

Understanding Sarcasm

By Summer Stanley

While some people are fluent in sarcasm, others see it as a foreign language. In particular, young children, people with autism, and those with brain damage may have difficulty understanding this form of communication.

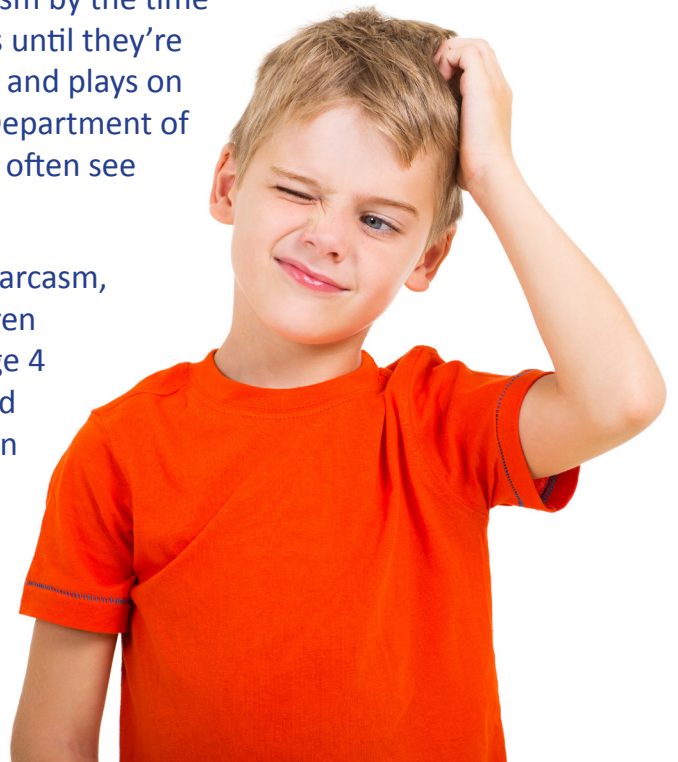
Sarcasm is so prominent that “it’s practically the primary language” in modern society, said linguist and author John Haiman. Complicating matters is the fact that there are more than two dozen ways to indicate sarcasm, including pitch, tone, volume, pauses, duration, and punctuation. Haiman gives the example of “Excuse me.” Dragging out the first word – “Excuuuuse” me – turns this normally straightforward phrase into a sarcastic one.

Sarcasm is even harder to detect in writing or text messages due to a lack of face-to-face interaction and visual cues. Emojis can help reduce the confusion, but it’s still easy to misinterpret a person’s intent in an email or text, especially when communicating with someone you don’t know well.

Studies show that most children understand and use sarcasm by the time they’re in kindergarten, but they may not find it humorous until they’re around 10 years old. “Younger kids think slapstick is funny, and plays on words. But not sarcasm,” said Melanie Glenwright of the Department of Psychology at the University of Manitoba, adding that kids often see sarcasm as mean-spirited.

According to Frontiers for Young Minds, familiar forms of sarcasm, like “yeah, right” or “thanks a lot” are the types that children usually use first when they begin using sarcasm, around age 4 or 5. Adults and older children often use more complex and creative forms of sarcasm that usually fit a specific situation and can be a way of hiding criticism from a listener.

In a small experiment to determine if children with autism spectrum disorders understand sarcasm the same as children who do not, researchers found that they do detect it – they just may not see the humor in it.



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A 2005 study in Neuropsychology concluded that when you hear a sarcastic statement, the language cortex of your brain understands its literal meaning. Then the frontal lobes and right hemisphere infer its context. Last, the right ventromedial prefrontal cortex puts the two together and interprets the statement as sarcasm.

Cognitive scientist Penny M. Pexman said, “In future research on this topic, it will be important to figure out whether understanding sarcasm can be taught, and what the best method of training might be, so we can help children and others who struggle to understand sarcasm when it is used in everyday speech.”

Resources:

“How Do We Understand Sarcasm?” accessed July 1, 2019, from <https://kids.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/frym.2018.00056>

“How Sarcasm Works,” accessed July 1, 2019, from <https://people.howstuffworks.com/sarcasm1.htm>

“The Science of Sarcasm? Yeah, Right,” accessed July 1, 2019 from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-science-of-sarcasm-year-right-25038/>

“Why is Sarcasm So Difficult to Detect in Texts and Emails?” accessed July 1, 2019, from <http://theconversation.com/why-is-sarcasm-so-difficult-to-detect-in-texts-and-emails-91892>

“Getting Sarcastic with Kids,” accessed July 5, 2019, from <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/08/070803141811.htm>

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