

# For children, some sarcastic comments can be lost in translation

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(Medical Xpress) -- It turns out irony and sarcasm are completely lost on youth. Yeah, right.

A Kansas State University speech-language pathologist is finding that even though children at the age of 6 may recognize a comment as sarcastic, realizing when the words are meant to soothe or sear in a situation may be just the opposite.

Debra Burnett, an assistant professor of family studies and human services, is looking at how children recognize and interpret irony, particularly [sarcasm](#). She has found that children recognize and understand sarcastic comments better when the comments that are used are conventional. Her findings could help children recognize and understand sarcasm better, as well as help better convey social meanings to children with language impairment or who are on the autism spectrum.

"[Irony](#) is one of the times when people aren't directly saying what they're thinking," Burnett said. "As a listener you're trying to understand what someone means, and that requires a little bit of extra work cognitively and linguistically. Sarcasm, though, is one of the only instances where there is a mismatch between the words that are being used and what is really meant. For [young kids](#), that's an odd concept."

Studies show that around age 6, children begin to understand that there is another meaning to what is being said, according to Burnett. But what is

relatively unexplored is how the frequent use of certain sarcastic phrases may help kids in recognizing whether a speaker is being sarcastic or sincere in a situation.

In an ongoing study that tests this, Burnett is reading a series of short situations to 6-8 year-olds. Each story is accompanied by illustrations and features a gender-neutral character named Pat. Each also ends with one of two sarcastic comments. The comment is either specific to the situation that Pat is in or is conventional in nature, meaning that it is a word or phrase society uses in a sarcastic manner more often than in a literal manner. For example, "way to go."

In one of the stories Pat's sister is making cookies and Pat is excited to eat them. But the cookies are burned black after being removed from the oven, creating a negative situation. According to Burnett, people are more likely to be sarcastic in situations perceived as negative.

After seeing the burned cookies, Pat either tells the sister "nice job" -- a conventional sarcastic comment -- or "delicious cookies" -- a situation-specific sarcastic comment.

"Sarcastic comments are said in a lower pitch and are drawn out a little more than the rest of our words," Burnett said. "So each comment is read with the same inflection that people make when using sarcasm."

In this instance, the vocal inflection on "nice job" is more slow and dramatic -- seemingly stretching the phrase's pronunciation. An audio example of Burnett using different inflections for "nice job" can be heard below:

To ensure accuracy on her part, Burnett recorded all of the sarcastic phrases and then played them to independent raters who determined whether the phrases sounded sarcastic or sincere. Each comment,

however, had been digitally filtered so that the enunciation was removed from the phrases. This left only the tone -- or prosody -- of Burnett's voice for raters to listen to. An audio example of the prosody in sarcastic comments can be heard below:

After being read the scenario, each child was asked four questions: what Pat meant by "nice job" or "delicious cookies" -- depending on which was used; how Pat felt in the scenario; why Pat said the comment; and whether Pat wanted to make the sister feel good or bad.

Burnett found that children, regardless of age and gender, recognized the conventional comment of "nice job" as being sarcastic significantly more than the situational comment of "delicious cookies." This reinforces that when used conventionally rather than situationally, children who are learning English can recognize an ironic statement and understand what is actually being said.

"For this age range of 6 to 8, I think this data solidifies the idea that it's important for speech therapists and adults to work on conversation and pragmatics in language in order to teach kids these conventional phrases," Burnett said. "That way when they encounter them, they understand what is actually being said."

Additionally, Burnett has found the same results when testing children who have a language impairment.

Burnett presented her findings along with a poster at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's annual convention in late November. The study is funded through a K-State university small research grant.

**More information:** Another study from Burnett that looks at how readers vocalize sarcasm and sincerity in children's books to young

listens can be read at [kstatenews.org/?p=6510](http://kstatenews.org/?p=6510)

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