The processing of scare quotes in English

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Scare quotes and verbal irony

Well, we have chosen a truly "sunny" day for our picnic!

→ *sunny* is not used literally

→ Quotes indicate this use

Verbal irony

- Articulates an **alternative** to the literal meaning

- Expresses an **evaluative attitude**

- Based on **implicature**

- Procedurally **more costly** than non-ironic utterances
  (Giora & Fein 1999)

Quotation

- **Metalinguistic** device used to talk about certain dimensions of language

- Mark a **deviation** from the standard use of an expression and produce a **non-stereotypical** interpretation
  (Gutzmann & Stei 2011, Härtl 2018)

- Open question: Are quotes part of the expression's **semantics** or are they interpreted in discourse, i.e., **pragmatically**?
  (De Brabanter 2013, Schlechtweg & Härtl 2021)

Scare quotes

- Scare quotes often mark the use of **irony**

- Signal the speaker's **reservation** w.r.t. the semantic appropriateness of the expression in quotes
  (Predelli 2003)

- Indicate a **non-literal reading** and signal a (negative) **evaluation** of the quoted material's denotatum

Research questions

➢ Do quotes affect processing (in English)?

➢ Do quotes facilitate the detection of ironic meanings?

➢ Are quotes used "on the fly" in ironic utterances (= semantics) or in later stages (= pragmatics)?

Reading time study

The processing of scare quotes in English

Subjects

36 native speakers of English

20 female, 16 male

Mean 28.61 years (SD: 6.26)

Academic background

Materials

60 test sentences, each in 6 conditions

Literal meaning + no quotes
Literal meaning + quotes
Ironic meaning + no quotes
Ironic meaning + quotes
Unrelated meaning + no quotes
Unrelated meaning + quotes

Literal, ironic, and unrelated meaning triggered by context

Materials

Context

Literal
Yesterday, a young woman won the jackpot of this month's lottery. She decided to donate ten million of the thirty million dollars to cancer research.

Ironic
Yesterday, a young woman won the jackpot of this month's lottery. She decided to donate sixteen cents of the thirty million dollars to cancer research.

Unrelated
Today, a small mouse damaged the engine of the Prime Minister's car. He decided to take the bicycle of his neighbor's grandson to the important summit.

Target sentence

We all hope that the generous / "generous" lady uses the rest of the money to fulfill her own dreams.

Materials

We all hope that the generous / "generous" lady uses the rest of the money to fulfill her own dreams.

Same target sentence in each of the 6 conditions
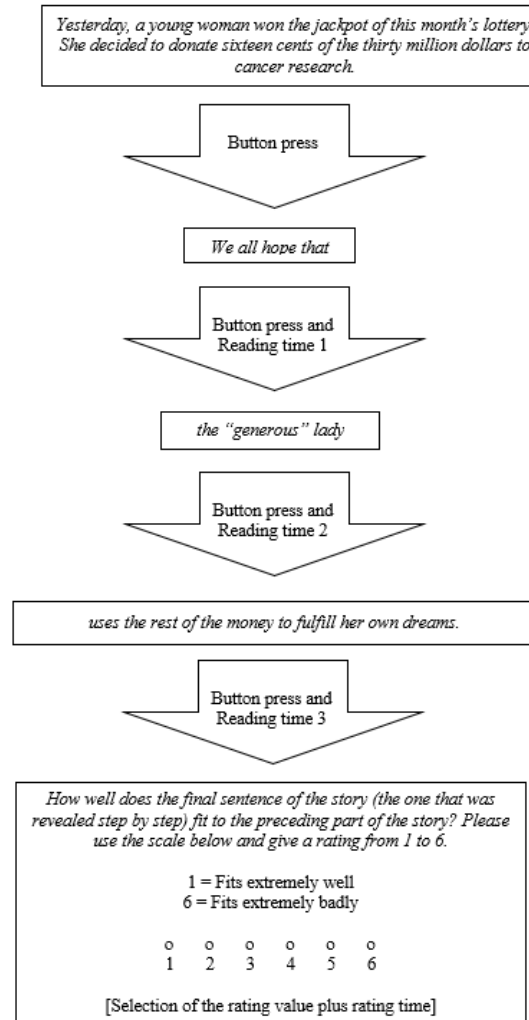
If quotes appear: Around the adjective

Procedure

Reading time experiment using Eprime 3.0

Each person exposed to each sentence in one condition

Total of 60 sentences per subject (10 per condition)

Procedure

Yesterday, a young woman won the jackpot of this month's lottery. She decided to donate sixteen cents of the thirty million dollars to cancer research.

Button press

We all hope that

Button press and Reading time 1

the "generous" lady

Button press and Reading time 2

uses the rest of the money to fulfill her own dreams.

Button press and Reading time 3

How well does the final sentence of the story (the one that was revealed step by step) fit to the preceding part of the story? Please use the scale below and give a rating from 1 to 6.

1 = Fits extremely well
6 = Fits extremely badly

o   o   o   o   o   o
1   2   3   4   5   6

[Selection of the rating value plus rating time]

Data analysis

2160 individual cases (36 subjects x 60 cases per subject)

If context reading shorter than 4 seconds: Case excluded (3.3 %)

Separate analyses for 5 response variables (READINGTIME1, READINGTIME2, READINGTIME3, RATINGTIME, RATING)

Explanatory variables QUOTES (yes, no) and MEANING (literal, ironic, unrelated)

Exclusion of statistical outliers (2.5 SD from mean)

(1.63 – 2.83 %)

Data analysis

Linear mixed effects models and Tukey comparisons in R (R Core Team 2020)

Fixed effects: QUOTES, MEANING, interaction

Random effects: Initially intercepts for SUBJECT and ITEM and slopes, then fitted

Results

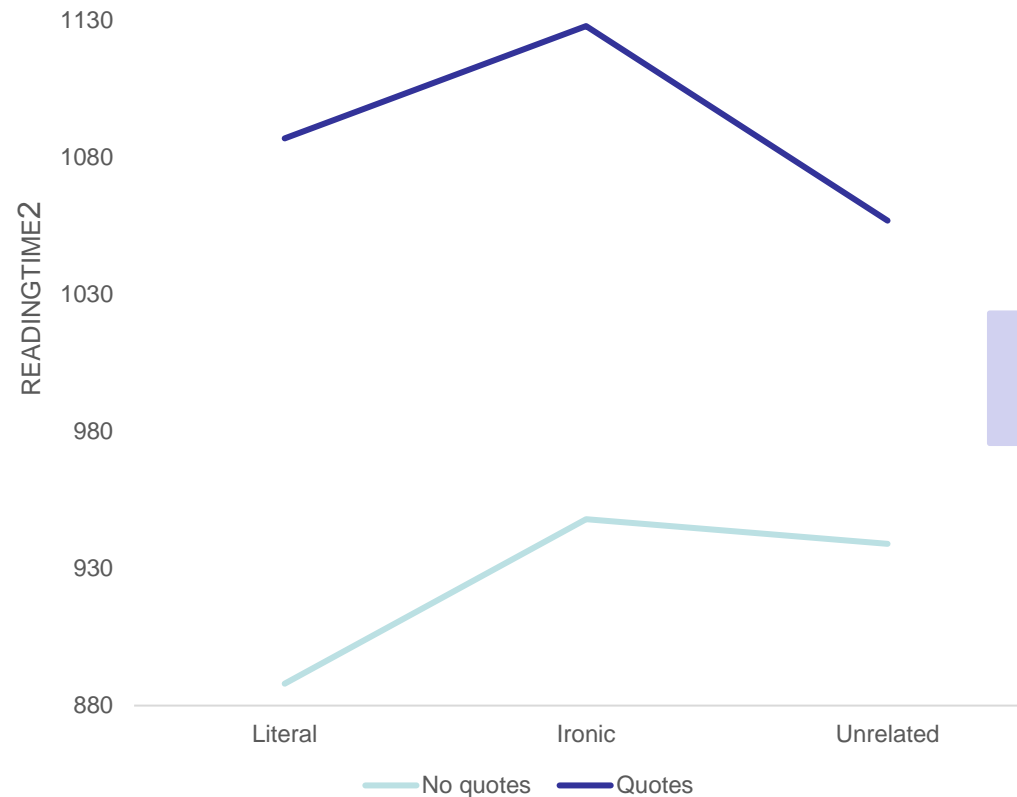*We all hope that* *the generous / "generous" lady uses the rest of the money to fulfill her own dreams.*

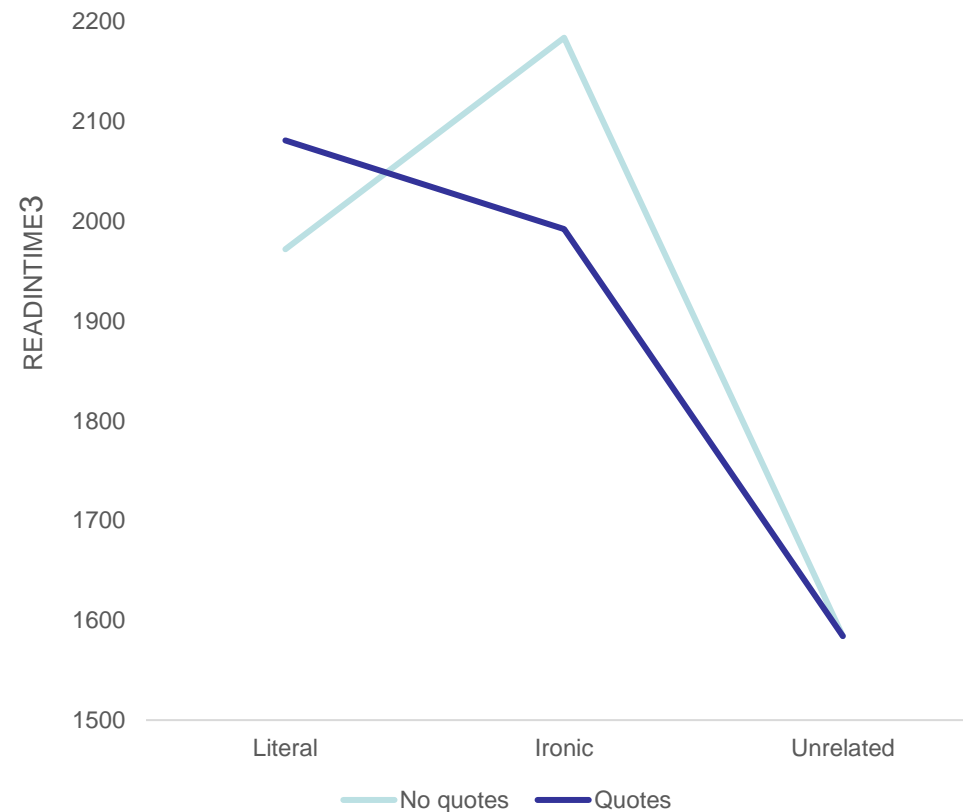READINGTIME1

No significant differences

Results

We all hope that **the generous / "generous" lady** *uses the rest of the money to fulfill her own dreams.*

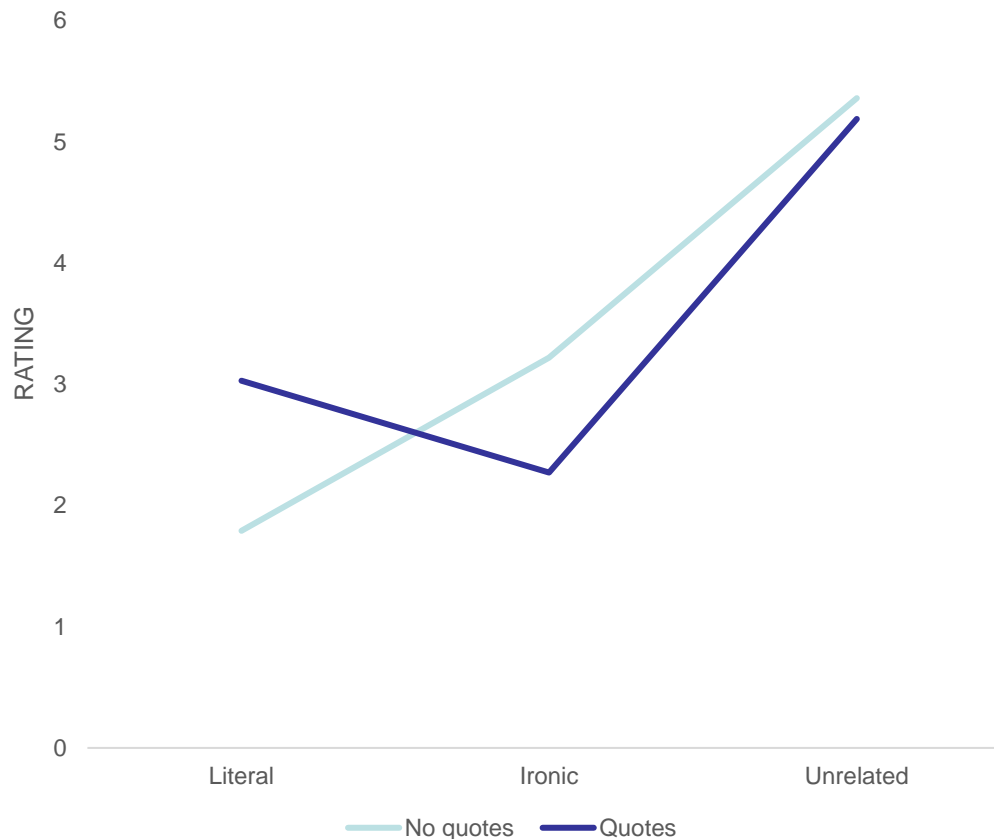Reading time significantly longer with quotes

Results

We all hope that the generous / "generous" lady **uses the rest of the money to fulfill her own dreams.**
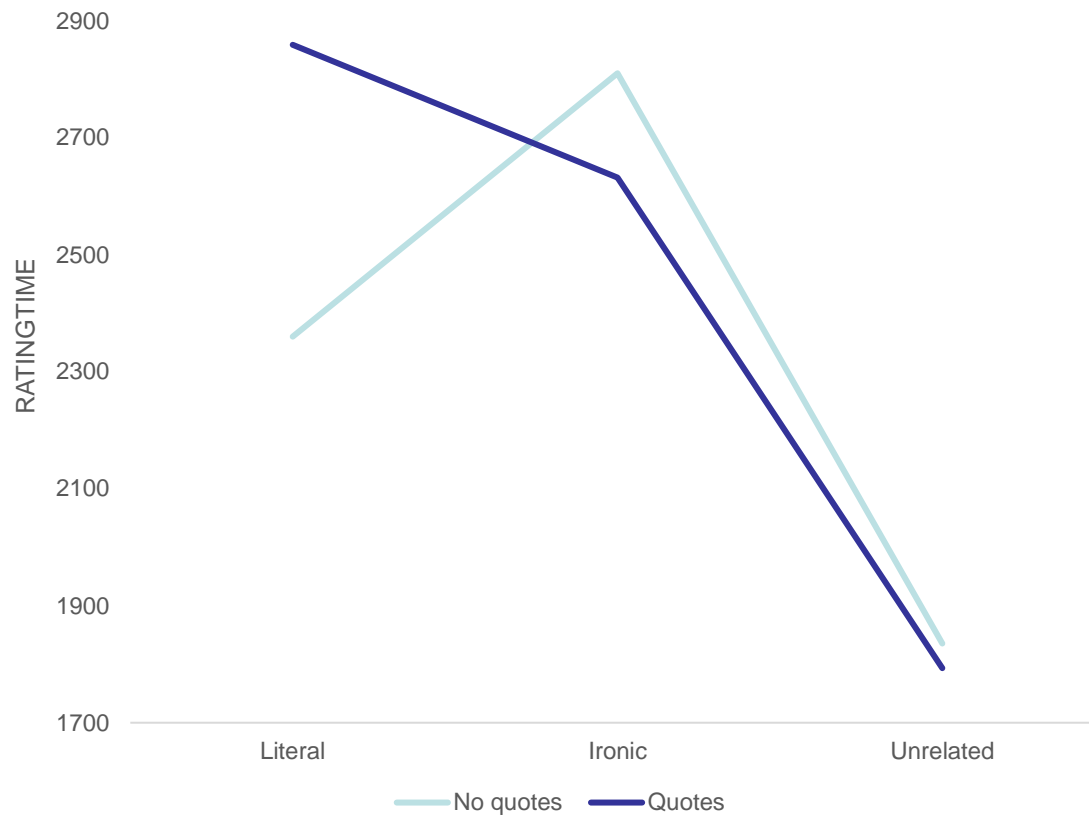

Significant interaction: Quotes significantly speed up the processing of irony

Results

Ironic cases rated significantly more acceptable with quotes

Results

Quotes speed up the processing of irony (non-significantly)

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Conclusion

➢ Quotes delay processing at their occurrence across the board

➢ Quotes facilitate the recognition of irony

➢ They do so in later stages

➢ Results support a pragmatic view towards quotes

References

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Gutzmann, Daniel and Erik Stei (2011). How quotation marks what people do with words. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43 (10), pp. 2650–2663.

Härtl, Holden (2018). Name-informing and distancing "sogenannt" ('so-called'). Name mentioning and the lexicon-pragmatics interface. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 37 (2), pp. 139–169.

Schlechtweg, Marcel & Holden Härtl (2021) Quotation marks and the processing of irony in English: Evidence from a reading time study. Submitted.