

Do quotation marks facilitate the processing of irony?

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Quotation is a metalinguistic device used to talk about certain dimensions of language (see, e.g., Cappelen & Lepore 1997; Davidson 1979). In utterances involving scare quotation, quotes indicate the speaker's reservation with respect to the semantic appropriateness of the expression in quotes (see, e.g., Meibauer 2007; Predelli 2003). In this way, the example in (1), when uttered ironically, asserts that it is not a sunny day, that is, a meaning that is contradictory to the sentence's literal meaning. The non-literality of the expression's meaning is a central characteristic of ironic and sarcastic language (see, e.g., Sperber & Wilson 1981). From a semantic viewpoint, verbal irony has been described to involve a form of (indirect) negation (see Giora 1995).

While there is a large body of literature on the semantics of scare quotation and its use conditions, the function of scare quotes in online processing has remained understudied. Specifically, the questions of (i) whether the use of quotes facilitates the integration of contradictory, ironic meanings and (ii) whether scare quotes affect the sentential wrap-up of an ironic utterance as a whole are still unanswered. We aim at answering these questions relying on a reading-time (RT) experiment created and conducted with Eprime, in which we test the four conditions mentioned in (2), each condition consisting of two context and a target sentence. In addition, each participant is exposed to filler scenarios, in which the target sentence does not fit – neither literally nor ironically – to the two preceding context sentences. The target sentence is identical across all conditions, the only difference being the absence/presence of quotes around the adjective, and the two context sentences are only minimally different in order to create a scenario compatible with the literal, ironic, or unrelated reading. We measure the reading time at several positions in the target sentence (Position 1 = after *that*; Position 2 = after *vehicle*; Position 3 = after *October*). Doing so, we are able to disentangle potential effects before the critical phrase creating the literal/ironic meaning, at the critical literal/ironic phrase itself, and sentence-finally. In the moving-window design, the context is presented at once, a button press is then required and reveals the sequence *It is now official that* of the target sentence (see 2), another button press reveals *the cheap vehicle* (see 2), and the next button press reveals *will be launched next October*. Further, subjects are asked, after the target sentence, to rate how well the final sentence (i.e., the target sentence) fits to the preceding ones (i.e., the context sentences) on a scale from 1 to 6. We hypothesize that the conditions do not differ in reading time at Position 1 but at Position 2 and/or Position 3. If quotes facilitate the integration of ironic contents, we expect reading times to be faster at the critical phrase and/or sentence-finally in (2d) than in (2b). Also, in (2d), the target sentence should be considered to fit better to the preceding context sentences than in (2b). In (2c), quotes are hypothesized to impede processing leading to longer response times and lower ratings than in (2a). In our analysis, we consider the reading latencies at the different positions and the rating as dependent variables, the two independent variables are the Presence of Quotation Marks (Yes versus No) and the Meaning (Literal, Ironic, Unrelated), and the two random variables are Subject and Scenario.

The results of our study are discussed in light of the debates about the theoretical implementation of quotes. Proponents of a semantic analysis of quotes claim, based on truth-conditional effects, quotes or their equivalents to be an essential part of the semantic-compositional structure of a quotational construction (see Predelli 2003; Simchen 1999). In contrast, pragmatic approaches towards quotation, like De Brabanter's (2013), argue for quotes not to be a necessary ingredient of quotational constructions based on the assumption that quotational meanings can be construed through context. In our conclusion, we focus on the immediacy of integration effects triggered by quotes, which we view as a decisive factor to determine the semantic or pragmatic status of quotes.

Examples

- (1) [On a rainy day]
This is such a “sunny” day!
- (2) Context: Yesterday, Apple presented a brand-new product, the so-called iCar. It combines autonomous driving with an innovative design and ...
- a. Context: ... will cost only five hundred dollars.
Target (literal meaning + no quotes): It is now official that the cheap vehicle will be launched next October.
 - b. Context: ... will cost over one million dollars.
Target (ironic meaning + no quotes): It is now official that the cheap vehicle will be launched next October.
 - c. Context: ... will cost only five hundred dollars.
Target (literal meaning + quotes): It is now official that the “cheap” vehicle will be launched next October.
 - d. Context: ... will cost over one million dollars.
Target (ironic meaning + quotes): It is now official that the “cheap” vehicle will be launched next October.

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