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**PERCEPTIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF SARCASTIC AND IRONIC  
UTTERANCES IN THE “GOSSIP GIRL” SERIES BY ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN  
LANGUAGE (EFL) LEARNERS**

Bachelor’s Thesis

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## PREFACE

EFL learners might encounter challenges in comprehending subtle aspects of language, especially regarding understanding sarcasm and irony (Attardo et al, 2003; Banasik-Jemielniak, 2019; Capelli, et al, 1990; Grice, 1975; Kim, 2014; Ramos, 2000; Tiv et al, 2021). Although sarcasm and irony have gained prominence in linguistic research, the existing literature—such as studies by Attardo et al. (2003) and Kim (2014)—suggests there remains a substantial amount of uncharted territory regarding the cross-cultural comprehension of these linguistic phenomena. Given the widespread popularity of “Gossip Girl” and its rich dialogue containing instances of sarcasm and irony, investigating how university-level EFL learners in Estonia perceive and interpret such utterances might present a certain research interest for educators, curriculum developers, and researchers in the field of language pedagogy. Therefore, the research problem addressed by this Bachelor’s thesis is the gap in understanding how EFL learners, specifically university-level learners in Estonia, interpret sarcasm and irony in media, which has implications for language teaching and the development of comprehension skills in foreign language education. The data will be statistically analysed and evaluated about Grice's (1975) maxim of quality and Ramos' (2000) contextual sources in a practical discussion of individual interactions and the degree of success implicature interpretation. This pragmatic approach is intended to address the aims of the study, which are to explore how EFL learners in Estonia perceive sarcasm and irony in English language communication, to determine the role of sarcasm and irony in the acquisition of English as a foreign language, to identify correlations between informants’ self-assessed English language proficiency and their understanding of sarcasm and irony, and to determine whether there are correlations between the interpretation of sarcasm and irony among university EFL learners in Estonia and their exposure to English-language media and cultural contexts.

The research paper contains an introduction, two main chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction provides an overview of sarcasm and irony, their dictionary definitions and a literature review on these linguistic means of communication. Chapter I, “Theoretical Foundations of Irony and Sarcasm,” discusses the initial exposure to sarcasm and irony, exploring factors such as first exposure, differences in understanding between children and adults, and the role of media such as “Gossip Girl” series, in facilitating this understanding. Chapter II, “Irony and Sarcasm Perception among Estonian University EFL Learners” details the research methodology, including the selection of “Gossip Girl” episodes and scenes, the use of subtitles, and the design of the questionnaire. This chapter also includes an analysis and discussion of the

results. The conclusion summarises the key theoretical and practical findings of the paper and evaluates the implications of the research.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Every day, people employ verbal irony in social situations to accomplish a variety of communication goals. According to Gibbs (2000), irony may occur in as many as 8% of all conversations between friends who speak English and reside in the United States. Irony and sarcasm are important components of linguistic communication, often serving as tools to convey hidden meanings, criticism, as well as in expressing emotions and evaluations. Since these linguistic phenomena are marked by multiple meanings, they can be usually difficult to understand as they often contradict the literal meaning of words. For foreign language learners in particular, this is especially true since knowledge of vocabulary and grammar is not always sufficient to successfully perceive and interpret such complex linguistic nuances. In order to better understand the nature of these phenomena and their part in foreign language learning it is crucial to turn to certain theories and approaches that view sarcasm and irony as aspects of linguistics and intercultural communication. Although the topic of sarcasm and irony comprehension is contemporary, the literature indicates that there is still a significant gap in understanding these language features across different cultures (Kim, 2014).

### **Dictionary Definitions of Irony and Sarcasm**

#### *Irony*

The concept of irony is multifaceted, encompassing both situational and verbal forms. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, irony can refer to a situation in which the outcome is starkly different from what was intended or expected (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). This type of irony highlights the unpredictability and often the humour in the reversal of expectations. Additionally, irony can manifest through language, where words are used to express the opposite of their literal meaning, often to achieve a humorous effect (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In the following paper, irony will be defined specifically as stated in the second definition: the use of words that convey the opposite of their literal meaning, often employed to create humour. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, this form of irony involves expressing something contrary to what is meant, such as when someone's voice is heavy with irony to indicate the humorous or sarcastic intent behind their words (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Moreover, in addition to the previous definitions, the Cambridge Dictionary provides a third interpretation of irony specific to American usage, describing it as “a type of usually humorous expression in which you say the opposite of what you intend” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Following The Oxford English Dictionary, irony is a meaning expressed by means of language which usually means the opposite, usually for humorous or emphatic effect and in earlier usage used as approving language to actually imply condemnation or contempt as well as with reference to sarcasm in such a case (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.)

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives related yet distinct definitions, where first one suggests that irony as verbal expression involves the use of words to convey a meaning that is different, often opposite, from their literal interpretation, usually with humorous or sardonic overtones (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Second case views irony in different events and as dramatic irony, implying that it can also describe the discrepancy between the expected and actual outcome of an event or its occurrence, emphasising the contrast between what is expected and what actually happens, and that it can be also observed in dramatic contexts in which the audience realises the absurdity of a situation that the characters themselves do not (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). And third point considers Socratic irony which exposes flaws in the reasoning of others through skilful questioning (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

### *Sarcasm*

Sarcasm is a term that refers to a variety of speech patterns intended to belittle or disparage other people, frequently by using words that convey the opposite of their literal meaning. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, sarcasm involves the deliberate use of remarks that express the opposite of what is truly meant, intending to hurt someone's feelings or to criticize something, often in a humorous manner (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). This definition highlights sarcasm's dual nature, serving both as a means of critique and amusement. Additionally, sarcasm can take the form of remarks that criticize someone or something in a way that is amusing to others but may be irritating or offensive to the person being criticized (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In this context, sarcasm serves as a tool for social commentary, providing a means of expressing dissatisfaction or disdain in a manner that is both entertaining and cutting.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary sarcasm is a “sharp, bitter, or cutting expression or remark; a bitter gibe or taunt.” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines sarcasm as a “a sharp and often satirical or ironic utterance designed to cut or give pain” and as a form of satirical humorous wit that relies on biting, harsh, and often ironic language, typically aimed at a specific person (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

## Irony and Sarcasm beyond Basic Definitions

Dictionary definitions of sarcasm and irony are helpful, yet they fall short in certain respects. To provide a more comprehensive knowledge of the terminology, additional theories will be discussed in this section. The following theories address sarcasm as well, despite the authors' primary discussion of irony, since both terms derive from the same meaning, as stated in the previous subchapter.

For a deeper understanding of the process of comprehension of sarcasm and irony by EFL learners, it is crucial to consider the major theoretical approaches that explore these phenomena from different angles. One of the most widely recognised approaches is Grice's (1975) theory of implicature, which provides a foundational perspective for understanding both irony and sarcasm. Grice (1975) introduces the concept of conversational implicatures, which suggests that what is said always contains more than just what is actually pronounced or put in written. He believes that information always carries a deep underlying meaning and that in order to successfully understand and present it, all four of Grice's Conversational Maxims must be observed: *quantity*, *quality*, *relevance and manner*, where quantity represents optimal amount of information, quality for credibility and comprehensiveness, relevance for appropriateness to the topic, and manner for being clear and avoiding ambiguity. Hence, based on the concept of conversational implicatures, which are meanings implied by speakers but not explicitly stated, Grice (1975) suggests that irony often involves a flouting of one of the four Grice's Conversational Maxims - the conversational maxim of quality. Therefore, irony refers to a situation in which the speakers mean something clearly opposite or false to what they actually said. A good example would be the phrase one often hears when describing bad weather with rain and lightning: "What a lovely weather we have here", in such case the speaker means the exact opposite of his literal statement. This subtextual opposition presented by Grice (1975) is a crucial element in understanding how irony and sarcasm function in conversation.

Lee (1994) discusses the similarities and differences between irony and sarcasm, emphasising that while both terms imply a discrepancy between what is said and what is implied, sarcasm is often characterised by a sharper, more cutting intention and commonly intended to ridicule or convey contempt, whereas irony can be more subtle and less aggressive. According to Lee's analysis, irony can be without the sarcasm, but sarcasm is always with irony, therefore sarcasm always inherently carries a degree of irony, which makes these phenomena dough bound. This

differentiated understanding makes it clear that while all sarcasm is ironic, it is not necessarily sarcastic. Moreover, according to Lee (1994), the psychological mechanisms of irony and sarcasm involve the different cognitive and emotional processes. Sarcasm generally requires a lot of emotional investment especially to show feelings such as disdain or humour. Irony, on the other hand, is often more detached and intellectual in its approach as it seeks to expose oxymoron or other forms of discrepancy without necessarily provoking strong emotions. This understanding helps in differentiating how these types of expressions, such as sarcasm and irony, function in social settings and therefore, the two should not be confused.

Additionally, a broadly similar point has also been made by Attardo et al. (2003). Their study asserts that sarcasm and irony are not interchangeable since the two have different communication functions and are marked by different multimodal signals. The study by Attardo et al. (2003) shows that sarcasm is commonly expressed with a harsher vocal tone and non-verbal signals like overacting on the face or changes in voice, while irony relies on the context and is often delivered with a more cool and distant language. Such variations in the expression and perception of irony and sarcasm highlight the need to distinguish between phenomena since each functions differently in social situations and has consequences for both listener's interpretation and speaker's intention.

Consequently, considering all the mentioned theories and classical dictionary definitions, it can be said that sarcasm and irony are undoubtedly closely related concepts, as they have such similarities as representation of opposition between literal and intended meaning, cultural and contextual dependence as well as humorous and critique-oriented purpose. However, despite all these similarities, they have meaningful differences such as intent, tone, expression, function: irony is often more subtle and intellectual, highlights a discrepancy or contradiction without necessarily being aggressive or emotionally charged (Attardo et al., 2003; Lee, 1994), typically delivered in a calm and distant tone, relying heavily on situational and linguistic context for its effect (Attardo et al., 2003), often detached and neutral, focusing on intellectual critique or observation of contradictions (Lee, 1994), while sarcasm is sharper and more cutting, sarcasm is usually aimed at ridiculing, belittling, or conveying contempt (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.; Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Lee, 1994). Sarcasm is often accompanied by harsher vocal tones, exaggerated facial expressions, and multimodal signals such as overacting (Attardo et al., 2003), and it requires higher emotional involvement, often fuelled by disdain, humour, or frustration (Lee, 1994). Therefore, these phenomena should not be

confused, and the following comprehensive definitions can be given to these two linguistic nuances and will be used throughout the research paper:

- Irony is a form of verbal expression, often used for humorous, intellectual, or observational purposes, in which words or circumstances convey a meaning opposite to their literal or expected interpretation. It is, generally, rather subtle, intellectual, and less negatively emotionally charged than sarcasm.
- Sarcasm is a form of verbal expression that involves sharp and cutting remarks, that are intended to mock, criticize, or ridicule. It is usually characterized by negative emotional intensity and wit aimed at provoking a strong reaction.

### **Irony and Sarcasm in English Language Learning**

Several explanations have been suggested of how EFL learners perceive sarcasm and irony in English language communication. One account stipulates that EFL learners often struggle with detecting sarcasm in English due to several factors contributing to this difficulty, including limited exposure to sarcastic expressions in English and cultural differences in communication styles (Kim, 2014). Additionally, Kim (2014) revealed that the learners' proficiency in English is a key factor that determines how well they can get the subtle meaning of sarcasm (Kim, 2014). The research focuses on the Korean students learning EFL and their ability to understand sarcasm in their target language and the problems that such learners face when trying to recognize and understand the sarcastic language utensil in English, which has nothing in common with Korean. Kim (2014) uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods to discover the findings on Korean EFL learners' ability to understand sarcasm; the participants were provided with written and verbal contexts with sarcastic remarks. The students' responses are assessed to see properly if they have understood the sarcasm correctly. Furthermore, the findings of the study also reveal that EFL classes should comprise lessons that focus on the training of non-literal use of language including sarcasm, thus underlining the significance of cultural and pragmatic awareness in the process of learning a foreign language. Overall, Kim (2014) has highlighted some of the difficulties that are encountered when learning how to comprehend sarcasm in a foreign language and therefore it is recommended that aspects of pragmatics should be integrated into the EFL curriculum to help learners prepare for the real life language needs.

A broadly similar point has also been made by Tiv et al. (2021), who assert that bilingual experience, particularly proficiency in a second language, enhances the comprehension and processing speed of irony in one's first language. This relationship may be tied to broader cognitive functions such as flexible social cognition and executive control. Thus, Tiv et al. (2021) imply that bilinguals may have a cognitive advantage in understanding a complex linguistic construct such as irony, due to the possible mental mobility required to switch between the two languages. Tiv et al. (2021), based on their results, provide a valuable theoretical basis to examine the impact of bilingualism on EFL learners' ability to understand the difficult language used in the culturally rich TV series like "Gossip Girl". This can enhance the educational experiences and strategies used to teach nuanced aspects of English to learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Another explanation suggests that understanding irony in verbal interaction is a complex cognitive process that varies depending on how well the listener can detect inconsistencies between what is said and the surrounding context (Ramos, 2000). To better categorise and understand these differences in the process of understanding irony Ramos (2000) introduces a new terminology: bypassed and entertaining sentences. Ramos (2000) emphasises that understanding irony involves different mental efforts, since each listener is familiar at different levels with contextual clues and their ways of interacting with each other, so that they can use them in different ways to refute or support the literal meaning of the original utterance. In essence, the process of understanding irony is not simply a matter of recognising the opposite meaning of words or a particular tone, but a dynamic interplay of multiple contextual factors that influence how the listener mentally processes and then understands a sentence, Ramos (2000) suggests. Such approach emphasises the importance of understanding context for non-native speakers who may have some difficulty in grasping the subtle discrepancies between literal expressions and contextual clues important for understanding irony. Presented by Ramos (2000) view can serve as a basis for developing teaching strategies to develop EFL learners' ability to interpret sarcastic and ironic utterances, improving their language skills and cultural awareness.

Capelli et al. (1990) find that children's ability to recognize sarcasm develops over time, initially relying not on context but on auditory cues such as intonation. Therefore, young children do not have the ability to accurately interpret sarcastic comments, much less evaluate them, especially if sarcasm is not emphasized by the tone of voice, even if the meaning is not literal. Cognitive development and maturation imply the skill needed to recognize sarcasm in speech, where relying

on vocal cues and intonation, rather than contextual cues in order to recognize sarcasm being a characteristic of young children and EFL learners that highlights the language and cultural barrier. Rich in specific rapid dialogue, irony, and sarcasm, “Gossip Girl” presents a complex set of cues that native speakers can easily decipher. For learners of English as a foreign language, more explicit exposure to phonetics and cultural background may be needed to recognize the literal and non-literal nature of language. To better understand sarcasm and irony in the English media, etc., special educational strategies should be used for learning.

When analysing the diverse but interrelated findings presented in existing research (Kim, 2014; Tiv et al., 2021; Ramos, 2000; Capelli et al.,1990), the studies offer key insights into the complexities of sarcasm and irony, particularly in the context of EFL learners, which are relevant to Estonian university-level learners’ understanding, considering a complex nature of the concepts and the aspect of their cognition by EFL learners. Estonian EFL learners' understanding of irony and sarcasm is supposedly a complex cognitive process that changes with language exposure and cognitive growth. These phenomena have a complex nature as their effective interpretation can depend on a variety of factors such as context, multilingualism, age-related cognitive development, a fine sense of tone and context, culture and the personal experience of the speaker and listener. In this context, understanding sarcasm and irony is of particular importance as these forms of speech can pose additional challenges for EFL students. Therefore, the present study examines how sarcasm and irony are perceived by Estonian university students learning English as a foreign language, as well as how these concepts relate to the media sphere in university-level language teaching following formulated research questions:

- How do university-level EFL learners in Estonia perceive sarcasm and irony in the English language, and what role do sarcasm and irony play in mastering English as a foreign language?
- Are there any correlations between proficiency level in English based on respondents’ assessment of their knowledge and comprehension of sarcasm and irony by first-year and second/third-year English major university EFL learners in Estonia?
- Are there any correlations between sarcasm and irony comprehension by first-year and second/third-year English major university EFL learners in Estonia and their exposure to English language media and cultural contexts?

## CHAPTER I THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF IRONY AND SARCASM

### 1.1 First Exposure to Sarcasm and Irony

The first exposure to sarcasm and irony occurs in a variety of contexts, starting at an early age. For example, early social interactions with family and peers play a significant role. Firstly, sarcastic comments may be used by the parents or elderly family members in a common scenario, which serves as a first guide for the child to decipher the hidden context. Another crucial context is the media: children are frequently exposed to irony and sarcasm in cartoons, films and books, where characters employ these strategies to comedic or dramatic effect. Teachers who teach students in high school, may also put out quite a bit of sarcasm or irony in their explanations designed to arouse students' interest in order to keep them focused on their teaching. As such, the initial encounter with these linguistic features is mediated by a number of factors, most notably family background and social connections, along with the cultural output a person is exposed to.

Banasik-Jemielniak (2019) examine the role of ironic language in conversations between mothers and young children under the age of four, demonstrating that children are exposed to sarcasm and irony from a very early age. According to the results of the study, irony is used quite frequently by mothers in the forms of rhetorical questions and hyperboles and is usually directed more towards the eavesdropping audience next to the mother than towards the child herself. Banasik-Jemielniak (2019) suggests that the use of irony in mothers' speech addressed to their children may be related to expressing emotions or coping with stress, which becomes an additional function of irony. Young children may not be able to explain the subtext in their own words, even though they may recognise and understand the meaning of a sarcastic or ironic comment without prior explanation of the terms they will encounter, which highlights the idea that understanding the presence of irony and sarcasm in speech does not necessarily need to be accompanied by an initial introduction to the definition of these terms. Since EFL learners who are non-native speakers, just like children, may struggle to decipher sarcastic and ironic nuances, understanding how irony is used and interpreted in a natural setting, such as between mother and child, can provide foundational knowledge about the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in recognising irony. Banasik-Jemielniak (2019) argues that the complexity of irony as a linguistic tool, highlighting the need for EFL learners to encounter different contexts of irony in order to better understand its use and subtleties both in everyday communication and in media such as "Gossip Girl", where such techniques are often used for dramatic and humorous effect.

## **1.2 Differences Between Children's and Adults' Understanding of Sarcasm and Irony**

Capelli et al. (1990) investigate the way how children comprehend sarcasm, paying particular attention to the use of context and intonation, and emphasizing that although children are good at recognizing the presence of sarcasm and irony in an utterance, it is still difficult to say exactly when this understanding occurs to them, raising the question of whether children can understand such a complex linguistic feature as sarcasm in the same way as adults. Capelli et al. (1990) suggest that there are significant differences in understanding. Young children, around eight to nine years old, are characterized by paying particular attention to intonation cues in the form of a strong change in tone or mockery when sarcasm is detected. In the absence of such cues, although what may seem obvious to adults as sarcasm due to the seemingly obvious discrepancy between the literal and intended meanings, a young child may have considerable difficulty or be unable to discern sarcasm in a given expression at all. Adults, on the contrary, interpret sarcasm using both intonation and context, having a high level of recognition of the discrepancy between context and literal meaning, which allows them to understand the presence of sarcasm in the expression even despite the absence of a special intonation. Capelli et al. (1990) illustrate that older children aged from eleven to twelve years old, as well as adults, begin to use context to understand sarcasm, but still strongly depend on intonation. Thus, children, unlike adults, focus more on intonation, which indicates their more superficial understanding, but as they grow older, the ability to rely not only on intonation, but also on context increases to a large extent and becomes more and more similar to the approach of adults.

Glenwright and Pexman (2009) examine when and how children begin to recognise the presence of sarcasm and irony in language and how they begin to distinguish between the two concepts. According to Glenwright and Pexman (2009), children between the ages of five and six recognise the presence of sarcastic or ironic expressions in speech, but do not distinguish between them, showing a tendency to understand both phenomena as negatively coloured speech. Children aged nine to ten years demonstrate the ability to clearly distinguish between sarcasm and irony and are able to give an accurate emotional assessment of both sarcasm and irony, emphasising the more negative or angry colouring of sarcastic expressions than ironic ones. Glenwright and Pexman (2009) suggest that the nine to ten year old group reacts very subtly to speech acts, as they empathise more with the object of the sarcastic utterance in the form of criticism, but in the case of ironic utterances they identify with the speaker and the listener equally. According to Glenwright and Pexman (2009) due to increased experience with non-literal and a developing understanding of its social implications, the ability to distinguish sarcasm from irony emerges

between the ages of six and nine, and children between the ages of five and six show sensitivity to the topic of a literal criticism (e.g., criticising a possession versus a situation), but this sensitivity does not extend to non-literal criticisms. Thus, the findings emphasise the role of empathy in understanding sarcasm and irony, demonstrating how children's ability to interpret these forms of non-literal language is related to their growing sensitivity to the emotional impact of speech acts on others. In the case of adults, the results show that, unlike children, adults are more capable of interpreting the *muting function* of irony according to Dews and Winner (1995) i.e. softening the expressed non-biblical criticism and perceiving it as softer and more polite than the literal version.

Moreover, when the focus of adult's listening is on speaker's hidden intention, the criticism will be perceived as a more mocking expression, but when the focus is on the social impression created, the expression takes on a more polite colouring for the listening adult (Glenwright & Pexman, 2009). These differences emphasise adults' developed ability to read multiple cues, which allows them to navigate non-verbal language with greater depth and flexibility. Further, Winner (1988) also argues that the main challenge for children in recognising irony or sarcasm in expressions is the need to understand that the speaker's utterance must be taken nonliterally.

Research findings show that the process of understanding irony and sarcasm is a multi-stage and age-dependent process which starts with child's reliance on intonation cues and gradually moving to complex contextual analyses in adulthood. While adults are able to integrate both elements and modify their perception based on the situation, children first interpret sarcastic and ironic expressions through intonation and only later learn to identify contextual cues. University students represent a special group because they are at an intermediate stage - on the one hand, they have a sufficiently developed cognitive apparatus to analyse context, but on the other hand, their foreign language skills may limit their success in interpreting sarcasm and irony. The present study will help to reveal whether their perception of these linguistic phenomena corresponds to an adult level or remains closer to a child's understanding.

### **1.3 Difficulties in Decoding Sarcasm and Irony by EFL Learners**

Dolan (2016) claims that native speakers of English normally understand sarcasm better than non-native speakers, however there are cases where the reverse occurs. For example, although native speakers remain the absolute leaders in interpreting verbal sarcasm, in interpreting written

sarcasm, non-native speakers perform better than native speakers, which may indicate that the context of the information provided is easier to understand. It is the presence of cultural differences and intonation factors, according to Dolan (2016), that causes this phenomenon, and he also emphasises that the older the subjects are, the higher their level of understanding of sarcasm and irony is, which indicates the importance of the factor of age in the understanding of such linguistic features. The same conclusions have been reached by other scholars (Bell, 2005; Bouton, 1999; Cook, 1997; Davies, 2003) as well who argue that understanding sarcasm and irony requires an accurate understanding of the initial literal meaning of an utterance, and the level of this understanding directly depends on the level of proficiency in a foreign language, whereas the higher the level, the higher the understanding is.

Bouton (1999) argues that ironic statements are more difficult to comprehend than other types of non-literal utterances, because even after a long period of training his students have significant difficulties in understanding and interpreting this linguistic feature. Such results suggest that even with a high level of language proficiency, difficulties in perceiving such complex and comprehensive concepts as irony and sarcasm are still relevant. The research instrument Bouton used was presented in written form and did not include any visual or audio elements that could have been a good cue for understanding the presented expressions. Ramos (2000) argues that the presence of audio and visual features in the form of specific intonation or facial expressions greatly facilitates the ability to detect the presence of ironic meaning in an utterance, emphasising the relationship between context and the literal meaning of an utterance, where the more these two features are incompatible, the easier it is to interpret irony in an utterance - *the principle of optimal accessibility to irony*. Ramos (2000) identifies seven categories of context or so-called *contextual sources*, which, in his opinion, are used by the listener in identifying ironic utterances:

1. Factual information - Incompatibility with factual, encyclopaedic, and common sense assumptions about the world we live in.
2. Physical setting - Incompatibility with a salient phenomenon from the speech setting surrounding the interlocutors in the course of a conversation.
3. Nonverbal communication - Incompatibility with normal nonverbal behaviour which typically accompanies verbal speech.
4. Biographical data - Incompatibility with the speaker's opinions, character, habits and attitudes about life and the world we live in.
5. Mutual knowledge - Incompatibility with information which is supposedly shared

between the interlocutors.

6. Previous utterances - Incompatibility (in the current conversational context) of the repeated utterance with the information provided explicitly by the same utterance in previous stages of the conversation or even farther away in time. Alternatively, incompatibility between the assumptions arising from the interpretation of previous utterances and the information provided by the current utterance.
7. Linguistic cues - Incompatibility with linguistic choices and sentential structures which are typically used for ordinary conversation.

(p.354).

Ramos (2000) believes that the contextual sources presented in his model are analysed by the listener when deciding whether there is irony in an expression by looking for inconsistencies between literal meanings and contextual meaning. Ramos shows that the so-called *high level of redundancy* or large concentration of contextual resources will require less effort to decide on the presence of irony and conversely, *little redundancy* or insufficient contextual resources may lead to difficulties in understanding and interpreting irony. Similarly, Gibbs (2000) also supports the view that the context in which an ironic utterance is uttered can be very important in order for the listener to fully understand or correctly interpret the meaning behind the utterance.

Similarly, Clark and Gerrig (1984), emphasise the importance of context by saying that the interpretation of irony depends to a large extent on the common ground shared by the speaker and the listener, i.e. beliefs, knowledge and assumptions that both consider to be common knowledge and obviously true for each. In such a case, pretence and inconsistency with the original context embedded in the utterance will be immediately recognised by the hearer. Clark and Gerrig (1984) examine the interaction between the illocutionary i.e. what the speaker says and for what purpose he does it and the perlocutionary i.e. the effect that the utterance causes in the listener acts in the role of understanding irony, arguing that in the illocutionary act the speaker's pretence of using irony as if in agreement with a belief he sincerely does not hold invites the listener to participate in recognising irony, where meaning goes beyond literal interpretation or common ground, while in the perlocutionary act the listener's reaction depends on his ability of interpreting the common ground and the speaker's pretence, where inconsistency in common knowledge can lead to failure.

Grice (1975) proposes the Cooperative principle based on the fact that dialogue participants usually try to be truthful, honest, clear and informative with each other, describing the principles of effective communication and the reasons for its success or failure: “Each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction” (Grice, 1975, p. 45). The Cooperative principle, divided into four maxims such as *quality*: i.e. do not say what is false or unsupported by evidence, *quantity* i.e. provide the right amount of information, *relation* i.e. be relevant, *manner* i.e. be clear, brief, and orderly (Grice, 1975). Precisely the maxim of quality, which emphasises that speakers should avoid false or unsupported statements in conversation, plays a key aspect in recognising the presence of irony or sarcasm in an expression, since these linguistic features are characterised by the fact that the literal content of an utterance is often the opposite of what the speaker intended to say, thereby deliberately violating the maxim of quality. Such a violation serves as a bright signal to the listeners that something is wrong with the expression and, therefore, the meaning of the literal contradicts the meaning of the intended one. Therefore, Grice's Maxim of quality, which emphasises truthfulness and avoidance of falsity and is deliberately ignored in sarcastic or ironic statements, creating a discrepancy between the literal meaning and the intended interpretation, will be used as one of the key bases for further practical research.

According to existing research several key factors can be identified as influencing the difficulty in perceiving sarcasm and irony by EFL learners. These challenges are summarized in the following Table 1, along with their relevance to the study:

**Table 1.** Key Factors Utilized in the Analysis of Sarcasm and Irony Comprehension in EFL Learners

Factor	Description	Relevance to the Study
Violation of the Maxim of Quality (Grice, 1975)	Sarcastic and ironic utterances often contradict their literal meaning, making interpretation more complex.	The phrase selection for analysis will be based on identifying violations of the Maxim of Quality as a key signal for recognizing sarcasm.
Role of Contextual Information (Yus Ramos, 2000)	The presence or absence of contextual sources (factual information, nonverbal cues,	In the questionnaire, participants will be provided with phrases accompanied

	biographical knowledge, etc.) affects the success of interpretation.	by short textual descriptions of the situation and a video clip (up to one minute) to ensure contextual understanding.
Linguistic Proficiency (Bell, 2005; Bouton, 1999; Cook, 1997; Davies, 2003; Dolan, 2016)	Understanding sarcasm and irony requires a strong grasp of literal meaning, which directly depends on language proficiency. Higher proficiency leads to better comprehension.	Self-assessment of English proficiency levels will be included in the questionnaire to examine correlations with sarcasm and irony interpretation.
Exposure to English-Language Media (Bouton, 1999)	Frequent engagement with authentic English-language materials improves the ability to interpret irony.	The questionnaire will assess participants' exposure to English media and their overall use of English in daily life, exploring whether more frequent exposure correlates with better comprehension of sarcasm and irony.

These aspects presented in Table 1 will be considered in the further study as they determine what kind of difficulties EFL learners have in perceiving and interpreting irony and sarcasm.

#### **1.4 The Role of Media in Developing EFL Learners' Understanding of Irony and Sarcasm**

In recent years, the role of mass media, particularly television series, in foreign language learning has received increasing attention from researchers (Gilakjani, 2012; Khalid, 2001; Mayer, 2009). Multimedia is a great way to learn because it is a complex of different images, text, sound and video, from which everyone can find something that is not only useful but also interesting. In addition to the general development of language skills, multimedia is particularly important for the acquisition of complex pragmatic phenomena, such as sarcasm and irony, which are difficult to grasp without visual and contextual accompaniment. The way of teaching which incorporates

various types of multimedia increases students' motivation and engagement in learning a foreign language and creates an immersive and authentic learning environment that promotes natural language acquisition and effective learning (Gilakjani, 2012). Such learning allows EFL learners not only to develop linguistic competence but also to grasp the cultural and pragmatic nuances of the language, including irony and sarcasm.

Some of the first attempts to empirically establish the relationship between watching subtitled TV programmes and foreign language learning were made by Vanderplank (1988), who investigated the use of English subtitles in various BBC programmes. The results of the study showed that subtitles helped to develop knowledge of new vocabulary and better understanding of fast speech with an unfamiliar accent, which indicates the favourable effect of subtitles on foreign language learning, particularly on listening skills. Furthermore, subtitles made it easier to comprehend pragmatic clues and implicit meanings, which are crucial for identifying sarcasm and irony in spoken language. Many participants representing foreign students quickly adapted to understanding subtitles, despite the fact that they initially found them quite distracting. The majority also emphasised that subtitles reduced anxiety levels and at the same time increased attentiveness, which contributed to a relaxed and effective learning experience. In genres such as comedy and drama, which frequently incorporate sarcasm and irony, particularly benefit learners by exposing them to real-life conversational tones and humour as well as complex cultural nuances and the underlying deeper meanings of the story.

Khalid (2001) similarly discusses the positive effects of media, namely the combination of a video clip and accompanying text, the author emphasises that such a combination is much more effective than just textual explanations or pictures, as videos create more vivid images and help to memorise information better. Participants were better at remembering words annotated in video format, achieving higher scores in both recognition and recall tests. This highlights the importance of multimedia tools, especially video, for language learning, emphasising the importance of using engaging and dynamic materials in educational programmes. Moreover, it confirms *the dual coding theory* proposed by Paivio (1986), which posits that there are two systems that support how people process information: the verbal system and the nonverbal system. The verbal system processes words, language, and any text input to the brain and the nonverbal system, on the other hand, deals with images and visual inputs. Both systems are conceptually independent of each other, yet interconnected. It is believed that learning will be more effective when there are non-verbal systems used to create images and verbal systems

together. For example, pictures paired with verbal explanations make it easier for learners to form mental connections, making it easier to remember and recall information. Multiple pathways are then created to retrieve information, making it easier to access information stored in the brain. In the case of EFL learners, this means that exposure to authentic media i.e. materials created by native speakers for native speakers rather than specifically for language learners including articles, films, podcasts and social media that reflect real speech and culture — enhances their ability to decode non-literal language such as irony and sarcasm by linking contextualised visual cues to verbal expressions.

Brett (1995) as well emphasises the significant positive impact of multimedia on language learning. In his study he concludes that by using multimedia in learning, students are able to choose the content and types of tasks, thus gaining the advantage of autonomy. The ability of students to choose what to study, what tasks to do, the level of difficulty and whether to use subtitles, makes learning more personalised. Subtitles and hyperlinks are particularly useful as they explain difficult words and help to understand subtle linguistic nuances better. The use of real videos makes the learning process livelier and motivating as learners are exposed to real speech. The programmes also give instant feedback, which helps correct mistakes and improve skills. Multimedia is superior to traditional methods as it combines different types of materials in one place, offers a lot of interesting content and gives more freedom in learning. In addition, students find such programmes more engaging and motivating. These findings once again support the idea that rapid encountering of sarcasm and irony in natural, context-rich scenarios rather than through isolated textbook explanations helps EFL learners to develop a more sophisticated understanding of such subtle linguistic nuances.

Moreover, a closely related argument has been presented by Markham (1999), who highlights that various multimedia and technologies provide tremendous support to foreign language learning by introducing real-life situations captured in video footage into the learning environment. Markham (1999) argues that subtitling in a foreign language learner has a positive effect on learning by significantly improving listening comprehension. With the increasing availability of subtitling in different languages, this technology holds great promise for solving second language acquisition problems. Subtitling has been shown to improve comprehension as it allows learners to compare spoken dialogue with written text, strengthening their ability to interpret hidden meanings. Everyday communication often involves irony and sarcasm, and this kind of subtitled learning is one of the key factors in developing pragmatic competence, i.e. the

ability to employ language effectively and appropriately in particular communicative contexts while accounting for social norms, context, and hidden meanings (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Thereby, according to existing research, one of the most effective ways to observe and analyse irony and sarcasm in authentic conversational settings is through popular TV series. Being one of the famous sources not only for entertainment, but also for learning English as a foreign language, “Gossip Girl” serves as a valuable source for such an analysis. The TV show created by Josh Schwartz and Stephanie Savage is based on the same-named novels by Cecily von Ziegesar. It was broadcast from 2007 to 2012 and had a significant impact on youth culture (Bindig, 2014). It consists of six seasons and each one contains around twenty episodes. According to IMDb (2025), “Gossip Girl” has received multiple prestigious award nominations, including Top Television Series (2009, 2010), Favourite Network TV drama (2013), Outstanding Contemporary Television Series (2009), and Favorite TV Drama (2011). The series also won more than 40 Teen Choice Awards. Furthermore, “Gossip Girl” was named the “Greatest Teen Drama of All Time” by New York Magazine (Pressler & Rovzar, 2008). According to continued engagement on social media, the popularity of “Gossip Girl” remains high even years after its release. Even after its finale in 2012, the TV series have over 1.1 million posts on TikTok using the hashtag #gossipgirl, which is a significant number for a show that ended more than ten years ago. The official Instagram account of “Gossip Girl” has 1.2 million followers, indicating a sustained interest in the series, and IMDb rates it at 7.5. These statistics confirm the show's continued role in shaping youth media consumption and language use, making it a perfect case study for examining how EFL learners perceive irony and sarcasm. As Bindig (2014) notes, “Gossip Girl” is more than just a show, it's an important part of culture that shows how the rich and famous in Manhattan talk to each other, follow social rules, and deal with class differences. The series is full of dialogue scenes that contain both explicit and implicit forms of sarcasm and irony, which makes it a perfect object to investigate the perception of these phenomena among EFL learners. The plot revolves around rich kids attending exclusive schools in New York City, and an anonymous blogger using the nickname “Gossip Girl” divulging their secrets. At the centre of the story are the characters Serena van der Woodsen, Blair Waldorf, Chuck Bass, Nate Archibald and Dan Humphrey, each with a unique style of communication. While watching these characters, language learners are not just acquiring knowledge of how to recognize irony but they master what it can do in social interaction. They provide many examples for the viewer of how to use sarcasm and irony in different situations as well as develop an intuitive grasp of tone and humour in English.

The analysis of the theoretical foundations of irony and sarcasm presented in this chapter reveals these concepts as complex, comprehensive linguistic nuances whose interpretation by EFL learners depends on a variety of factors such as first exposure, cognitive differences between children and adults, as well as language proficiency and frequency of exposure to English-language authentic media. Research also emphasises the importance of pragmatic competence and the fact of contextual awareness in the successful interpretation of sarcasm and irony. Considering all these factors, authentic language material becomes one of the best ways to develop skills in understanding irony and sarcasm because media, especially television series, offer a natural environment in which the learner can see the subtleties of using sarcasm and irony in real-life communication. “Gossip Girl” series is a widely known show whose authentic environment is filled with witty and dynamic dialogues that often use sarcasm and irony. All this makes this TV series a valuable resource for exploring EFL learners' understanding and interpretation of sarcasm and irony in a real-life context, which sets the stage for further empirical research in the following second chapter.

## CHAPTER II IRONY AND SARCASM PERCEPTION AMONG ESTONIAN UNIVERSITY EFL LEARNERS

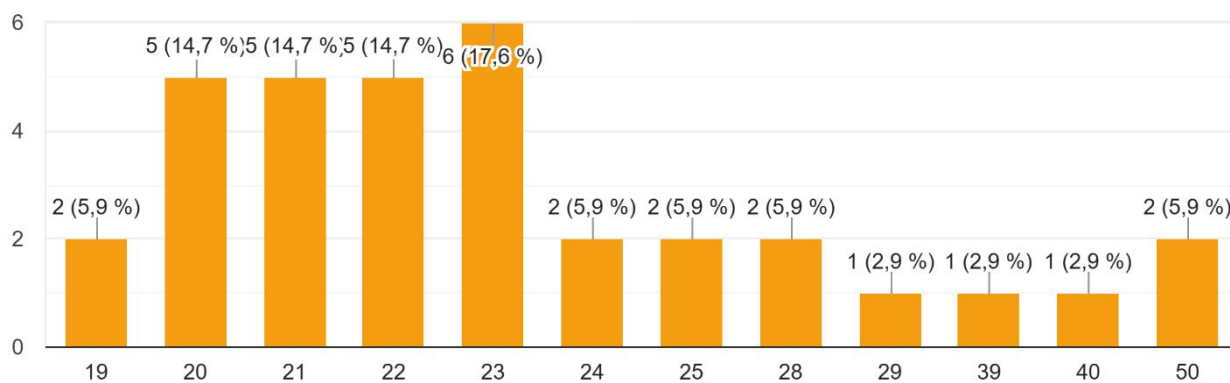
### 2.1 Informants

The present study involved a total of 34 ( $N = 34$ ) students who were recruited through the university's email list based on their availability and willingness to participate. A sample size of 30 participants is considered appropriate for this study based on the principles of the *Altman's nomogram*, which helps determine how many participants are needed depending on the expected effect size, the significance level, and the statistical power. This study assumes a medium effect size (Cohen's  $d \approx 0.5$ ), meaning that the differences or relationships being examined are expected to be noticeable but not large. With a commonly accepted significance level ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) and statistical power of 0.80, the *Altman's nomogram* indicates that a sample of around 30 participants is sufficient to detect such an effect. Therefore, this sample size is both statistically justified and suitable for the aims of the research.

**Table 2.** Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Number of Participants (N = 34)
<b>University Level</b>	
First-year students	9 (26,5%)
Second-year students	6 (17,6%)
Third-year students	19 (55,9%)
<b>Age Range</b>	19–50
<b>Gender</b>	20 females (58,8%), 14 males (41,2%)

All respondents were first and second/third year English language students at Narva College of the University of Tartu studying EFL at university level. They were informed that participation in the study was completely voluntary, their responses would remain anonymous, and all data would be treated confidentially and used solely for the purposes of this study. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 2.



**Figure 1.** Number of Participants by Age Group

Participants' age, gender and university education level were not used as selection criteria, but were recorded for general characterisation of the sample. The majority of participants were around 20 years old, with the exception of a few individuals aged between 39 and 50 years. More detailed information on participants' age distribution is presented in Figure 1. The gender distribution among participants was balanced, with 41.2% male and 58.8% female. The participants' educational levels varied, with most being third-year bachelor's degree students. Since the primary focus of the study is on the interpretation of sarcasm and irony, irrespective of these factors, these variables were not analysed separately, which contributed to a more comprehensive representativeness of the data.

## 2.2 Selection of Scenes

As previously discussed in Chapter 1, “Gossip Girl” was selected as the primary material for this study due the frequent use of irony and sarcasm in dialogues and its wide recognition. The selection of scenes for the study was based on the factors in Table 1 as selection criteria to ensure that the selected scenes provided a suitable basis for analysing EFL learners' interpretation of irony and sarcasm. The first stage of the study involved a general review of season 1 episodes to identify scenes with the presence of sarcasm and irony, where the primary indicator was the apparent contradiction of the utterance to its literal meaning according to the Grice's Cooperative principle, indicating a violation of the maxim of quality (Grice, 1975). Further, the contextual content of the scenes was analysed according to Yus Ramos' (2000) framework. Only those fragments where sarcasm and irony were clearly expressed in the form of tone, facial expressions, and other characters' reactions and remarks that hinted at hidden meanings were retained. Moreover, scenes whose understanding depends on being familiar with events from the past episode or season were discarded. Without being familiar with the past, it would probably be

impossible to understand the implication. Having sufficient contextual information would allow the participants of the study to rely on both verbal and non-verbal elements when interpreting the utterance in the test.

The next criterion for selection was the level of Linguistic Proficiency. It was assumed that since all the participants in the study are university students, where English proficiency at level B2, according to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), is often the minimum requirement for entry to courses related to the study of English at university, all the respondents have English proficiency at least at this level. As such, the scenes were selected to be appropriate for B2 level but retain elements that require contextual analysis and knowledge of linguistic nuances, making them suitable for investigating the perception of irony and sarcasm by EFL learners. Furthermore, the level of perception of sarcasm and irony may depend on exposure to authentic language material (Bouton, 1999). Since the study also aims to identify a possible correlation between the level of exposure to English through media and the success in interpreting irony and sarcasm, the scenes were chosen to represent natural examples of the use of these phenomena in everyday speech. In the next step, participants will assess their frequency of interaction with English media, which will determine whether this factor influences their success in interpreting sarcasm and irony. After viewing 9 episodes, based on the listed criteria for selection, 10 scenes were selected for further study.

Presented in Table 3 are the scenes selected from the show. Each scene is accompanied by a brief explanation of the implicature allowing respondents to make meaningful choices when interpreting the implicature in accordance with Yus Ramos' (2000) framework:

**Table 3.** Selected Scenes from the Show with Contextual Descriptions and Utterance Classification

<b>№</b>	<b>Scene</b>	<b>Context Description</b>	<b>Type of Utterance</b>
1	<i>“Sounds very fair. Sweat shops could learn a thing or two.”</i> — Rufus Humphrey	Jenny’s father Rufus’s response after she tells him that her classmate said she might get invited to the party if she addresses all the envelopes for her using her beautiful handwriting.	Sarcasm

2	<i>"If it's not broke, break it."</i> — Serena van der Woodsen	The phrase is said by Serena in response to Nate's question about why her family has moved back into the hotel. The line reflects the attitude towards her mother's decision to make the change despite the lack of obvious need.	Irony
3	<i>"Yeah, I could tell. Since you didn't call or write the entire time it was happening."</i> — Blair Waldorf	Blair's response to Serena, who apologised for not being there for her during a difficult time.	Sarcasm
4	<i>"Oh yeah. I can see that. Chuck's bed. Very romantic. Classy too."</i> — Serena van der Woodsen	Serena comments on Blair's romantic relationship with Nate, referencing that they wanted to get intimate in the hotel room of their mutual friend Chuck.	Sarcasm
5	<i>"Then you must be delusional."</i> — Blair Waldorf	In response to Serena's remark that what happened was an accident, Blair makes this statement.	Sarcasm
6	<i>"I hope it's broken."</i> — Serena van der Woodsen	Blair pretends to have injured her leg after a collision with Serena, feigning an injury during the game to make Serena appear at fault and get her disqualified. In response, Serena says the following.	Sarcasm
7	<i>"Oh. Well thanks, that's a great story, Dad."</i> — Dan Humphrey	Dan shares his concerns about his relationship with his father. After his father uses a grim metaphor about drowned relationships, Dan replies with the following statement.	Irony
8	<i>"Yes, Dan, that's why I'm here. I stalked you"</i>	Vanessa unexpectedly runs into Dan at the ball, even though he told her he'd be writing his	Sarcasm

	<p><i>because I am just so obsessed with you.</i></p> <p><i>Wait. Don't stop there.</i></p> <p><i>You're the whole reason I came back to New York, 'cause I just couldn't stop thinking about you.</i>” — Vanessa Abrams</p>	<p>research paper. When Dan suggests she’s following him, she responds with the following line.</p>	
9	<p><i>“Yeah, I think I saw that next to that ambiguous vague thing by the nondescript place.”</i> — Rufus Humphrey</p>	<p>Jenny looks for the bracelet and asks her father Rufus if he has seen it, to which he replies with the following line.</p>	Irony
10	<p><i>“Yes, it would be very nice if I was sailing up on the Mayflower.”</i> — Blair Waldorf</p>	<p>Blair's mother suggests an outfit, and Blair comments, with the following phrase, comparing herself to a settler.</p>	Sarcasm

### 2.3 The Research Methodology

In the course of the study, a questionnaire and test in Google Forms format were developed, consisting of several quantitative questions. At the beginning, students were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of introductory questions about their age, gender (optional) and university course, as well as questions in the form of a self-assessment scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is “completely disagree”, 5 is “completely agree”, 2 would indicate that they have a partial understanding of the situation, 3 indicates that they comprehended the context, and 4 indicates that they comprehended the context along with certain details. The students were given questions to enable them to determine their own assessment of their ability to listen, write, speak and understand spoken English, as well as how often they were exposed to English in their free time, media in English and how often they encountered sarcasm and irony in English. With this information it will be possible to assess if there are any correlations between proficiency level in

English based on respondents' assessment of their knowledge and comprehension of sarcasm and irony.

In the test, which constitutes the main part of the study, the participating university students were presented with 10 selected sarcastic or ironic lines from the series. Each phrase was structured into a standardized task format: first, the participant read the phrase, accompanied by contextual information without additional interpretation; then, they watched a short video clip from the series, lasting up to one minute. In accordance with Yus Ramos (2000), it was essential to provide contextual information. Therefore, the selected scenes had to include more details beyond the target utterance, both in textual and visual form. The interpretation of the chosen statement would most likely be only a guess if the topic of the conversation was unknown. After reading the line and watching the video, students were asked to choose one of four options - sarcasm, irony, neutral or "I don't know". This response format helps to avoid forced choices because if the respondent really cannot determine whether a phrase is ironic, sarcastic or neutral, are not compelled to make a random selection, which reduces the risk of data distortion. Providing both textual and video context also reduces the likelihood of random guesses, as respondents rely on intonation, facial expressions and the situation, which corresponds to the real perception of sarcasm and irony.

To provide additional support, the testing decided to supplement the video sequences with subtitles as they can provide support in understanding complex expressions as well as compensate for the loss of responses due to possible linguistic or acoustic difficulties associated with speech perception, especially for rapidly spoken or unclear phrases. Nevertheless, the main focus of the study remains centred on the EFL learners' perception of spoken speech. Watching a video with subtitles differs from reading a text in that in the latter case one has the opportunity to reread a passage several times and carefully analyse the context. However, in the audiovisual format, perception relies not only on textual information, but also on non-verbal information. The inclusion of subtitles helps participants to relate what they hear to what they see, while maintaining the natural dynamics of perception. It is important to note that the time for comprehension remains limited because the dialogues change quite rapidly, which requires participants to process information quickly. Thus, subtitles in the study do not act as the main source of understanding, but as an additional tool that supports the interpretation of ironic and sarcastic utterances but does not replace the analysis of oral speech as a whole.

## 2.4 Analysis and Discussion of the Results

The following section addresses the research questions by analyzing participants' test performance. Table 4 presents the outcomes of their interpretations of the scenes and intended implicatures.

**Table 4.** Distribution of Correct, Incorrect, and Unanswered Responses in the Test

Response Type	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Correct Answers	157	46,18%
Incorrect Answers	139	40,88%
Unanswered	44	12,94%
<b>Total Incorrect Answers</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>53,82%</b>
Total	340	100%

The results presented in Table 4 indicate that interpreting the statements provided in the test was a sufficiently challenging task for the students who participated in the study. The total percentage of incorrect responses, which includes both incorrect answers and unanswered responses or those marked with “I don't know”, was 53.82%, while only 46.18% of the answers were correct. This suggests that the participants' overall success rate was less than half, indicating significant challenges in understanding and interpreting sarcasm and irony.

Participant / Scene	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1	F	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
32	X	F	X	X	X	X	F	X	X	X
34	X	F	X	X	F	X	X	X	X	X
11	F	X	X	X	F	F	X	X	X	X
12	F	X	X	X	F	X	X	X	X	U
27	X	X	F	X	X	X	F	X	F	X
3	F	F	X	X	F	X	F	X	X	X

4	F	X	X	X	X	X	F	X	F	F
5	F	X	X	X	F	F	F	X	X	X
8	X	F	X	X	F	F	X	X	F	X
15	X	X	F	F	X	X	F	X	X	F
18	X	X	X	X	F	F	F	X	F	X
33	X	F	X	X	F	X	F	X	F	X
16	F	X	X	F	X	F	X	F	X	F
20	X	X	F	X	F	F	F	X	X	F
23	X	X	X	F	X	F	F	X	F	F
24	F	F	X	X	F	F	F	X	X	X
26	X	X	X	U	F	X	U	X	F	F
30	F	X	F	X	F	X	F	X	X	F
2	F	F	F	X	F	F	F	X	X	X
10	X	X	X	F	F	F	F	F	F	X
13	U	X	X	X	F	X	F	U	F	F
14	X	U	X	X	F	X	F	F	F	F
21	X	X	F	X	U	X	F	F	U	U
22	F	X	F	X	F	X	F	X	F	U
28	X	F	F	F	X	F	F	X	F	X
6	X	F	X	F	X	F	F	F	F	F
31	U	F	F	X	F	X	F	F	F	X

9	U	F	F	F	X	F	X	U	F	U
29	F	F	F	X	F	X	F	F	F	U
7	F	X	U	F	F	F	F	F	U	F
19	X	U	F	F	U	U	U	U	U	U
17	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U
25	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U

**Figure 1.** Heatmap of Participant Responses Sorted by Accuracy

Figure 1 shows a heat map of participants' responses to the test questions, arranged in descending order by total number of correct answers. Each row corresponds to one of the 34 participants, and each column represents a different question. Responses are colour coded to facilitate visual interpretation: green cells marked with “X” indicate correct answers, red cells containing “F” or “False” represent incorrect responses, and orange cells denote responses marked as “U” or “Unanswered” and equals “I don't know”. This colour-coded matrix provides a comprehensive view of task performance, making it easy to identify both high-performing participants and those who encountered difficulties. Moreover, the heat map reveals common areas of uncertainty and frequent errors in the group. According to the participants' self-assessment, 21 out of 34 individuals, or 62%, rated their level of English proficiency as high, which for the purposes of this study is defined as a total self-assessment score ranging from 12 to a maximum of 15. This range corresponds to an average score of at least 4 out of 5 on each of the three assessment items. Despite relatively confident self-assessment, none of the participants were able to answer all of the test questions correctly. Such mismatch between self-assessment and actual results indicates potential overestimation by some respondents.

Despite the fact that children as young as two years old are exposed to sarcasm and irony (Banasik-Jemielniak, 2019), the findings of this study show that the ability to interpret and understand sarcastic and ironic speech does not come automatically. This also supports the claim made by Capelli et al. (1990) that the exact age at which people can identify linguistic nuances such as sarcasm and irony is still not precisely defined. Similarly, the challenges faced by non-native speakers in understanding sarcasm and irony, as emphasised by Dolan (2016), align with

the findings of this study. According to Dolan (2016), non-native speakers often struggle more with interpreting sarcasm and irony in a second language, particularly in spoken form. Since this study mainly focuses on spoken language, this may explain the relatively low number of correct answers among participants, as they had to process these complex linguistic features in a foreign language, which is often more difficult.

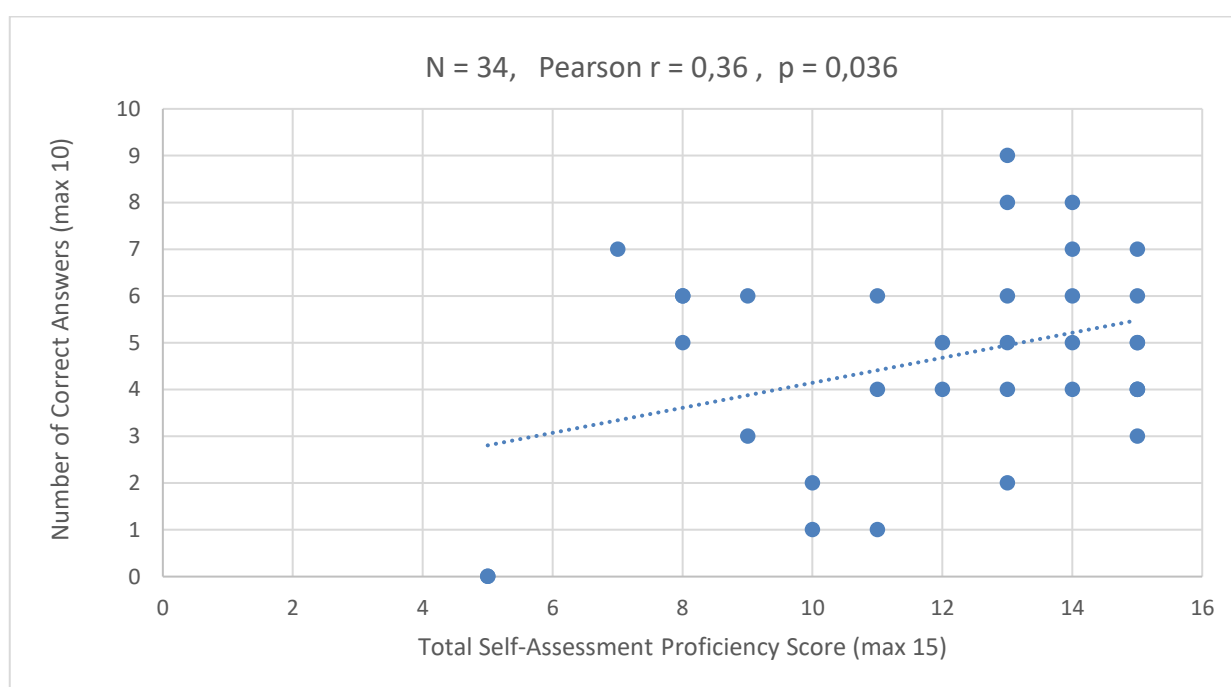
**Table 5.** The Assessment of the Informants with Zero and Lowest Interpretation Scores

<b>Informant Number</b>	<b>English Self-Assessment (max 15)</b>	<b>English Media Exposure (max 15)</b>	<b>Interpretation Score</b>	<b>Type of Incorrectness</b>
17	5	4	0	All unanswered
25	5	3	0	All unanswered
19	10	7	1	Mostly incorrect
7	11	11	1	Mostly incorrect
9	10	4	2	Mostly incorrect
29	13	13	2	Mostly incorrect

Table 5 presents data on the participants with the lowest interpretation scores, including two informants: 7 and 25 who failed to provide any correct responses. It is important to note that both of these participants left all interpretation items unanswered, marking them as “I don’t know”, indicating a complete lack of confidence or inability to cope with the task. This suggests that for some learners, the interpretation of sarcasm and irony in a foreign language may be so difficult that even a guess appears too uncertain. These two informants also reported the lowest levels of self-assessed English proficiency and exposure to English language media, both rated their English skills at 5 out of a maximum 15, while their English media exposure scores were 4 and 3 respectively. Participants’ English self-assessment scores were calculated based on their responses to three 5-point Likert-scale questions evaluating their self-perceived ability to understand, speak, and interpret English. The assessment of exposure to English media was also based on three items of a 5-point Likert scale. These measured how often participants use English in their daily lives for study, work or communication, how regularly they watch films or TV series in English, and how often they encounter sarcasm and irony in their speech.

In addition to the two participants who scored zero, several informants performed very low despite reporting average or high levels of English language proficiency and media exposure.

Informants 7 and 19, for example, answered only one question correctly, while informants 9 and 29 answered two questions correctly. These results are particularly noteworthy given that their self-rated English proficiency scores ranged from 10 to 13 out of 15, and their relatively high scores for exposure to English media ranged from 4 to 13. These findings align with Dolan’s (2016) observation that even advanced non-native speakers may struggle with interpreting sarcasm and irony, particularly in spoken form. Moreover, this supports Capelli et al. (1990) claim that understanding such pragmatic nuances requires more than just general exposure but also the development of specific interpretive competence, which cannot be acquired automatically even in frequent language users.

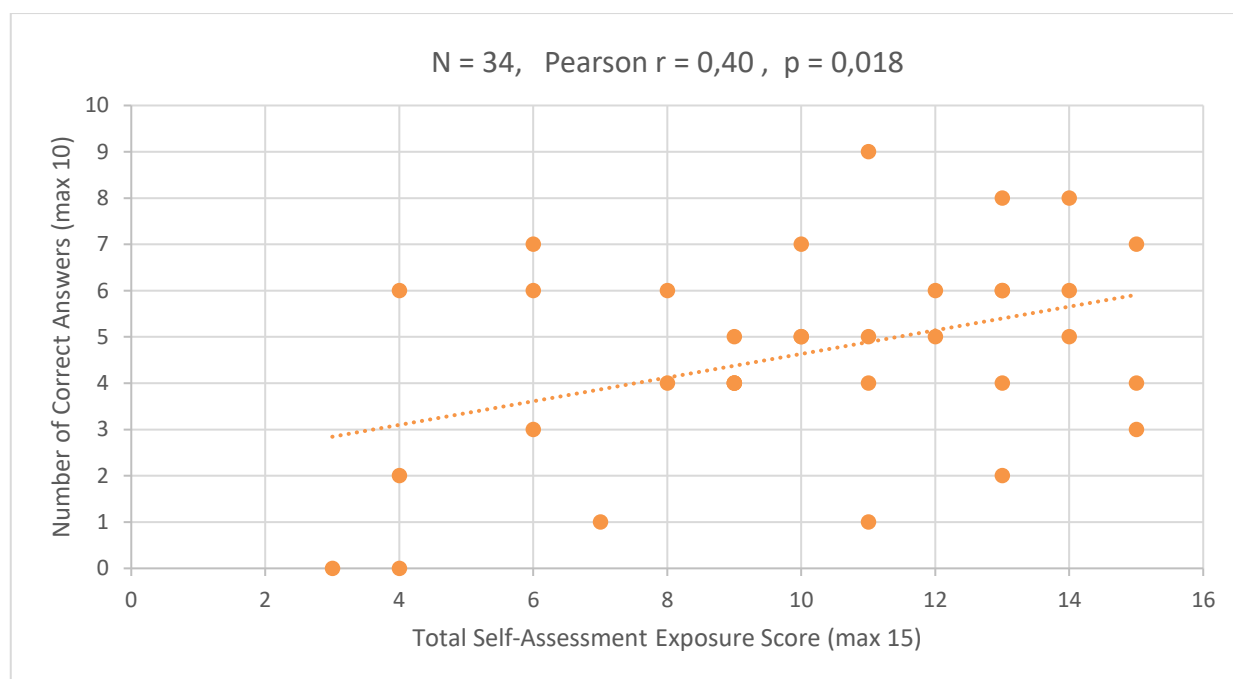


**Figure 2.** Correlation between Self-Assessed Proficiency in English and Correct Answers

To investigate if there are any potential correlation between participants self-assessed English language proficiency and their actual performance on the task, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. A scatterplot of the data is provided in Figure 2. The self-assessment score was based on a 5-point Likert scale with maximum total score of 15 and covered three questions related to participants' English skills. Task performance was evaluated by the number of correct answers out of a maximum of 10.

The analysis revealed a positive but weak correlation with a Pearson correlation coefficient of  $r = 0,36$ . This means that participants who rated their English proficiency higher tended to perform slightly better on the test. However, the strength of this relationship is not particularly strong.

although a student with high self-efficacy scores may generally score higher on the task, this is not guaranteed as there are many exceptions and the pattern is not strictly consistent. The p-value associated with this correlation is  $p = 0.036$ , which is below the conventional threshold of 0.05. This indicates that the correlation is statistically significant, meaning that the probability that this result occurred by chance is low and there is likely to be a real association between the variables. Such results are consistent with Kim (2014), Bouton (1999) and Attardo et al. (2003) that pragmatic comprehension in a foreign language is closely related to overall language competence.



**Figure 3.** Correlation between Self-Assessed Exposure to English Language Media and Correct Answers

Following the analysis of self-assessed English proficiency, a similar Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to explore if there any correlations between sarcasm and irony comprehension by EFL learners and their exposure to English language media and cultural contexts. A scatterplot of the data is provided in Figure 3.

A positive but weak correlation between the two variables with a Pearson correlation coefficient of  $r = 0.40$ . This implies that individuals who used English language media more often also tended to perform better in the interpretation test. However, the strength of this relationship remains limited. The correlation is statistically significant as evidenced by a p-value of  $p = 0,018$ , suggesting that greater media exposure may support the development of perception and

interpretation of sarcasm and irony. These results support the findings made by Markham (1999), Brett (1995) and Khalid (2001) who emphasise the positive impact of multimedia on learners' ability to decode linguistic features such as irony and sarcasm in authentic contexts.

According to the results of the study, the ability to interpret sarcasm and irony plays an important role in mastering English as a foreign language because understanding these subtle linguistic features reflects a high level of pragmatic and cultural competence that goes beyond grammar and vocabulary. Understanding sarcasm and irony requires the ability to recognise the discrepancy between what is said and what is implied, which is a skill characteristic of an advanced language user. Moreover, the study confirms the findings of Yus Ramos (2000) that context as well as non-verbal cues in the form of intonation and facial expressions are necessary for successful recognition. This suggests that such linguistic phenomena help to develop context sensitivity and listening skills and also enhances the learner's intercultural competence. Furthermore, Sarcasm and irony are phenomena that reflect a natural, lively part of language and provide learners with a realistic perception of English speech.

## CONCLUSION

The current research aimed to explore how university-level EFL learners in Estonia perceive and interpret sarcasm and irony in the English language, focusing on both cognitive and contextual factors that influence this process, in the context of the TV series “Gossip Girl”. These series were chosen as the main media source due to its frequent use of sarcasm and irony in natural dialogues, as well as its cultural relevance and accessibility. The central research questions were to explore how university-level EFL learners in Estonia understand sarcasm and irony in English and what role do they play in the process of learning English as a foreign language, whether there is a correlation between self-assessed English language proficiency and the ability to correctly interpret sarcastic and ironic statements, and whether learners' exposure to English-language media and cultural content affects their understanding of these linguistic features.

The research was grounded in four key frameworks. The fact of violating the maxim of quality according to Grice's theory of implicature (1975) was the main marker of the presence of sarcasm or irony in the expression and was used in selecting scenes for the test. Yus Ramos' (2000) principle of optimal accessibility and contextual sources substantiated the importance of using short descriptions of scenes, subtitles and short video clips as contextual cues for interpretation. Research insights made by Bell (2005), Cook (1997), Davies (2003) and Dolan (2016) served as a basis for including self-assessment of language proficiency, emphasizing the positive correlation between language proficiency and the quality of interpretation of linguistic nuances. Finally, Bouton's (1999) findings on positive impact of media exposure shaped the questionnaire part assessing participants' exposure to English language media and cultural contexts.

The study involved 34 Estonian university-level EFL learners. Participants were asked to interpret 10 selected scenes from the show, each containing a sarcastic or ironic utterance, accompanied by a brief contextual description and a short video clip. A total of 340 responses were collected, of which only 157 answers (46.18%) were correct, while 183 (53.82%) were either incorrect or marked as “I don't know”. The results of the study showed that university-level learners of English as a foreign language in Estonia experienced significant difficulties in interpreting sarcastic and ironic statements, as less than half of the responses were correct, despite the fact that many participants rated their English proficiency and exposure to English-language media as high. Statistical analysis revealed a weak but statistically significant positive correlation between self-assessed language proficiency and interpretation accuracy ( $r = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), suggesting that general language competence alone does not guarantee the ability to understand

non-literal language, but has a positive effect on this process. A similar weak but significant positive correlation was found between learners' exposure to English-language media and their success in identifying sarcasm and irony ( $r = 0.40, p < 0.05$ ). These results indicate that although language proficiency and media exposure are important factors, successful interpretation of sarcasm and irony largely depends on pragmatic awareness and contextual sensitivity, skills that reflect high language proficiency and cultural competence that goes beyond grammar and vocabulary. Furthermore, the study shows that sarcasm and irony play an important role in learning English as a foreign language as tools that stimulate the development of depth perception of language, skills for interpreting hidden meaning, sensitivity to intonation and context, and cultural adaptability.

The results of this study can be used to improve learners' pragmatic abilities in EFL teaching by incorporating real media content that uses irony and sarcasm. Selected episodes from television shows can be used by teachers to help learners understand context, tone, and non-literal meanings. The results also offer guidance for curriculum and language assessment developers who want to incorporate pragmatic competence into language teaching and assessment.

The study has several limitations, as the sample was limited to Estonian EFL university students and one media source, which limits the generalizability of the results. Language proficiency and media engagement were self-assessed, which may impact accuracy. Future research could include more diverse participants, examine different media types, and use objective language assessments. It could also examine how age and gender affect the interpretation of sarcasm and irony.

## SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö eesmärk oli uurida, kuidas Eesti üliõpilased, kes valdavad inglise keelt võõrkeelena, mõistavad ja tõlgendavad irooniat või sarkasmi ingliskeelses suhtluses. Uurimistöö keskendus nii kognitiivsetele kui ka kontekstuaalsetele teguritele, mis seda protsessi mõjutavad. Uuringus kasutati audiovisuaalse allikana telesarja „Gossip Girl“, kuna selle dialoogides leidub rohkelt irooniat ja sarkasmi ning sari on kultuuriliselt kergesti mõistetav noortele.

Töö aluseks oli neli teoreetilist lähenemisviisi. Grice'i implikatuuri teooria (1975) võimaldas tuvastada sarkastilisi ja iroonilisi väljendeid, mis rikuvad kvaliteedi maksimi. Yus Ramose (2000) kontekstiliste allikate teooria rõhutas konteksti, intonatsiooni ja jagatud teadmiste tähtsust, mistõttu lisati igale teststseenile lühikirjeldus ja videoklipp. Keeleoskuse rolli uurimisel tugineti Bellile (2005), Cookile (1997), Daviesile (2003) ja Dolanile (2016), kelle tööd näitasid seost keeleoskuse ja keeleliste nüansside tõlgendamise vahel. Samuti toetuti Boutoni (1999) järeldustele meediatarbimise positiivsest mõjust pragmaatilisele arengule.

Uuringus osales 34 Eesti üliõpilast. Osalejad tõlgendasid kümmet telesarjast valitud stseeni, mis sisaldasid irooniat või sarkasmi. Kokku koguti 340 vastust, millest vaid 157 (46,18%) olid õiged. Ülejäänud vastused olid kas valed või märgitud kui „ei tea“. Tulemused näitasid, et õppijatel on märkimisväärseid raskusi kaudse keele mõistmisel, hoolimata nende kõrgest enesehinnangust nii keeleoskuse kui ka meediatarbimise osas. Statistiline analüüs näitas nõrka, kuid statistiliselt olulist positiivset korrelatsiooni keeleoskuse enesehinnangu ( $r = 0,36$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ) ning meediatarbimise ( $r = 0,40$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ) ja edukuse vahel. See viitab sellele, et kuigi keeleoskus ja kokkupuude meediaga on olulised tegurid, sõltub irooniliste ja sarkastiliste väljendite edukas mõistmine suuresti oskusest tajuda varjatud tähendusi, intonatsiooni ja suhtluskonteksti. Need oskused viitavad keelelisele küpsusele ja kultuurilisele kohanemisvõimele, mis ulatuvad kaugemale tavapärasest grammatika ja sõnavara valdamisest.

Uuringu tulemusi saab rakendada inglise keele õpetamisel, kaasates autentseid meediamaterjalid, mis sisaldavad irooniat ja sarkasmi. Õpetajad võivad kasutada telesarjade stseene, et arendada õppijate võimet mõista kõnetooni, konteksti ja varjatud tähendusi. Töö pakub väärtuslikku teavet ka õppekavade ja keelehindamise kujundajatele, kes soovivad pöörata rohkem tähelepanu keelelisele sobivusele ja tähendusloomele.

Uuringul on siiski piiranguid: valim piirdus Eesti üliõpilastega ning kasutati ainult üht meediaallikat, mis piirab tulemuste üldistatavust. Keeleoskust ja meediatarbimist hinnati enesehindamise kaudu, mis võib mõjutada andmete täpsust. Edasised uuringud võiksid kaasata mitmekesisema taustaga osalejaid, uurida eri tüüpi meediat, kasutada objektiivseid keeleoskuse mõõdikuid ning analüüsida vanuse ja soo mõju ironia ja sarkasmi tõlgendamisele.

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