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“A bit of salt, a bit of pepper, and a bit of irony:” A qualitative analysis of attitudes towards verbal irony in gelotophobes and nongelotophobes

Abstract: A qualitative study was carried out to survey attitudes towards and feelings associated with verbal irony among gelotophobes and nongelotophobes (gelotophobia denoting the fear of being laughed at). Sixty-one people (13 gelotophobes) were surveyed using an open-ended online questionnaire. An inductive, manifest content analysis was carried out. The analysis distinguished that non-gelotophobes treat verbal irony as a skillful way of drawing attention to absurdity. Irony was also often seen as a personal quality rather than a linguistic form. Concerns with recognizing irony appeared very rarely. In contrast, the gelotophobes' responses displayed a more negative and one-sided attitude towards irony, describing it mostly as a way to put down and insult. These findings, though obtained in a general exploration, present a perspective complementary to that seen in linguistic and psycholinguistic literature as they draw attention to matters of personal experience of irony use. Additionally, the study's methodological limitations and further directions for research are discussed.

Keywords: verbal irony, irony understanding, individual differences, gelotophobia, content analysis

INTRODUCTION

Gelotophobia was first described as a clinical syndrome (Titze, 2009) and was later distinguished from social anxiety disorder (Carretero-Dios et al., 2010; Weiss et al., 2012). However, it can also be understood as an individual difference (Platt et al., 2016; Ruch & Proyer, 2008). Gelotophobia is relatively rare, though its prevalence seems to depend on cultural factors (see Proyer et al., 2009, for an international study of 73 countries and 42 languages). The majority of people not diagnosed as clinical gelotophobes or shame-based neurotics (see Ruch & Proyer, 2008) will also most often exhibit only slight gelotophobia.

The chief feature of gelotophobia is a very negative attitude towards laughter: “[t]hey assume that all laughter is ‘bad’ laughter, which elicits in them feelings of fear and shame. This inability has been found to go along with a fear of being laughed at [...]” (Platt et al., 2016, p. 47). It is accompanied by a “conviction that any laughter of others might be directed at oneself (i.e., one presumably is the target of random laughter), and that laughing people are suspicious” (Platt et al., 2012, p. 101), potentially leading to a guarded attitude in social interactions and low self-esteem (internalizing that one deserves mockery).

Führ et al. (2015) showed that gelotophobes utilize humor as a coping style less effectively. However, gelotophobia has not been tied to an inability to be humorous: In a study by Ruch et al. (2009), gelotophobes rated their sense of humor as low (and scored higher on measures of trait bad mood and seriousness, p. 120). They also characterized their own style of humor as “socially cold and inept, but also mean spirited” (p. 121). However, the captions they produced for cartoon images were not rated by independent judges as less funny or more critical than those made by non-gelotophobes, though they were shown to use self-enhancing and affiliative humor less often, in line with their self-descriptions. On the other hand, Renner and Manthey (2018) reported a negative link between gelotophobia and the quality, though not the quantity, of produced humor. This potentially points to a complicated picture in which gelotophobes might differ in their perception of humor depending on whether they are the speaker or the addressee of a joke.

Although gelotophobia is related to laughter and studied in the context of humor, considering the results of Ruch et al. (2009) it seems pertinent to examine how gelotophobes relate towards *verbal irony* in particular – a form of non-literal language that is related to, but ultimately distinct from, humor and jocularity (Dyrel, 2014).

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Verbal Irony

First, there are similarities between the theories of humor and irony, chiefly in the concept of incongruity, named by Forabosco (2008) as “one of the most important concepts, if not the most important, as to the description and explanation of the humor process” (p. 45). With irony, incongruity between what is said and what is meant (Dyner, 2014) needs to be resolved by the hearer in order to appreciate the irony (Pexman, 2008). Likewise, theories of humor often describe the resolution of incongruity between expectations and reality (Martin, 2007), likening humor interpretation to a cognitive process of problem solving (Forabosco, 2008; see also Dyner, 2012).

However, a crucial distinction emerges when looking at the intentions behind ironic and humorous utterances. While “ironic utterances typically convey pertinent evaluative meaning” (Dyner, 2013, p. 292) towards a given situation or the recipient of the utterance, humor can be produced solely with the intention to amuse. When an utterance expresses an overt untruth (the first core feature of irony) but does not simultaneously express a negative attitude (the second core feature), it will most likely be characterized as jocular banter rather than irony (Dyner, 2013). Dyner (2014) thus distinguishes verbal irony from a range of humorous utterances such as teasing, parody, or humorous hyperboles on the basis of the presence (or lack thereof) of one or both these features (e.g., parody can be mistaken for irony because it contains overt untruthfulness, but not a negative evaluation).

An additional issue concerns the distinction between irony and sarcasm. These two concepts are variously understood either as interchangeable terms describing a single phenomenon – saying the opposite of what you mean with a negative emotional/evaluative tinge (Dyner, 2014), as related concepts, or as sarcasm being a type of irony (see Dyner, 2017; Taylor, 2017). For example, Ruch et al. (2018) have distinguished irony from sarcasm in their Comic Style Markers questionnaire (irony “aims at creating a mutual sense of superiority toward others by saying things differently than they mean it” while sarcasm “aims at hurting others”, p. 3). However, both are classified as comic styles, that is, formal types of humor. Due to the exploratory character of the current study, irony and sarcasm were treated as a unitary concept, although the term “irony” was consistently used in the study materials. The ambiguity inherent in irony and accompanied by humor was of chief interest in the current study. However, due to the personal, negative character of sarcasm emphasized by several authors (Gibbs, 1994; Haiman, 1998), comparing whether gelotophobes differ in attitudes/reactions to irony and sarcasm would also be a pertinent topic of more fine-grained research.

In light of this conceptual complexity, some studies show that verbal irony can be used to communicate a negative, critical attitude towards something or someone in a less aggressive and more subtle way (e.g., Averbek & Hample, 2008; Dews & Winner, 1995). Meanwhile, others state that, on the contrary, irony is perceived as more critical than literal criticism (e.g., Bowes & Katz, 2011;

Pexman & Olineck, 2002). However, irony can also bring people together, when criticizing a third party (van Mulken et al., 2010) or when used in a playful manner between friends (Gibbs, 2000). Being skillfully humorous is consistently named as one of the most important and recognizable goals of being ironic (Milanowicz, 2013). Irony also often co-occurs with humor and laughter (Bryant, 2010; Dyner, 2013; Gibbs et al., 2014). Finally, skillful applications of irony might also serve rhetorical purposes, or portray the speaker as being in control of their own emotions and the situation they comment on (Attardo, 2000; Anolli et al., 2002).

The Current Study

Thus, since (a) verbal irony and humor are related (Gibbs et al., 2014; Ruch et al., 2018), (b) verbal irony can serve a wide range of pragmatic and communicative functions, and (c) interpretation of irony relies on a complex social-cognitive process (Gibbs, 2012, Pexman, 2008), it is worth examining in more detail the interplay of feelings and attitudes between self-produced and received verbal irony, both among gelotophobes and non-gelotophobes. As Ruch et al. (2009) write, “gelotophobes should be very sensitive to disparaging humor, or humor that is ambiguous and not safe” (p. 113). Similarly, Renner and Heydasch (2010) have shown that gelotophobia is related to protective self-presentation style (“perceiving social situations as risky challenges and approaching them with “pessimism and fear,” p. 177), as “persons prone to gelotophobia play the rather passive roles of being the target of laughter (probably not being able to defend themselves) or the witness in the audience that realizes how demeaning it is to be laughed at” (p. 176; see also van Mulken et al., 2010, for a study on using irony to mock a third group together). Verbal irony seems to fit that description in many cases. Indeed, Brunsch and Ruch (2017b) suggest that “gelotophobes may be sensitive to derisive ironic criticism especially when self-involvement [being a participant in the situation in which irony occurs] is high” (p. 13). Brunsch and Ruch (2017a) also showed that the correlation between gelotophobia, measured by the PhoPhiKat-45 inventory (for gelotophobia, gelotophilia – the joy of being laughed at – and katagelasticism – the joy of laughing at others), and irony use was not significant (p. 141), though it also was not negative. On the other hand, Ford et al. (2017) reported that self-defeating humor (making fun of oneself) did not significantly decrease, but also did not increase, state anxiety in a stressful situation (imagined math test). Finally, Hofmann (2018) showed that *laughing at yourself* (measured with a questionnaire and an experimental task of participants digitally distorting photographs of their own faces in an amusing manner) “is not solely the elicitation of positive emotions, but also the absence of negative emotions” (p. 10; see also Ruch & Proyer, 2009, for a discussion of *gelotophilia*, the joy of being laughed at). Thus, some evidence points towards potential benefits of self-deprecating humor and/or self-irony for gelotophobes (see, e.g., Ask & Abidin, 2018; Ungar, 1984 for examples of building affiliation through self-irony; Brunsch & Ruch,

2017a, for a correlation between the self-defeating humor style and irony use), especially in light of evidence that gelotophobes exhibit deficits in intrapersonal emotional regulation (Papousek et al., 2009).

The aim of the current study was thus to explore how gelotophobes view and relate to verbal irony – whether it also becomes affected by the strong negative bias characteristic of gelotophobia and whether any distinct differences can be outlined between gelotophobes and non-gelotophobes in this regard. To this end, a qualitative approach based on an open-ended Internet survey was employed. Such a study design was intended to allow for a preliminary exploration of subjective attitudes. By establishing a middle ground between existing theoretical and empirical literature and a data-driven approach, it was hoped to provide novel results which would stimulate further research in new directions (see Kałowski & Malanowski, 201; Katz, 2017, for issues in studying verbal irony). Thus, the exploratory character of the current study must be emphasized.

METHOD

Participants

The study was carried out online, using an open-ended questionnaire advertised on various social media groups for college students and for online survey volunteers (i.e., it was not advertised on groups specifically for people suffering from social anxiety, gelotophobia support groups, etc.). The study, the questionnaire, and the data collection method were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw.

While the questionnaire registered 1492 individual visits, 61 people completed it in its entirety (49 females, 12 males). One possibility for this stark contrast is the questionnaire's length and difficulty (open-ended questions concerning personal experience and asking for examples), or a relatively long period in which it was left active (March 2018-February 2019). Only the completed responses were taken into account in the analysis.

The participants' mean age was 23.77 years ($SD = 4.83$). Twenty-four reported having higher education (BA or MA degree), 22 – currently being in college, and 15 – having graduated high school. On the basis of the GELOPH<15> questionnaire (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$ in the current study), 13 people (2 males, 11 females; aged 17-31, $M_{age} = 22.54$, $SD = 4.46$; 3 people having a higher education, 6 people currently being in college, and 4 people having graduated high school) achieved scores pointing to a mild expression of gelotophobia ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.18$; the cut-off point of $M \geq 2.50$ between no and mild gelotophobia is the same in the Polish version of the GELOPH<15> as it is in the original German version, Chłopicki et al., 2010). The remaining 48 people (10 males, 38 females, aged 18-37, $M_{age} = 24.1$, $SD = 4.92$; 21 people having higher education, 16 being in college, and 11 having graduated high school) achieved scores below the cut-off point ($M = 1.8$, $SD = 0.38$) and were thus classified into the non-gelotophobes group. An independent-samples

t -test showed that differences in GELOPH<15> scores between this group and the non-gelotophobes group was significant, $t(59) = -8.3$, $p > .0001$, $d = 3.06$.

Thus, 21.3% of the 61-person sample was characterized by any gelotophobic traits, which represents a higher proportion than the average of 7 % in the Polish study by Chłopicki et al., 2010). This percentage is possibly skewed by the low responder retention.

The descriptive statistics of the sample suggest a degree of respondent self-selection, which could, in turn, influence the obtained results considering the qualitative character of the study. This point is further addressed below, in the Discussion section.

Online Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed on the LimeSurvey platform, in the Polish language. It displayed the purpose of the study (gathering subjective opinions about and experiences with verbal irony) along with information on the anonymity of the responses clearly on the welcome screen. This information was also provided in each online advertisement of the study.

Aside from gathering the participants' demographic data (gender, age, and education) and including the aforementioned GELOPH<15> at the end, the online questionnaire was comprised of six open-ended questions. The questions were informed by the theoretical literature on irony and its uses/functions (see, e.g., Attardo, 2000; Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000; Gibbs, 2012) and were designed in such a way as to allow for the broadest possible survey of the participants' experience of being ironic and being with others who are ironic, taking into account both the interpersonal context of irony use as well as the participants' experienced emotions. The participants were also asked to provide examples from their daily lives. The questions were:

1. How do you understand the word "irony?" What is irony, in your opinion?
2. In what situations and with what people do you usually use irony?
3. In your opinion, why do people use irony?
4. Do you associate irony with any given situations or people?
5. How do you usually feel when you encounter irony in social situations?
6. Suppose that you made some mistake. Would you rather be reprimanded with an ironic comment or a literal remark? Why?

Inductive Content Analysis

The collected data was interpreted through *inductive content analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Howitt, 2016) in order to preserve a data-driven approach. The analysis was *manifest* (Bengtsson, 2016), meaning that it "describes what the informants actually say, stays very close to the text, uses the words themselves, and describes the visible and obvious in the text" (p. 10). To ensure the current study's trustworthiness (see Elo et al., 2014) or dependability (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011), the following section

describes the steps of the content analysis carried out after data collection was completed.

Step 1

All completed questionnaires were collated in a spreadsheet to create the data set for the study. Complete sentences constituted the unit of analysis (Elo et al., 2014). Next, each participant's mean GELOPH<15> score was calculated to obtain a measurement of the severity of their gelotophobia. Based on this, the data set was then divided into two groups, that of gelotophobes ($M_{\text{score}} \geq 2.50$) and non-gelotophobes ($M_{\text{score}} \leq 2.49$; see Ruch, 2009, for details on distinguishing participant groups based on the GELOPH<15> scores). The decision to divide the data set at the outset of the analysis was made due to the study's intended intergroup character.

Step 2

The author familiarized themselves with the data set, reading it several times. Sparse responses not providing sufficient information (e.g., "It depends," "I don't know.") were removed from the data set, as they would potentially invite a large degree of subjectivity in interpretation. At this point, initial codes were generated based on the general data review (e.g., "pointing out absurdity," "others do what I don't."). Codes are defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as "a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst" (p. 18). Based on its content, each response could be assigned multiple codes.

Step 3

The codes served as the basis for inductively creating the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) separately for each group. Since both groups responded to the same questions, separating their responses into the gelotophobic and non-gelotophobic data subsets allowed for a more focused approach. Themes could then be set against each other in a more vivid fashion, whereas a bulk analysis of all the responses would run the risk of blurring such distinctions. However, a drawback of this decision was that the two data subsets were uneven in size.

Data classified into each theme were collated together. The themes were then checked against the data (again, separately for each group) and appropriately labeled. After this review, the developed themes were compared between the groups in order to describe any emerging similarities and differences.

RESULTS

Content Analysis: Non-gelotophobes

The non-gelotophobes group consisted of people whose GELOPH<15> scores were lower than 2.49 points. Forty-eight people (38 females) were classified into this category, forming a dataset of 288 responses (six responses to six questions per person).

Theme 1: Irony as a vehicle for absurdity.

An important association with irony that emerged from the participants' descriptions was its affinity with

contrasts and defied expectations. Indirectness, opposition of expressed and intended meaning, and especially drawing attention to absurdity appeared in the participants' definitions ($n = 49$, 17.01%, mentioned at least once by 41 participants)¹. What exactly was meant by "absurdity" was not explained by any of the participants, however. On a surface, structural level, being ironic thus seems to be understood as pointing out the unusual, unexpected character of certain situations:

Participant (P)113: Speaking in a nonliteral way that underscores the absurdity of a situation

P185: For me, irony is, for example, something absurd said in a credible way.

P1090: A mocking way of showing that we see something as absurd.

P1318: Saying an obvious untruth not to lie, but to show its absurdity.

This way, one can express a negative attitude towards what is happening. However, what distinguishes irony from literal complaints is the cleverness and intelligence added by the reversal of meaning. For some, this attractive way of speaking makes it humorous, even though the critical element remains present ($n = 17$, 5.9%, mentioned at least once by 9 participants):

P 15: [...]a mean, mocking, but also intelligent summary, paraphrase, or response.

P13: When you say the opposite of what you want to express in such a way that the person you're talking with knows what you really mean (if they're at least somewhat clever).

P41: A smarting/mocking, but also intelligent way to talk about something.

P1095: I think irony is an interesting way of speaking, adding color and character, making you think a bit. We use it to cause dissonance, make someone think or relax the atmosphere and joke.

Because of the tinge of humor added to negative comments, irony also seems to become a useful way of voicing frustration or acknowledging the felt tension ($n = 68$, 23.61%, mentioned at least once by 35 people):

P35: [...]easing negative emotions, avoiding arguments – making light of something, expressing irritation/impatience, distancing oneself – we express a negative attitude towards something but without creating a space for confrontation.

P181: It's definitely a more interesting way of talking, allows for adding jokes into the conversation, sometimes makes the atmosphere more relaxed [...]

P1079: To reprimand someone in a way that isn't serious, rather making them laugh. To relax the atmosphere.

P1097: I deal with irony most often among friends and I think this relaxes the atmosphere a bit, often just makes us laugh outright [...]

These topics formed the first subtheme, pertaining to the functions of irony and its dual character. The second subtheme builds upon the first. Due to that dual character, irony was identified by a part of the respondents as a fitting response for "stupid questions," or a moderately negative interpersonal context where an ironic remark would not be

perceived as overly critical ($n = 19$, 6.59%, mentioned at least once by 14 people):

P13: When someone asks a question that has an answer which seems obvious. When someone says something obvious or stupid.

P35: [...]when they say something that I don't agree with at all, but the topic doesn't need serious treatment, and even begs for joking.

P69: When someone says things that are so stupid I don't even feel like correcting them [...]

P1090: When someone says something obvious, absurd, or is lying to me.

On the other hand, in case of heightened tension or mistakes and personal responsibility, irony becomes even more hurtful than literal criticism ($n = 37$, 12.84%, mentioned by 34 people):

P519: I'd definitely prefer a serious reprimand because irony can be mean.

P665: Depends on the situation. When it's a small thing, I don't mind irony. It can help relax the tension. But when it's something serious, I want to hear an honest remark. It makes me feel I'm being taken seriously and can fix my mistake.

P1110: Serious, because criticism is meant to be constructive, meaning precise. Irony is good for pleasure, not building things.

P1970: I'd prefer a direct reprimand because it would mean neutral feedback, and irony in such a situation would mean mockery and taunting for me.

Not all participants felt that way, however. A small part voiced a preference for ironic criticism, stating that due to its humor, it would mitigate the blame that literal criticism conveys ($n = 8$, 2.77%, mentioned by 8 people):

P106: I'd prefer an ironic comment, because then I'd feel more at ease and the whole situation could be turned into a joke.

P1213: Ironically, because it makes me laugh, and then we can talk seriously about what went wrong. And I won't feel stupid. I'd see the other person's positive approach.

Thus, irony was not seen as positive or negative in itself. A small number of responses ($n = 3$) also described irony as a way of being or a mode of perception. Notable also was the mention of irony being an attractive way of expression which marks the speaker as intelligent and well-spoken. While this is intuitively recognizable and has been explicitly named in previous theoretical accounts (Attardo, 2000), it draws relatively little attention from empirical researchers (though see, e.g., Milanowicz, 2013, for a study on IQ and preferences towards irony). The participants' responses in the current study suggest that aside from serving such functions as voicing criticism in a socially permissible way, verbal irony is used in conversations also because it highlights the speaker's ease of expression and creativity.

Interestingly, while the literature examines the impact of such factors as gender, occupation, or message modality on irony understanding, such topics were not mentioned by the participants. Rather, individual and interpersonal differences were subsumed under the general category of

relational context, or how well the interlocutors know each other ($n = 52$, 18.05%, mentioned once by at least 36 people). Thus, rather than making fine-grained distinctions when using or interpreting irony, the participants seemed to chiefly focus on the degree of interpersonal closeness or shared information (Kreuz, 1996).

Theme 2: Irony as a feature of personality.

As was mentioned above, irony was sometimes overtly named as a personal quality (P40: "For me it's a way of communicating with the world [...]". P135: "Irony is a way of life"). Also, it was sometimes associated not only with specific situations and contexts, but specific people or other traits like intelligence or a sense of humor ($n = 31$, 10.76%, mentioned at least once by 25 people). Participants were able to name people who were known for being ironic across different situations, as well as mention general types of people who would be expected to often be ironic (Subtheme 2.1):

P15: Sadly, irony reminds me of "chronically" complaining people, I have in mind a few of my acquaintances and their style of using irony is frustrating for me [...]

P69: With my parents, when they don't want to accept my criticisms of them and they try to turn everything into a joke. With myself, when I'm telling my friends or my therapist about some dumb, meaningless thing someone else said to me.

P145: It reminds me of confident, intelligent people who are certain that the recipients of irony will understand it.

P1110: As regards jokes it reminds me of intelligent people, the funniest jokes are those that require the most from the hearer. As regards arguments, it reminds me of egoists who don't want to solve, but only escalate.

While overtly naming themselves as ironic was rare ($n = 4$, 1.38%, mentioned by 4 people), describing their personal style of being ironic was more common among the participants. These descriptions involved drawing a contrast between one's own irony and that of other people. Irony was as if appropriated into one's personality, treated as something that is "mine." A particularly interesting feature of these descriptions was attributing positive, friendly irony use to oneself (alongside expressing an awareness of the potential of irony to be hurtful) while claiming that other people that use it for more negative purposes. Some participants seemed to describe themselves as proficient ironists, able to appreciate its positive aspects (Subtheme 2.2., $n = 17$, 5.9%, mentioned at least once by 15 people):

P4: [...] sometimes it's passive-aggressive; or mocking, ridiculing, but it has a less pronounced negative quality for me than such expressions [...]

P17: Often to show their superiority towards someone else. People from my surroundings - for humor.

P35: Sometimes people are also ironic to mock someone and make them feel bad. I don't do this and I don't remember any specific situations.

P185: I think some use it for jokes like I do but there are also people who use irony in a somewhat mean way, I'd say.

As was mentioned above, relational context/interpersonal distance emerged as a general factor determining irony use and facilitating irony interpretation for the participants. Additionally, treating verbal irony as a personal style was also reflected in the preference of using, as well as being met with irony among close friends, relatives, and people that were known to the participants ($n = 52$, 18.05%, mentioned once by at least 36 people). With such people, it is easier to decipher the intentions behind their ironic comments, to recognize their “brand” of irony:

P15: I'd prefer literal critique from a stranger because I never know what that person intends with further communication. A person that's close to me could say it ironically because I'd feel safe and it would probably ease the tension.

P17: It depends on the person saying it. When I recognize their intent as mean, I feel ashamed and awkward, because it is difficult to respond properly to mean irony. That's usually a rhetorical question/statement. When my friends do it it amuses me.

P1101: Most commonly with close friends and coworkers whom I know will understand irony.

P1378: A friend - okay with ironic comments. It depends on the scale of the mistake, because sometimes even a friend can be irritating. A stranger - literal.

Thus, the relational context, that is, how well the interlocutors know each other, or how well they are acquainted with each other's personal brand of irony, emerged as the most important factor influencing how participants view verbal irony (Subtheme 2.3).

It is worth mentioning that irony recognition per se was named very rarely as an issue. The participants generally did not remark on the difficulty of recognizing when someone is being ironic. Rather, the difficulty was with deciding why someone else, whether a close or a distant person, is being ironic. This stands in opposition to a large body of empirical studies, as irony recognition, as well as the factors facilitating or impeding it, is one of the most popular areas of research. In everyday experience, however, it seems that irony is intuitively understood without much issue (Is someone being ironic or not?), yet accurately reading others' intentions when communicating (Why exactly is that person being ironic?) can be problematic.

In sum, a certain contrast emerged in the non-gelotophobes' responses – while they mentioned both positive and negative sides to verbal irony, they often explicitly attributed positive usage to themselves and negative usage to others, especially strangers from outside their social circles. Though specifically described as serving both those distinct functions, irony was seen as most appropriate in negatively moderate contexts, allowing for teasing, but not yet veering into criticism. Also, despite its complexity as a linguistic phenomenon, recognizing and understanding it was less problematic than was decoding the intentions behind it. This finding can be taken to reflect a contrast between understanding the formal/logical and the emotional/intentional aspect of verbal irony. Though both humor and verbal irony share incongruity as a structural feature (Dyner, 2014), recognition of this incongruity and its understanding as humorous

or ironic can be separate. The current findings thus suggest that irony recognition could be separate from irony understanding.

Seeing as gelotophobia involves a very biased and negative interpretation of the intentions behind humor, the next step of the analysis involved examining the responses of gelotophobes specifically.

Content Analysis: Gelotophobes

The sample of gelotophobes numbered 13 people (11 females) and a total of 78 responses. The mean scores on the GELOPH<15> for all participants in this sample were between 2.49 and 3.2 points, meaning that, with the exception of one participant, they were classified into the “slight expression” group (see Ruch, 2009).

Theme 1: Irony as a vehicle for frustration.

Though the data set of responses made by gelotophobes was smaller, a distinctly less positive and less nuanced attitude towards verbal irony could be seen. Some given definitions ($n = 6$, 7.14%, mentioned by 6 people) did not provide any information about irony's emotional qualities, focusing on formal features instead:

P31: It's a statement in which the speaker wants to express the opposite of what they're saying, e.g. What nice weather today [it's raining].

P147: A way of expressing opinions where the form of the expression suggests that you should read it as opposite to the communicated meaning.

Other gelotophobes explicitly focused on its negative, critical character ($n = 5$, 5.95%, mentioned by 5 people):

P129: Saying something not literally, something opposite, often mocking.

P172: A style of communication mixing jokes with meanness, usually intending to mock something, directed at a certain group of hearers.

P1429: Irony is a category centered around opposition. Typically understood as mockery, ridicule. When we say something ironic, a message opposite to the meaning and the proper sense of our utterance is sent.

When talking about intentions behind irony use, both their own and those of others, gelotophobes also focused more on expressing frustration and voicing criticism ($n = 20$, 23.8%, mentioned by 11 people), although mentions of humor did appear ($n = 10$, 11.9%, mentioned by 8 people):

P31: When they're frustrated with someone's pointless behavior, they want to show how stupid their question or comment was.

P48: When someone is irritating me and I know he won't fully understand my ironic remark, so he will feel weird with it, kind of suspended between interpretations.

P129: When talking with relatives as a way of joking, but I also sometimes am ironic because I want to upset someone.

P1429: When the person I'm talking to frustrates me, or when the conversation is jocular and not serious.

Interestingly, despite this more one-sided outlook on irony, gelotophobes also reported using irony in situations

where they know their interlocutors well. This fits with the results of Ruch et al. (2009), who reported that “some of the participants with higher scores in gelotophobia seemed to be quite willing to act humorously” (p. 125), as well as with the well-described finding of irony being more common in close interactions (Kreuz, 1996). However, gelotophobes mentioned preferring interpersonal relationships and known interlocutors both for humorous as well as for critical irony. Within the context of the current study, this further supports the aforementioned argument of verbal irony being seen as a personal trait or quality ($n = 18$, 21.42%, mentioned by 11 people):

P31: Most often with my partner when I see he isn't listening to me or when he asks questions with obvious responses. I use irony less often when talking with strangers or more distant acquaintances.

P78: Usually in situations where the other person knows I'm being ironic on purpose. In situations, where I am joking, making fun of something.

P172: Talking with my boyfriend, my friends, when something angers me, eg. someone else's behavior.

P1086: With people close to me who know my personality.

Thus, it seems that even in a sample of slight gelotophobes, a degree of negative bias can be seen with regard to perceptions of verbal irony: Its positive, humorous function appears to be less appreciated – it emerged chiefly as a way to express criticism and dissatisfaction, losing some of its duality and its attractive, complex character. However, this bias refers mostly to how gelotophobes use irony themselves. Did it also extend to being the recipients of ironic messages?

Theme 2: Irony as “intellectual domination.”

A striking feature noticeable in these participants' responses was that they ascribed very negative intentions to others using irony ($n = 13$, 15.47%, mentioned by 7 people). In their view, even though irony can sometimes be funny, it is usually intended to put down, ridicule, mock, and signal one's own superiority:

P21: For me irony is a tool to show one's intellectual domination [...]

P78: Maybe they think it makes them sound smarter.

P172: To express their anger or amusement. Irony gives the people using it a feeling of superiority, it's often seen as an “elite” form.

P399: Because they want to be seen as intelligent or they aren't able to show empathy.

P1304: [...] there's also that type of irony that tries to hide the user's defect, some inferiority complex, IDK, or that person is simply a brute and wants to humiliate others – I don't respect that.

Non-gelotophobes mentioned the attractiveness of irony and how it makes the speaker look intelligent, though their descriptions seemed much less negatively tinged than did those of the gelotophobes. They, in turn, despite representing the lower end of the gelotophobia intensity scale, saw ironic messages rather as elitist put-

-downs than clever turns of phrase, intended specifically to make the interlocutor feel bad. Such an outlook corresponds with the core feature of gelotophobia (tendency to perceive jokes, humor, and laughter as both mocking and directed at them in particular, Ruch et al., 2014), and seeing as irony is tied closely to humor (Gibbs et al., 2014), it seems fitting on a conceptual level that gelotophobes would also be negatively predisposed towards irony. However, it is important to note that the gelotophobes surveyed in this study did not avoid irony completely – they were able to name situations where they were ironic and they also expressed a preference for being ironic in the company of friends. Their outlook was not uniformly negative, but distinctly moreso than that of the non-gelotophobes.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

Table 1 summarizes the results of the content analysis. The two chief themes visible in the responses given by the non-gelotophobes were (a) treating the expression of absurdity as irony's most salient feature and (b) understanding irony as a personal trait. Irony was named as commonly used to remark upon unexpected, absurd situations in a way that not only allows for making one's negative or disappointed attitude known, but also lets one do it in an appealing, entertaining form. Because of the focus on absurdity, irony was reported to be a suitable response to “stupid questions” (e.g., when someone fails to keep up with the general tone and intellectual level of involvement in the conversation) rather than situations of personal blame or criticism, as is often assumed in the literature: Non-gelotophobes often felt that irony became too critical and inappropriate in such situations, though there were some for whom it was a way to reduce tension and mitigate that personal blame.

A new and significant finding was also the certain asymmetry in the participants' description of their own irony and of the irony of others. Irony was often treated as a personal quality, a style of expression associated not with situations, but with people. However, while they displayed awareness of irony having the potential to both mock and amuse, the participants claimed that they are ironic chiefly for the positive reasons, while other people tend to be more negative in their irony use.

The gelotophobes in the current study had only a slight degree of gelotophobia (Chłopicki et al., 2010; Ruch, 2009). Nevertheless, certain differences could be seen in their responses compared to the non-gelotophobes. Most importantly, their accounts of irony were much less positive, either focusing only on the structural features of irony (duality, juxtaposition) or only its capacity to criticize and insult. They reported using irony not for amusing wordplay, but to express frustration. These participants also felt that other people are ironic to criticize and ridicule, or to display intellectual domination. What for the non-gelotophobes was a positive tinge of cleverness and intelligence, for the gelotophobes became a sign of

| Nongelotophobes (<i>n</i> = 48) | Number of participants who mentioned the theme/subtheme |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Theme 1: Irony as a vehicle for absurdity. | |
| Subtheme 1.1: The duality of humor and criticism. | |
| Indirectness, opposition of meaning, drawing attention to absurdity. | <i>n</i> = 49, 17.01%, mentioned at least once by 41 people. |
| Clever, intelligent, and witty way of speaking. | <i>n</i> = 17, 5.9%, mentioned at least once by 9 people. |
| Voicing frustration or acknowledging tension. | <i>n</i> = 68, 23.61%, mentioned at least once by 35 people. |
| Subtheme 1.2: A fitting response for “stupid questions.” | |
| More hurtful than direct criticism in negative interpersonal contexts. | <i>n</i> = 37, 12.84%, mentioned at least once by 34 people. |
| Easier to accept than direct criticism in negative interpersonal contexts. | <i>n</i> = 8, 2.77%, mentioned at least once by 8 people. |
| Theme 2: Irony as a feature of personality. | |
| Subtheme 2.1: People and traits associated with irony. | |
| Subtheme 2.2: Me as a proficient ironist. | <i>n</i> = 17, 5.9%, mentioned at least once by 15 people. |
| Subtheme 2.3: The importance of the relational context for using and understanding irony. | <i>n</i> = 52, 18.05%, mentioned at least once by at least 36 people. |
| Gelotophobes (<i>n</i> = 13) | |
| Theme 1: Irony as a vehicle for frustration. | |
| Negative, critical character of irony. | <i>n</i> = 5, 5.95%, mentioned at least once by 5 people. |
| Expression of frustration, but also criticism. | <i>n</i> = 20, 23.8%, mentioned at least once by 11 people. |
| Humorous aspects. | <i>n</i> = 10, 11.9%, mentioned at least once by 8 people. |
| Irony as a personality trait, associated with specific individuals, situations, and other characteristics. | <i>n</i> = 18, 21.42%, mentioned at least once by 11 people. |
| Theme 2: Irony as “intellectual domination.” | <i>n</i> = 13, 15.47%, mentioned at least once by 7 people. |

showing superiority in an abrasive way, of putting down others. Relatedly, Papousek et al. (2009) found that gelotophobes are more susceptible to “emotional contagion of negative moods” and simultaneously show difficulties in intrapersonal (private), though not interpersonal emotional skills (p. 63; see also Ruch et al., 2009). Gelotophobia also correlates with the protective self-presentation style. Thus, while gelotophobes perceive irony negatively (because “more gelotophobic participants indicated higher levels of negative affect in response to negative emotional expressions of another person,” Papousek et al., 2009, p. 62), they might nevertheless use irony themselves for the purposes of interpersonal emotional regulation, or possibly as a way of seeking approval, ingratiation, and shielding themselves from being targets of further jokes (see Renner & Heydasch, 2010; Renner & Manthey, 2018). It is also worth mentioning that neither Ruch et al. (2009) nor Renner and Manthey (2018) found statistically significant relation-

ships between gelotophobia and quantitative humor production (although Renner & Manthey reported a slight negative correlation with the quality of the humor). While these are tentative interpretations, the fact that both nongelotophobes and gelotophobes did report using irony despite not showing a liking or preference for it is consistent with previous quantitative results (Bruntsch & Ruch, 2017a).

It is worth pointing out that these differences were visible already in the group of slight gelotophobes. Thus, the qualitative analysis in this study deepens the understanding of gelotophobia by presenting evidence for the gelotophobic negativity bias extending also towards verbal irony.

Study Limitations

The data collection method employed an online open-ended questionnaire. This represented a compromise between reaching a sizable enough sample and gathering

saturated enough data. While a face-to-face interview not limited to a set of predetermined questions could potentially deepen the understanding of the topic and provide many additional sources of data, conducting qualitative research through questionnaires is also not without precedent (see, e.g., Frith & Gleeson, 2004). Furthermore, a range of solutions can be implemented in future online studies to ensure more accurate data collection (see Aust et al., 2013).

While the current results contribute to the existing research, caution should be maintained when interpreting them. Above all, while the qualitative approach allowed to collect data which can direct further research, the natural limitations of such a methodology need to be considered. Attention was paid to maintain the highest possible degree of transparency (following best practice guidelines, describing the process of analysis, basing on established linguistic theory rather than designing the questions via pure intuition). Nevertheless, the content analysis was carried out by a single person, and thus some subjectivity cannot be discounted. For this reason, the results are presented as a complementary contribution to the existing literature rather than as decisive conclusions.

Furthermore, while the moderate size of the data set, achieved via the online questionnaire, allows for carrying out content analysis, the possible existence of a response bias cannot be discounted: Those participants who completed the questionnaire were mostly college-educated or college students, and thus could be distinguished by various characteristics (extraversion, psychological mindedness; see Burns, 1974), potentially influencing their answers. Additionally, the participants could have differed with respect to language proficiency, ease of expression in the written form, or even familiarity with the context and format of a psychological study, which could also impact the obtained data (see, e.g., Gordon, Slade, & Schmitt, 1986). Indeed, literacy is not a unitary construct. For example, the International Adult Literacy Survey distinguishes five levels of proficiency in prose literacy and document literacy separately (Thorn, 2009). The participants could have differed in terms of literacy levels, and these differences could have impacted the obtained results, either through facilitating participant self-selection (i.e., participants with lower literacy levels did not take part in the study) or by influencing the final shape of the data set (e.g., participants with higher literacy levels could have produced longer, more saturated responses).

As a possible way to mitigate these limitations, qualitative interviews could be conducted in-person, or participants could be invited to complete the online questionnaire on a computer in a set location, for example, a university room. Alternatively, a more targeted way of recruiting participants could be employed (e.g., posting advertisements in social media groups for people suffering from social anxiety instead of general student groups). Such solutions could ensure greater motivation and the ability to control for various confounding factors, for example, by the in-person interviewer adjusting their interpersonal style or rephrasing questions as needed.

Next, the surveyed population included mostly college-aged people, and while the size of the gelotophobic group surpassed the distribution of gelotophobia in the general population percentage-wise (Chłopicki et al., 2010), it still comprised only 13 people on the lower end of the scale. Additionally, the sample in the current study was uneven with respect to gender, with men being under-represented. This can have potentially significant consequences for measuring attitudes towards humor (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006) and irony in particular (see Colston & Lee, 2004; Kałowski & Malanowski, 2018). For example, men have been found to generally hold more favorable views towards irony (Milanowicz, 2013) and to use irony more often (Colston & Lee, 2004), while women perceive irony more negatively (Jorgensen, 1996; Milanowicz, 2013) and are more sensitive to detecting irony and its emotionally-charged character (Rivière & Champagne-Lavau, 2020). Therefore, controlling for the participants' gender is suggested in further studies.

Thus, the results of the current study should only tentatively be generalized to the wider population, especially to people exhibiting more intense expressions of gelotophobia. Nevertheless, they point to directions of further study, as the fact that qualitative intergroup differences were already visible in such a sample points towards the potential worth of studying verbal irony in larger numbers of gelotophobes displaying more pronounced symptoms. Finally, more fine-grained analyses regarding the relation of gelotophobia to such forms of non-literal humor as sarcasm or satire (Ruch et al., 2018), in addition to irony also seem worthwhile. Qualitative studies on verbal irony seem relatively under-represented, yet with appropriate methodological quality and diverse replications to safeguard against subjectivity, they could become a valuable contribution to the existing literature (see, e.g., Dynel, 2017, Taylor, 2017, Heinz & Ruch, 2018).

FOOTNOTES

1. The numbers in parentheses refer to the total amount of times a given theme or subtheme was mentioned in the entire data set for a given group. While a part of these frequency counts is relatively low, the importance of a theme in content analysis should not be equated with the numerical frequency of its appearance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, the example responses cited in the text have been translated from Polish into English.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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