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“I UNDERSTAND YOU, SO I’LL NOT HURT YOU WITH MY IRONY”:  
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN IRONY  
AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Due to the growing interest not only in theoretical approaches to irony, but also in its pragmatic functions, the number of questions is increasing. One of them is: Is irony in any way connected to emotional intelligence? This paper outlines what irony is and how it is used in everyday conversations. Analysis of current studies in emotional intelligence highlights its influence over behavior and attitude. It led to an experiment where subjects ( $N = 80$ ) were asked to fill an emotional intelligence questionnaire and an irony questionnaire. The results show that emotional intelligence is negatively correlated with the overall sum of ironic sentences and self-ironic sentences, and with the number of ironic praise sentences. Later, the implications of empirical findings are discussed.

*Key words:* irony, language, figurative speech, pragmatics, emotional intelligence

## Introduction

The subject of irony, despite the commitment and studies of many researchers, remains poorly investigated. Though we are getting better at realizing what irony is and how it is produced, we know less about its pragmatic use, its application in discourse, or the individual determinants of using irony. That is why irony continues to be a rewarding subject of research and reflection. If we consider the intensity of irony in daily life and the fact that how people approach irony is often charged emotionally, the need to understand ironic speech as a phenomenon is greater than ever before. If there is an “ethos of

irony” (“Irony is the ethos of our age,” Wampole, 2012, para. 1), then knowledge on irony becomes knowledge about ourselves.

For this reason, it is necessary, as well as intriguing, to find out who the ironists are. This is a question that so far has been in the background of research on irony. Seeking an answer became the starting point for the present text. Is there a correlation between ironic speech and emotional intelligence?

## **Irony**

Research on irony investigates verbal irony, as it always has a specific speaker (the “producer” of irony). Situational irony, also called the irony of fate, though it has a strong presence in popular culture and daily life, is less dependent on people. Verbal irony is the most important and most widespread category of irony, and also the most widely discussed in the literature (Bryant, 2012).

The oldest irony theory in psychological studies is Grice’s theory (1975), which defines irony as violating the quality maxim of communication. The maxim is “do not say what you believe to be false.” When we say “the weather’s nice today” on a rainy day, we know what we are saying is false, but we relay the statement anyway. Based on Grice’s approach, Searle (1979) assumes that the essence of irony lies in the utterance being inappropriate to the situation. However, this approach has been criticized for, among other things, not accounting for why a speaker decides to violate the maxim of quality in communication (Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg, & Brown, 1995) or due to the disputability of the notion of literal meaning (Gibbs & O’Brien, 1991).

A different approach to irony, being in opposition to the mainstream, is proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1981). The most important element of their so-called echoic theory of irony is that it distinguishes between *use* and *mention* of an expression (Sperber & Wilson, 1981). Use of an expression involves reference to what the expression refers to, while mention of an expression involves reference to the expression itself. In everyday conversations, mentions serve to underline that the previous statement has been heard and understood as well as to enable the listener to offer a response. Through the choice of words, tone, and context, ironists express their attitude toward what has been said - especially when they want to express disbelief or point to the inappropriateness of the previous statement (Sperber & Wilson, 1981). The key element in the listener recognizing something as ironic is understanding that the statement was an instance of mention and not use, and identifying the speaker’s attitude to what the statement expresses.

While Searle (1979) and Grice (1975) focused on language and negation, and Sperber and Wilson (1981) on echoing, the context and dramatic effect of irony remained outside their direct field of study. The almost theatrical nature of irony is the central element in another trend trying to define irony: pretense theory. There is an obvious connection to the etymology of irony as “pretended

ignorance” here – and in fact, the authors of pretense theory, Clark and Gerrig (1984), do invoke it. These authors suggest looking at ironic use as pretending that one is an injudicious person addressing an audience that is unaware of the context, whereas the intended addressee of the communication can see through the facade and identify the speaker’s intention. For this approach to irony, two audiences are needed: the actual one and another that can equally well be a mental construct. The other audience, unaware of the injudiciousness of the speaker’s statement, serves the purpose of enabling the real audience to see through the mask and, as a member of the “inner circle” based on a kind of intimate relation with the speaker (they are accomplices in irony against the other audience), to see the intended meaning of the irony, the speaker’s injudiciousness, and the other audience’s ignorance (Clark & Gerrig, 1984). The main elements of irony in this approach are the dramatic effect (Clift, 1999) and pretended ignorance. The authors point out that this approach explains many issues left unresolved by previous theories: the asymmetry effect (positive evaluations of negative outcomes are more ironic than negative evaluations of positive outcomes), the presence of a victim of irony, or the ironic tone of voice. It is worth noting that this theory does not negate Grice’s postulates, as he himself noted that an element of pretense is an inherent part of irony (Grice, 1978).

One interesting theory drawn from the development of thinking in terms of mention and pretense is the allusional pretense theory of Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995). According to this theory, ironic uses refer to expectations or norms that will be violated. Irony is founded on the difference between what is and what should be. Ironic use must contradict the principle of honesty and occur in a situation of violation of expectations. The authors point out that such a definition can cover a wide range of uses of allusion (questions, requests, offers). Empirical studies have shown that irony does in fact violate the assumption related to contradicted expectations. However, ironic expressions that agreed with the assumptions of speech acts but were still interpreted as ironic were also found (Colston, 2000).

Presenting definitions of irony, one cannot leave out the work of Attardo (2000), who based his definition on the category of *relevant inappropriateness*. In his view, identifying irony requires a level of violation of relevance, appropriateness, or the way in which an expression is produced (Attardo, 2000).

Numerous doubts regarding different concepts of irony – both its definition and the mechanisms of its processing – show that it is a vague, dynamic concept determined in discourse and not having a fixed meaning. Though some elements are shared by all the approaches and some factors appear more often than others, it is difficult to make categorical judgments about irony – it is likely to remain an intuitive or only partially classified notion.

## Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is an extremely popular construct, researched intensively in psychology as well as other sciences, with a growing number of studies devoted to it (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2004). One extremely popular approach is to consider emotional intelligence as a skill. It includes the ability to identify, describe, and express emotions, to access and produce emotions compatible with one's thoughts, and to manage emotions in a way that leads to emotional and intellectual development (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). There are four specific, hierarchical skills involved: identification, assimilation, understanding, and regulation of one's own and other people's emotions. This is based on processing of information with emotional content, showing a connection to the types of intelligence already well established in psychology (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2004). Having and developing emotional intelligence enables people to function in society and find their place in an environment full of affective stimuli. Salovey and Mayer's (1990) model has found confirmation in many empirical studies (Fernandez-Berocal & Extremera, 2006).

The underlying assumption is different in the emotional intelligence theory by Bar-On (1997). This is a mixed model: Its author does not consider emotional intelligence to be a distinguishable mental capacity, but a construct strongly tied to coexisting personality traits (Bar-On, 1997). It defines emotional intelligence as a series of non-cognitive skills, competences, and abilities that affect the capacity to deal with environmental pressures and demands (Bar-On, 1997, p. 14). In other words, this kind of intelligence is a set of mutually related social and emotional skills and competences that determine how one understands and expresses oneself, understands and relates to others, and handles daily challenges (Bar-On, 2006). The author distinguishes the following domains of emotional intelligence: intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, adaptability, stress management, and general mood (Bar-On, 1997).

The last widely acknowledged model of emotional intelligence is that proposed by Daniel Goleman (2007). This, too, is a mixed model because it considers emotional intelligence as the core of other structures in an individual's mind, determining its character. The author distinguishes five areas: awareness of one's own emotions, regulation of one's own emotions, self-motivation, identifying the emotions of others (empathic awareness), and maintaining relations (*ibidem*). It needs noting that of the three models outlined here, this last one has been the least well verified empirically (Fernandez-Berocal & Extremera, 2006).

Regardless of the adopted model, one cannot fail to notice that emotional intelligence – as a skill or a trait, a component of personality, or general intelligence – radically affects daily functioning. The way people experience and understand emotions largely influences their behavioral responses in

a given context and shapes the way they function in many different areas of daily activity.

Relevant social competences determine human activity and affect the way people behave, including what they say and how they say it. The appropriate form of criticism for a given objective, the ability to soften it, praise adequate for the context, the sentences uttered – all this depends on emotional intelligence (the ability to process also the emotions of others) and social competences. One could say that these two factors form a cognitive framework enabling people to predict and control their own and other people’s emotions, which can make it easier to shape situations according to their will.

Empirical discoveries have shown that emotional intelligence is correlated the most strongly with indirect aggression, slightly less with verbal aggression, and the least strongly with physical aggression (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 2000). This could stem from the fact that indirect and verbal aggression are less threatening than physical aggression, or are considered more sophisticated but also socially acceptable. A higher level of empathy reduces the intensity of aggressive behaviors. This suggests that empathy mediates between emotional intelligence and aggression rather than being a component of emotional intelligence. Understanding and noticing other people’s emotions is not the same as empathizing - in fact, one could say, and this is also suggested by Bjorkqvist et al. (2000)- that high emotional intelligence coupled with undeveloped empathy can lead to Machiavellian actions resulting from strong awareness of one’s own and others’ emotional functioning and failure to account for the affective results of one’s actions when assessing them. In other words, someone with high emotional intelligence and low empathy knows what others feel but does not necessarily take this into account.

The above outline aimed to show what emotional intelligence is and what purpose it serves. It is evident both from the theories and, above all, from empirical research that it is extremely important for individual as well as social functioning. It has a substantial impact on thought but also on behavioral processes. Awareness of one’s own and others’ feelings enables one to choose a situation-appropriate response strategy. In the light of research on irony and emotional intelligence, the hypothesis that there is a correlation between these constructs seems justified.

### **Pragmatics of Irony**

Now that it has been shown what irony is and what emotional intelligence is, it is also necessary to indicate how irony is used in discourse. By looking at this use of language from the point of view of pragmatics, it will be possible to show why emotional intelligence has been chosen as a potential correlate of ironic speech.

There is no doubt that irony belongs to the broader category of figurative speech. Figurative speech is used for highlighting, clarification, showing

negative emotions, or for self-promotion, for example, to show one is witty (Roberts & Kreuz, 1994).

It is impossible to analyze the use of ironic expressions without first noting that there is a functional distinction to be made for clarity of argumentation. In Western culture and its discourse, unquestionably the most frequent example of ironic speech is blame by praise (that kind of utterance is called *blame irony*; Dews, Kaplan, & Winner, 1995). One example would be the utterance “great game, Mark!” coming from a speaker watching Mark’s very poor performance in golf (Dews et al., 1995). The literal meaning in this type of irony use is praise, which turns out to be false once one understands (thanks to the context, sometimes also the tone of voice, or other factors) the irony coded within. Thanks to decoding (as noted earlier, this is often unconscious), the criticism concealed in the expression becomes clear. Blame by praise is used to make the utterance funny, which can reduce tension (Dews et al., 1995) but above all reinforces the critical message produced in the expression (Colston, 1997). Hence, we can infer that the speaker wants to express his or her thoughts more powerfully or to control the situation. Colston (1997) notes, however, that there are situations in which ironic blame releases tension and weakens the critical overtone, indicating that we should be careful with generalizations about types of irony in isolation from context, as this can be of key importance for understanding the pragmatic use of irony. Rhetoric is sometimes called an art or a skill (Korolko, 1990), which also shows how much can depend on the communication competence and abilities of both the speaker and the audience of a message.

The next type of ironic expression is *praise by blame* (ironic utterances involving praise by blame are referred to as *praise irony*). Symmetrically opposite to the previously described category, an ironic compliment contains a literal layer, which is a critical statement, and a metaphorical layer concealing praise (Pexman & Olineck, 2002). An example often quoted in the literature is the use of the word *terrific* together with many other words to form strongly lexicalized phrases, for example, “terrific performance,” “terrific do,” “terrific friend,” which express praise or the great impression something has made on the speaker (Colston, 2000; Hancock, Dunham, & Purdy, 2000). Praise by blame appears to be less widespread. A trace of it can be found in the Polish expression “jesteś strasznym przyjacielem” (literally “you are an awful friend”), where *awful* is a carrier of negative meaning. However, one needs to consider whether this actually is strongly lexicalized irony or, perhaps, a semantic shift; In some contexts, *awfully* would serve rather as a reinforcement of the positive meaning of the word coming after it (“awfully nice”) and would be a synonym for *very*. This is definitely an issue worth further discussion and consideration by linguists.

Ironic compliments carry a less positive charge and are considered less polite than literal compliments (Pexman & Olineck, 2002). This can be advantageous in situations when the speaker wants to save face – not jeopardize their

status, not reveal their true intentions, or not embarrass the recipient of the compliment.

The two above categories cover a large part of ironic statements. Irony is most often used to show a person’s attitude toward a given object, and criticism and compliments seem to be the most widespread ways of expressing attitude. That does not mean, however, that this classification fully covers all uses of irony. Various researchers propose other categories as well, though it needs noting that the listed types will be in different kinds of relationships (usually inclusive) with ironic praise or ironic blame.

An exhaustive classification supported by research on transcripts of real conversations has been proposed by Gibbs (2000). He distinguishes ironic utterances based on jocularity, sarcasm, rhetorical questions, hyperbole, and so forth. It is worth noting right away that each type has a different use: The research in question shows that jocular use of irony usually uses a negative communication to conceal a positive meaning, while an expression of understanding appears in ironic exchanges of utterances.

If self-presentation means controlling the way others perceive us and manipulating impressions (Leary, 2007), and it takes place largely through language, then every use of language, especially as distinctive as irony, leaves a trace in the audience. What it is a trace of and to what conclusions it leads will be the subject of the further part of the present paper. However, to understand the strategy of using irony, it is important to note that, irrespective of whether it is used intentionally or unintentionally, it has the potential to affect what the audience (even an accidental witness) will think about the speaker.

## **The Current Study**

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of the study was to find out if there are correlations between emotional intelligence and ironic speech described in quantitative terms. Different uses of irony were considered, such as blame irony and praise irony, and also differences depending on the audience of an ironic communication (self-irony, also referred to as *autoirony*, or irony addressed to others).

On this basis, the main research question put forward was “is there a correlation between emotional intelligence and a tendency for ironic speech?”

The problem was expressed as above because finding an answer to this question could bring us closer to knowledge about ironic minds and also – in a way – to realizing who contemporary ironists are and how the society they form functions. To properly approach such a complex phenomenon and such a complicated object of research, a set of research questions was built around the main problem during operationalization:

1. Is there a correlation between emotional intelligence and a tendency towards ironic speech?
2. Is there a correlation between emotional intelligence and a tendency to use ironic expressions for a specific purpose, such as blame or praise?
3. Is there a correlation between emotional intelligence and a tendency for autoirony?

To find answers to these research questions, the following hypotheses were offered:

1. There is a linear correlation between the level of emotional intelligence and the number of ironic utterances produced.
2. There is a linear correlation between the level of emotional intelligence and the number of utterances that are critically ironic or ironically praising.
3. There is a linear correlation between emotional intelligence and the number of autoironic sentences produced.
4. There is a difference in the number of ironic (blame, praise) and autoironic sentences produced between people with high emotional intelligence and those with low emotional intelligence.

In view of the significant impact that emotional intelligence has on how people function, including socially, one can expect this variable to affect the use of irony. The direction of the correlation is probably negative, because considering the increased criticism of an ironic communication compared to literal criticism and its affective response, people who understand and show consideration for the emotions of others will use irony less often, especially blame irony.

## Method

**Subjects.** The study involved 80 students aged 19-30 years ( $M = 21.61$ ,  $SD = 2.79$ ): 56 women and 24 men.

**Materials.** The tool used to study emotional intelligence was the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (EIQ; Ciechanowicz, Jaworowska, & Matczak, 2000). The authors based it on emotional intelligence from the concept of Salovey and Mayer (1990). The questionnaire is comprised of 33 self-descriptive items whose aptness with respect to themselves the subjects evaluate on a five-degree scale from 1 (*I definitely don't agree*) to 5 (*I definitely agree*). Most of them can be classified as statements on skills or abilities, and less as concerning preferences or life optimism. The minimal result is 33 points, the maximum is 165 points. The EIQ shows satisfactory reliability and accuracy.

Also used in the study was an original tool called the Irony Generation Test (IGT). It is comprised of 12 items and is intended to check how many ironic utterances a given person will produce. Twelve situations that could happen in ordinary life were created, involving people denoted by initials. The scenes

end in such a way that someone can say something; it is the task of the subject to write what the character in the story might say. Next, these endings are evaluated to see if the expressions used are ironic or non-ironic. The sum of ironic sentences produced is the result of the test. This means that a person can get 0 points minimum (no ironic sentences) and 12 points maximum.

It is clear that the IGT is based on the same assumptions as projection tests, that is, the subject will perceive the events and stimuli in the story in terms of his or her own expectations and views and will subconsciously attribute his or her own processes to others (the characters in the story), as if "speaking with their lips" (Frank, 1989). For this reason, the characters in the stories were denoted by gender-neutral initials (*A* and *B*). The test contains no articles or inflected forms that could suggest the gender of the characters in the story situations, so that the subjects can project themselves onto the test positions.

The situations have been written so as to take into account different social configurations of the people involved (e.g., boss and subordinate) as well as the two most general functions of irony: blame and praise (involving a compliment).

In terms of the person receiving the communication and the social hierarchy, the items can be divided into the following groups:

- Items checking autoirony, when person *A* has done something (e.g., cleaned the house, broken a glass) leading to a specific situation and is asked to comment (instruction: "what do you think *A* could tell themselves?")
- A situation of equal status, when both persons in the situation are acquaintances or know each other very well, which suggests there are ties of friendship between them (e.g., *A* and *B* are friends, *A* and *B* have known each other a long time).
- Situations of unequal status, which can be manifested in subordination or superiority as seen from the speaker's point of view. The ranks have been arranged to account for different options: inequality stemming from business relations (*B* works for *A*) or quasi-business relations (*A* teaches a seminar for students. *B* is late), cultural norms (*A* going into a building is followed by the elderly *B*), or cultural and functional factors (*A* is *B*'s child).

Each of these arrangements has four corresponding items, so the test is comprised of four situations in which the subject is asked to write an utterance "to himself or herself", four situations involving equal partners, and four with unequal partners (two subordinate and two superior).

### **Research Procedure**

The study was conducted as a group test at the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Warsaw and the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering of the Silesian University of Technology<sup>1</sup>.

The subjects were given the questionnaires stapled together. The IGT was first, due to the necessity of avoiding priming by stimuli related to emotional intelligence, which could lead to the IGT items being filled in after the situations were perceived through a person's emotional intelligence (Bengtsson, Dolan, & Passingham, 2010). Next, the subjects were asked to fill in the EIQ; Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (SES) was used to assess general self-esteem, understood as a conscious attitude toward the self (Dzwonkowska, Lachowicz-Tabaczek, & Łaguna, 2008)<sup>2</sup>. The time of filling in the tests ranged from 20 to 45 minutes.

## Results

For the analysis of results, the following indicators were created:

1. Sum of ironic sentences (*Sum of irony*), or the average sum of values of all the IGT test items, where an ironic statement was assigned the value of 1 and a non-ironic one – 0. Descriptive statistics:  $N = 80$ ,  $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ , skewness of 0.67, kurtosis of 0.1. Analysis with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test yielded the results of  $Z(80) = 0.17$ ;  $p < 0.05$ , which means the distribution is not similar to a normal distribution.
2. Sum of ironic blame sentences (*Blame irony* or *blame*), or the average sum of values of the IGT test items testing the production of critical statements. Descriptive statistics:  $N = 80$ ,  $M = 1.09$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ , skewness of 0.91, kurtosis of 0.39. Analysis with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test yielded the results of  $Z(80) = 0.24$ ;  $p < 0.05$ , which means the distribution is not similar to a normal distribution.
3. Sum of ironic praise sentences (*Praise irony* or *praise*), or the average sum of values of the IGT test items testing the production of ironic statements that constituted praise or a compliment. Descriptive statistics:  $N = 80$ ,  $M = 1.17$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ , skewness of 0.88, kurtosis of 1.01. Analysis with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test yielded the results of  $Z(80) = 0.24$ ;  $p < 0.05$ , which means the distribution is not similar to a normal distribution.
4. Sum of autoironic sentences (*Self-irony* or *irony to self*), or the average sum of values of the IGT test items testing the production of self-ironic statements. Descriptive statistics:  $N = 80$ ,  $M = 0.73$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ , skewness of 0.498, kurtosis of -1.04. Analysis with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test yielded the results of  $Z(80) = 0.28$ ;  $p < 0.05$ , which means the distribution is not similar to a normal distribution.

The indicators based on the EIQ results were described as follows:

1. Emotional intelligence:  $N = 80$ ,  $M = 126.50$ ,  $SD = 11.16$ , skewness of 0.26, kurtosis of -0.54. Analysis with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test yielded the results of  $Z(80) = 0.57$ ; ins., which means the distribution is similar

to a normal distribution. This confirms the information presented by the authors of the Polish adaptation of EIQ (Ciechanowicz et al., 2000).

For the purpose of further analysis, the individual EIQ results were also calculated to sten scores in accordance with the values provided in the tables from the manual, based on the tool’s normalization.

**Hypotheses 1-3.** To check whether there is a linear correlation between emotional intelligence and a tendency for ironic speech (operationalized as the number of ironic sentences produced) for different functions of irony, correlation calculations were carried out.

The choice of correlation method (Pearson’s *r*, Kendall’s tau, Spearman’s rho) depends on their two assumptions being met. It is accepted that Pearson’s *r* test is the strongest statistically, but above all it requires a normal distribution of the variable and is sensitive to extreme values. Though the variable distribution is not similar to normal, as shown above, an analysis of the scatter diagram (see Appendix) leads to the conclusion that the other, much more important assumption – which is lack of extreme values – is met, justifying the use of Pearson’s *r* test in the present study<sup>3</sup>. The result of the calculations is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation Between Emotional Intelligence and the Number of Ironic Sentences Produced

	Sum of irony	Irony to self	Blame	Praise
Correlation coefficient	-0.25*	-0.23*	-0.10	-0.27*

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

The above observation indicates that emotional intelligence is negatively but significantly correlated to a small extent (the correlation coefficient ranges between 0.2 and 0.3) with the overall sum of ironic sentences, and also with the number of autoironic and ironic praise sentences. This means that as emotional intelligence increases, the number of sentences produced in these categories decreases.

Next, a regression model was built to check how large a variability of variance in the number of ironic sentences can be explained by emotional intelligence. The linear regression used is better than a blind guess in predicting

the value of the sum of irony on the basis of emotional intelligence and explains approximately 6% of the variance in the group (which is quite a low value),  $R^2 = 0.06$ ,  $F(1, 78) = 5.20$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

**Hypothesis 4.** In order to be able to check if there was a difference in the number of ironic sentences produced for the different functions of irony, with emotional intelligence taken into account, a division into groups according to this variable had to be made.

The normalization from the EIQ manual was taken as the basis – the respective raw values were calculated into sten norms. Subjects whose results were between sten scores of 1 and 4 were included in the “low emotional intelligence” group, and those with a result of 7 to 10 – in the “high emotional intelligence” group. Both groups counted 25 members. Though equal in size, the groups were too small to justify the use of parametric tests in spite of the non-normal distribution. Therefore, further analyses were performed using the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test.

The following descriptive statistics were calculated for the indicators of the variables:

- Blame irony for the low emotional intelligence group:  $N = 25$ ,  $M = 1.16$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ , *skewness of 0.96*, *kurtosis of 0.20*.
- Blame irony for the high emotional intelligence group:  $N = 25$ ,  $M = 1.08$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ , *skewness of 1.14*, *kurtosis of 1.08*.
- Praise irony for the low emotional intelligence group:  $N = 25$ ,  $M = 1.76$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ , *skewness of 0.89*, *kurtosis of 1.36*.
- Praise irony for the high emotional intelligence group:  $N = 25$ ,  $M = 0.96$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ , *skewness of 0.54*, *kurtosis of -0.20*.

It emerged during the analysis that it is possible to confirm the hypothesis that there is a difference in the number of ironic praise sentences produced between people with high emotional intelligence and those with low emotional intelligence, where those whose EIQ results were between sten scores of 1 and 4 produced more such sentences ( $M_{\text{rank}} = 30.64$ ; representatives of the high emotional intelligence sample:  $M_{\text{rank}} = 20.36$ ),  $U = 184$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . This confirms the correlation shown earlier.

The hypothesis similar to the above, but concerning blame sentences, should be rejected. An analysis with the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test did not show a difference in the number of ironic blame sentences between the groups differing in the level of emotional intelligence,  $U = 303$ ,  $p = 0.84$ , that is, a statistically insignificant result.

In an analogy to the testing of the earlier hypotheses, the groups with high emotional intelligence and low emotional intelligence were checked for any differences in the number of autoironic sentences produced. Before that, however, the descriptive statistics were calculated:

- Autoirony in the low emotional intelligence group:  $N = 25$ ,  $M = 0.92$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ , skewness of 0.15, kurtosis of -1.45.
- Autoirony in the high emotional intelligence group:  $N = 25$ ,  $M = 0.56$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ , skewness of 0.90, kurtosis of -0.38.

The test yielded the following result:  $U = 235$ ,  $p = 0.1$  for  $M_{\text{rank}} = 28.58$  (low emotional intelligence) and  $M_{\text{rank}} = 22.42$  (high emotional intelligence). Therefore, it should be assumed that no difference was found.

## Discussion

High emotional intelligence (measured with the EIQ) is negatively correlated with the overall sum of ironic sentences, with the number of autoironic sentences, and with the number of ironic praise sentences. A comparison of the high and low emotional intelligence groups in terms of the average frequency of ironic sentences was inconclusive: The result suggests a tendency, which makes it hard to say whether the hypothesis has been refuted or supported.

The higher the emotional intelligence, the less a person uses ironic speech – this conclusion proves the hypothesis and seems logical from the point of view of even rudimentary knowledge of psychology. However, research and academic integrity requires potential sources of this correlation to be indicated.

It needs noting that the linear regression analysis showed that emotional intelligence is a poor predictor of ironic speech and explains the variability of variance in the group. Thanks to this, it is justified to posit that there is a degree of causality between emotional intelligence and ironic speech.

First of all, we need to look at the personality correlates of emotional intelligence – this trait (or skill, depending on the theoretical approach) is positively correlated with *agreeableness* and extraversion, and negatively with a neurotic attitude (Dawda & Hart, 2000). Agreeableness is understood as a factor describing the attitude toward other people manifested in positive behaviors, one of its elements being straightforwardness (Zawadzki, Strelau, Szczepaniak, & Śliwińska, 1998). This could lead to avoidance of structures of multi-tiered meaning (like detecting irony in an utterance) and to a tendency for clarity in communication, which irony may not be conducive to, as shown earlier. Extraversion, meanwhile, understood in the most general sense, does not seem to have much in common with irony, and if it did, it should support it, since irony attracts attention and arouses interest (Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995). However, it needs noting that extraversion's factors also include positive emotions and cordiality (Siuta, 2006). It is logical to suppose that extraversion (where those two factors are particularly strong) combined with emotional intelligence will lead to consideration of other people's emotional states in

different manifestations of involvement. A combination of high emotional intelligence with emotional positivity and cordiality can lead to avoidance of irony as something potentially critical and possibly incomprehensible.

The above-described role of emotional intelligence seems to explain a weak tendency towards ironic speech. If emotional intelligence is responsible for understanding and acknowledging the emotions of others when choosing one's behavior (and according to the EIQ, it is), then the awareness that irony is mostly perceived as criticism (Gucman, 2015) will incline a person towards not using it for fear of hurting their interlocutor's feelings. This is the simplest explanation but, in accordance with the principle of Ockham's razor, the most convincing one. It has additional worth: It not only sheds light on the use of irony but also consolidates earlier discoveries related to how irony is received.

It needs underlining at this point that, like every study on communication, this one is also strongly embedded in culture. Depending on professed values, norms, and beliefs, the correlations considered here can be different. This applies particularly to emotional intelligence – the pattern discussed here and its explanation can only be true if irony, especially blame irony, is more critical and risky than literal communication.

This conclusion is compatible with the results of other studies on emotional intelligence: It has been reported that the number of critical or passive-aggressive comments decreases with growing emotional intelligence (Brackett & Geher, 2006) and that not using irony has a positive impact on relationships (Goleman, 2007). Empathetic awareness probably plays a key role in explaining why there is a negative linear correlation between emotional intelligence and a tendency for ironic speech.

The tool used in the study – the EIQ questionnaire – is used, among other things, for measuring the ability to make use of emotions; It strongly accounts for empathy as a component of emotional intelligence (which can be seen, for example, in the item “when someone tells me about an important event from their life, I almost feel as if I had lived it”). Clearly, the affective charge of ironic statements and its valence is extremely important for the correlation between emotional intelligence and ironic speech. When emotional intelligence is high, others' emotions are taken into consideration and the addressee's feelings are not exposed to hurt more than is necessary.

Also, for the negative correlation between emotional intelligence and the tendency towards self-irony, the answer appears simple. Emotional intelligence is a trait (or, again, a skill) that largely regulates a person's emotions so that they lead to intellectual and emotional development (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). The observed correlation suggests that ironic speech addressed to oneself, especially criticism, is not an optimal mechanism enabling tension or uncertainty to be lessened. There exist more effective or more desirable emotion regulation tactics that are available to people with high emotional intelligence, because

such people are more competent at regulating their own emotions. Therefore, irony might not lead to a lower level of discomfort related to an unpleasant event: It does not quiet negative emotions or change them into constructive affect but rather constitutes a less mature form of internal dialogue aimed at achieving an inner harmony of emotions.

Of course, these conclusions are true if we assume that empathy involves not just understanding other people's emotional states but also compassion, which leads to communication that takes into account the interlocutor's positive emotions. If this assumption is correct, then the conclusions about emotional intelligence can be summarized as follows: When someone has a high level of emotional intelligence, they show concern for their relationships and know how to behave in accordance with their own and other people's emotions – hence they use irony less often in order not to risk excessive criticism or hurting of their interlocutor, and regulate their own emotions in ways other than with ironic speech.

### Appendix

Figure 1. Scatter of results: sum of irony and emotional intelligence

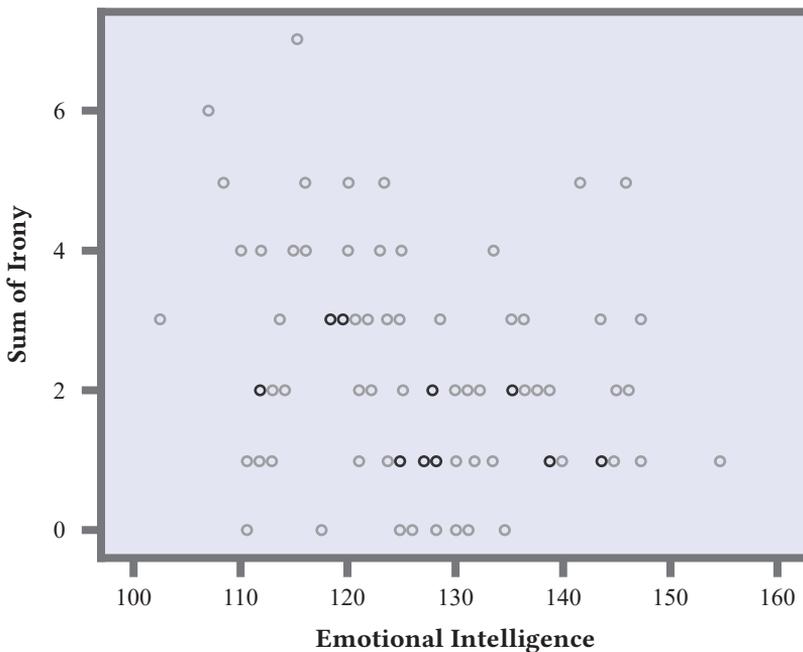


Figure 2. Scatter of results: autoirony and emotional intelligence

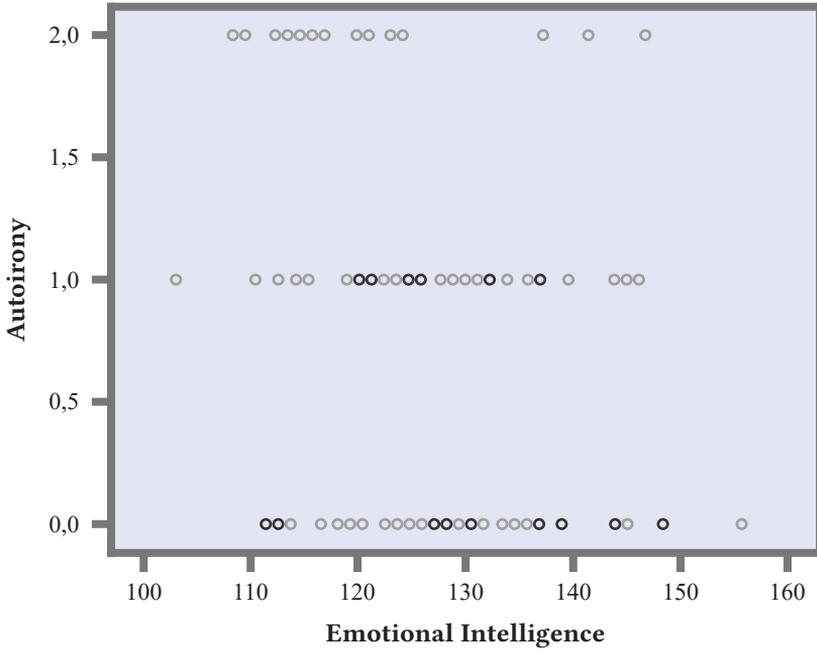


Figure 3. Scatter of results: blame irony and emotional intelligence

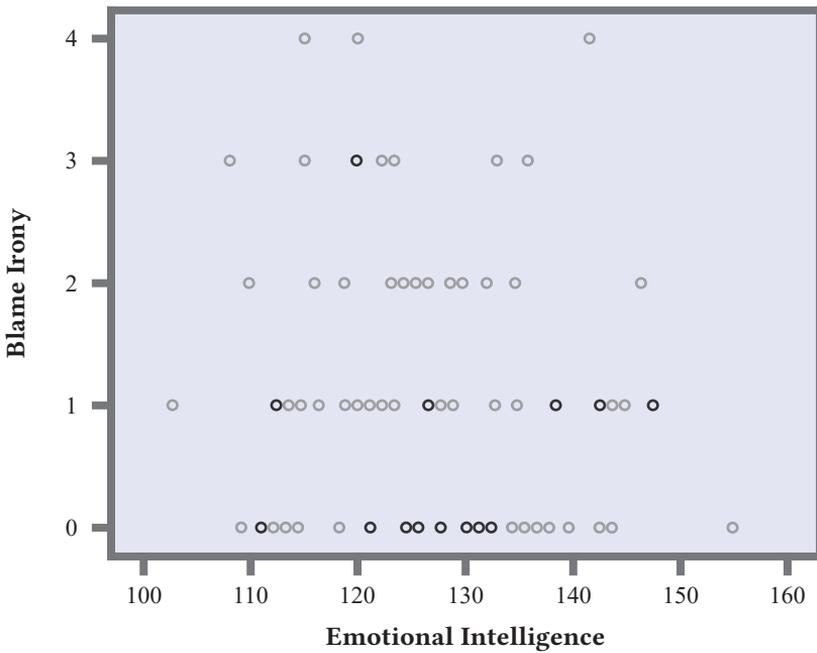
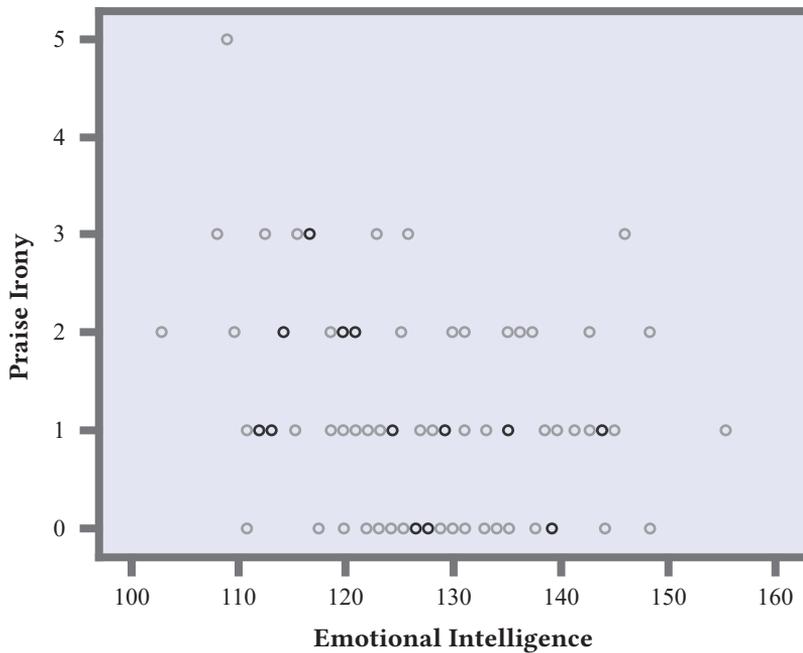


Figure 4. Scatter of results: praise irony and emotional intelligence



**Footnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> The results did not reveal differences between students of the two different types of university.
- <sup>2</sup> The present paper does not cover the results of the SES self-esteem scale. They will be presented separately.
- <sup>3</sup> According to Bedyńska, Niewiarowski, & Cypryńska (2013), in the case of a study sample size of more than 30 people, parametric tests are usually resistant to violations of the assumptions and therefore the analysis can be performed with the help of parametric tests.

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