irony with sarcasm or conflict. This limitation should be considered when interpreting parental self-reports.

The first four questions of the questionnaire used the same ironic stories as the ones in the children's irony test (see Example 1). The remaining seven questions aimed to measure three key aspects: parents' general attitudes towards irony (see Example 2), their main reasons for using irony, and how they regard their child's comprehension and use of irony (see Example 3).

1) Gyermekek alvás előtt az építőkövekkal játszik. Nekikezdesz elpakolni a kockákat. Ekkor gyermeked elővesz egy dinót, és azzal kezd el játszani.

Mondanál neki erre egy ehhez hasonló megjegyzést? : „Te aztán nagy segítség vagy!”

*‘Your child is playing with building blocks before bedtime. You start putting the blocks away. Then, your child takes out a dinosaur and starts playing with it. Would you make a comment like this to him?: ‘You are a great help!’?’*

2) Szerinted jó dolog-e az irónia?

*‘Do you think irony is a good thing?’*

3) A kutatásban részt vevő gyermeked milyen gyakran használja az iróniát?

*‘How often does your child (participating in the experiment) use irony?’*

The responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. For example, concerning Example 1, the options were: ‘A. Not at all typical of me. /B. Mostly not typical of me. /C. It's sometimes typical of me and sometimes not. /D. Mostly typical of me. /E. It's definitely typical of me. The scoring ranged from 0 to 4, with 0 points for option A, 1 point for B, 2 points for C, 3 points for D, and 4 points for E. Since seven questions measured how often parents used irony, the highest possible score on the questionnaire was 28. A higher score indicated more frequent use of irony and a more positive attitude toward it.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, children from both age groups (Ch01-Ch15) were arranged by age from youngest to oldest, and their parents were paired accordingly. In the children's tests, each correct answer earned 1 point, with eight stories divided equally between ironic and non-ironic, leading to a maximum score of 8 for each story type. Figure 3 displays scores for non-ironic (yellow bars) and ironic (grey bars) stories across the age groups: 3–4 years and 4–5 years.

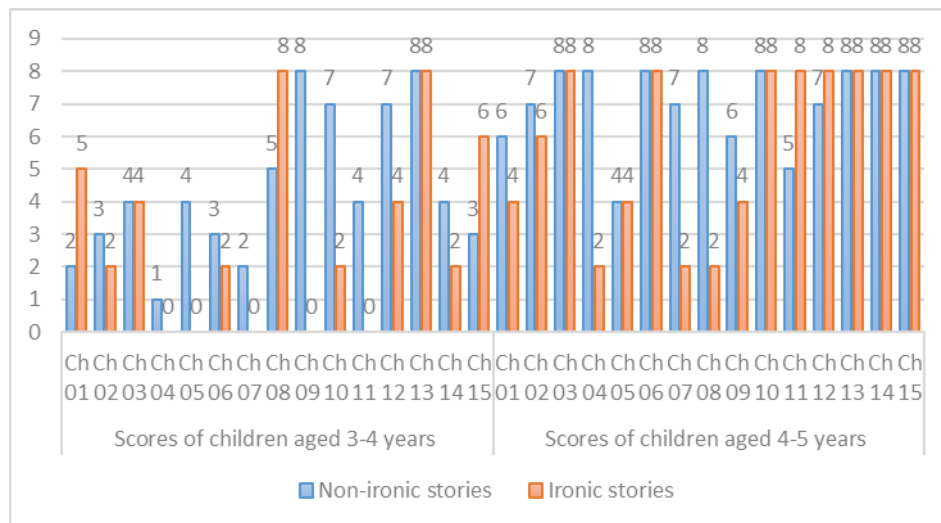


Figure 3. Results of the children's tests.

It clearly shows each child's performance, facilitating an easy comparison across different ages and story types. Notably, all children but one provided at least two correct, adult-like responses in both tasks, aligning with Banasik's (2013) findings that children as young as four years old can comprehend ironic utterances to some extent. However, comprehension levels for ironic stories varied significantly among the younger children. A subsequent analysis revealed a significant difference in irony comprehension between the two child age groups ( $t(28) = -3.033$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). This result indicates that the older children had a better understanding of irony compared to the younger children, suggesting developmental progress in pragmatic language skills as children age.

A gender-based comparison was also conducted to explore whether boys and girls differed in irony comprehension. Among the 30 children, 16 were boys and 14 were girls. Girls achieved a higher average score ( $M = 5.21$ ,  $SD = 3.38$ ) than boys ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 2.66$ ), although the difference was not statistically significant ( $t(28) = 1.44$ ,  $p = .161$ ). These findings suggest a possible gender-related trend in irony comprehension, but this should be interpreted with caution and confirmed by studies involving larger samples.

### 3.1 PARENTAL INFLUENCE AND CHILDREN'S IRONY COMPREHENSION

As mentioned earlier, the parents' responses about their use of irony and attitudes were totalled to a maximum score of 28. A higher score reflects a more frequent use of irony and a more favourable attitude towards it. Figure 4 displays the parental scores in the two different age groups. The yellow bars represent the mothers' scores, while the grey bars represent the fathers' scores.

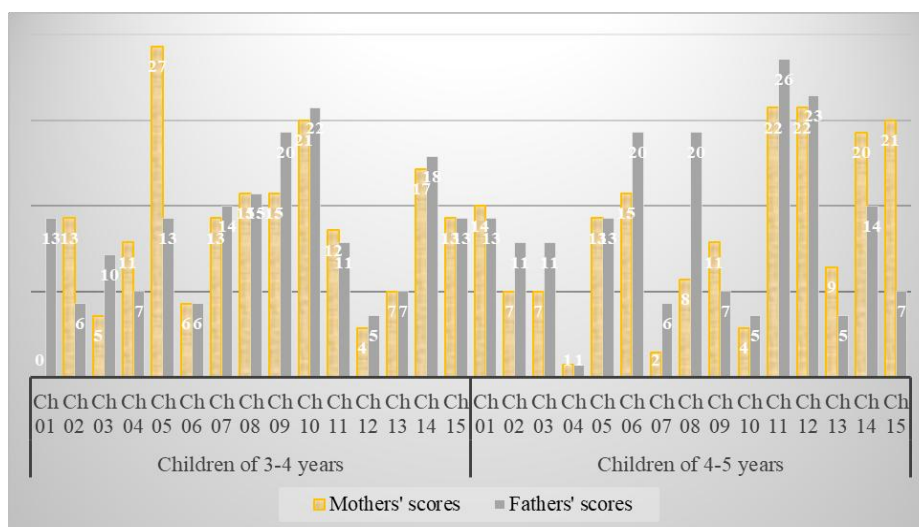


Figure 4. Parental scores.

The figures reveal individual differences in parents' attitudes toward using irony with their children, even among members of the same family. The variation in parental attitudes suggests there could be considerable differences in how children are exposed to and understand ironic utterances.

Comparing the two age groups revealed no significant difference in parents' scores. It may imply that parents' attitudes towards irony and their frequency of using it at home remain stable regardless of the slight differences in their children's ages. This stability suggests that parental engagement with irony does not necessarily adjust as their children grow from 3 to 5 years old. It might also indicate a uniform environmental influence on children in these age groups. Based on these results, parental influence could be viewed as a rather constant factor when studying how children's irony comprehension develops over time.

An interesting finding from the parents' questionnaire is about their common use of verbal irony, primarily for joking or indirectly expressing opinions. As these functions overlapped with the forms of irony used in the irony comprehension tests, children's considerably high scores on the tests could be linked to this pattern. It suggests that children's exposure to specific ironic styles at home, especially for humour and opinion-sharing, could enhance their understanding of similar expressions, improving their results on irony comprehension tests.

### 3.2 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MOTHERS AND FATHERS

On the basis of the answers, the following tendencies and differences between mothers and fathers were noted. While more fathers than mothers reported using irony for humour/joking, more mothers than fathers reported using irony to implicitly express an opinion or opposition. These results suggest that while both

parents do not frequently consider irony as typical of their communication style, fathers are more flexible in their perception of irony and slightly more likely to use it for humour. This finding aligns with Recchia *et al.*'s (2010) research, who found that fathers are more inclined to use irony for humorous purposes.

In addition, mothers mentioned a variety of reasons for using irony, including instinctive reactions, mood dependency, and managing conflict or easing tension. For instance, some mothers use irony reflexively or to “take the edge off” stressful situations without directly scolding their children. This approach can provide children with cues to interpret non-literal language in a supportive, albeit complex, emotional context.

These observations suggest distinct parental roles in irony use, with fathers favoring humour and mothers leaning towards using irony as a communication tool for expressing nuanced perspectives.

Notably, there was no correlation between parents' attitudes towards irony and children's irony comprehension among the 3–4 years age group. In contrast, a moderately strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.559$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ) was observed between mothers' use of irony and children's irony comprehension in the 4–5 years age group. It can indicate that as children age, their irony comprehension improves, potentially due to increased exposure to their mothers' ironic utterances. No similar correlation was found for fathers, pointing to potential differences in communicative styles or the frequency of irony use between mothers and fathers.

The final segment of the questionnaire asked parents to assess their child's understanding of irony. Based on the answers, mothers' estimates corresponded more closely with their children's actual irony comprehension scores than fathers'. It could be attributed to mothers typically spending more time with their children, thus having a better grasp of their comprehension levels.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The research presented above builds on previous work (Szabóné Habók 2024) to offer a more detailed view of the sociocultural and linguistic factors shaping irony comprehension among preschool children. The study presented here examines Hungarian preschool children's irony comprehension and investigates whether there is a link between parents' use of irony and their children's level of irony comprehension.

In the case of 4–5-year-old children, the results show a moderate positive correlation between the frequency of irony used by mothers and their children's level of irony comprehension. This finding is consistent with Banasik-Jemielniak *et al.*'s (2020) results from Poland (see Section 1.3). Similarities between the Hungarian and Polish data may reflect shared features of family dynamics and caregiving roles in these two Central European countries, where traditional family structures often involve mothers as primary caregivers. This could influence the

frequency and context of children's exposure to irony at home. However, without comparative data from culturally and historically different contexts – such as Western democracies or non-European societies – it remains speculative whether the observed similarities stem from post-communist legacies or reflect more general features of caregiver-child interaction.

In both Hungary and Poland, children typically spend more time with their mothers, which may increase their sensitivity to the nuances of maternal language use. This exposure is likely a key factor contributing to the observed correlation. For children aged 3–4, however, other factors – such as cognitive developmental stages or broader language skills – may play a more central role in irony comprehension. As suggested by Babarczy & Szücs (2019), Vygotsky (1986), and Rogoff (2003), the development of irony comprehension is closely linked to both cognitive growth and sociocultural learning.

While this study provides valuable insights, it also has limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the sample size and demographic scope could be expanded to include a wider variety of family structures and cultural backgrounds, which might affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-report questionnaire may introduce bias. Thus, future studies could benefit from observational methods or different experimental designs to assess children's irony comprehension more directly.

Further research could also explore the impact of fathers' use of irony, as the current study suggests different roles in irony use between mothers and fathers. Investigating how irony is modeled in single-parent families or in families where fathers are more involved in day-to-day child-rearing could provide deeper insights. Additionally, future studies could benefit from a longitudinal design to track how irony comprehension evolves over time, particularly in the 3–4-year-old age group where no correlation was observed in this study. It would also be valuable to control for other potential influences, such as bilingualism or knowledge of a foreign language, exposure to educational input outside the family (e.g., storybooks, media), or the presence of siblings, as these may shape children's pragmatic development in subtle but important ways.

In conclusion, while irony comprehension is influenced by a combination of cognitive abilities and sociocultural factors, the role of the family environment, particularly parental attitudes and behaviours concerning irony, is significant. The findings indicate that the purpose and perception of irony remain relatively stable across age groups, and that parents' use of irony does not appear to vary substantially during the early developmental stages of their children. In family settings, a positive view and frequent use of irony can contribute to the development of children's irony comprehension. It suggests that enhancing a child's irony comprehension may require not only educational interventions but also a supportive home environment where irony is used appropriately and viewed positively. Thus, both educators and parents have roles to play in fostering this complex cognitive skill.

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## **AGE-RELATED DIFFERENCES IN IRONY COMPREHENSION: THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL LANGUAGE USE ON PRESCHOOLERS**

### **Abstract**

This study builds on previous findings (Szabóné Habók 2024) to further examine the influence of parental irony use on the development of preschool children's irony comprehension, specifically analysing age-related differences. Employing methodologies adapted from Banasik (2013) and Banasik-Jemielniak *et al.* (2020), the research involved a parental questionnaire assessing attitudes towards irony and an irony comprehension test conducted with the children. The children were divided into two age groups: 3–4 years and 4–5 years. Results indicate a positive correlation between mothers' frequency of irony use and 4–5-year-old children's irony comprehension, suggesting a developmental aspect where exposure to irony becomes more influential as children age. No significant correlation was found for children aged 3–4 years, suggesting that younger children's irony comprehension may be less affected by parental irony use. These findings contribute to understanding how the cognitive development stages of preschool children influence their skill to understand complex language forms and their meanings, for example, ironic utterances.