

An Exploratory Study on the Derivation of Ironic Implicatures by English Foreign Language Learners: Could Culture Play a Role?

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Literature on cross-cultural communication has demonstrated that communication breakdowns are more likely to occur among speakers from different cultural backgrounds (Keenan 1976; Devine 1983). This kind of assumptions constituted the departing point of further studies, such as that of Bouton (1988), where he tested the communicative habits of non-native speakers of English and contrasted them with those of English native speakers. The results of these studies have proved that the derivation of implicatures by English non-native speakers differs if compared with that of English native speakers and that ironic implicatures are among the most difficult ones to grasp for English non-native speakers. What is more, culture has been regarded as a possible variable influencing the derivation of implicit meanings (Bouton 1988; Liddicoat 2009). In view of this literature and applying the approach on High Context and Low Context cultures (in accordance with Hall 1976; Würtz 2005; Min 2016; Hornikx and le Pair 2017), this exploratory study aims at analysing if culture plays a role in the derivation of ironic implicatures by English foreign language learners. For current purposes, the present study aims to analyse, first, whether a group of English foreign language learners derives pragmatically felicitous ironic implicatures or not; and, secondly, if culture as a bidirectional factor has an impact on participants' interpretations. In order to do so, an exploratory sample of twelve English foreign language learners (all of them belonging to a High Context culture) filled a questionnaire, which was used to gather data. The questionnaire contained fifteen questions: ten multiple-choice questions and five open questions, each of them giving rise to an ironic implicature. The results suggest that participants show a high tendency to

derive pragmatically felicitous ironical implicatures and that culture as a bidirectional variable has an impact on their interpretations. This leads to the conclusion that culture as a bidirectional variable seems to play a role in the derivation of ironical implicatures by the English foreign language learners in our sample.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication; High Context culture; Low Context culture; English foreign language learners; implicature; irony; cultural background; English-speaking culture

1. Introduction

In the process of acquiring a second language (L2) as a foreign language (FL), linguistic skills are given primary importance (Kim 2002). However, sometimes students face some difficulties which relate to extralinguistic knowledge. This is precisely the object of study of the present work, which aims at explaining if culture as a bidirectional factor influences English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' derivation of ironical implicatures. To do so, first, Section 2 exposes the theoretical framework, including Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and his account on irony in Sections 2.1 and 2.2, respectively. After this, Section 2.3 addresses how this theory applies to actual communication and highlights the relevance that choosing the adequate contextual assumptions has when it comes to avoiding communication breakdowns. Taking this latter point into account, Section 3 deals with cross-cultural communication and its relation to the derivation of ironical implicatures by English native speakers (ENS) and English non-native speakers (ENNS). After this, Section 3.1. provides a description of the notion of culture—following the approach on High Context and Low Context cultures—and then, throughout Section 4, the present study is exposed. Section 5 discusses the results obtained, in relation to the literature described in Sections 2-3. Finally, in Section 6, the main conclusions, the limitations and some proposals for further research are presented.

2. Theoretical framework

The gap between the grammatical encoded meaning and the meaning speakers actually intend to convey has been broadly acknowledged to exist within pragmatics (Ariel 2010). As a consequence, and with the purpose of filling this gap, some accounts, such as that of Grice (1975), were developed aiming to explain how hearers manage to interpret utterances and successfully infer the speaker's intended meaning.

2.1. Grice's Cooperative Principle

Grice's (1975) approach became revolutionary in the field of human communication, since it abandoned the idea of understanding communication as a coding-decoding process (Wharton 2003).

According to Grice (1975), people engaged in conversation do not make meaningless, irrational contributions, but rather cooperate. This idea is framed within the Cooperative Principle, a principle that speakers are supposed to follow when conversing. This principle is formulated as follows: "Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice 1975, 45). Grice expands on this principle and divides it into four categories, each of them constituting a maxim and some of them counting also with submaxims. The maxims and submaxims are the following:

(1) The Cooperative Principle

- a. Maxim of Quantity: "Give the right amount of information."
 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- b. Maxim of Quality: "Try to make your contribution one that is true."
 1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
 2. Do not say that for what you lack adequate evidence.
- c. Maxim of Relation: "Be relevant."
- d. Maxim of Manner: "Be perspicuous."
 1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
 2. Avoid ambiguity.
 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 4. Be orderly.

(Grice 1975, 45-46)

For Grice, this principle can bridge the gap between explicit and implicit meaning, because from these maxims and speakers' behaviour towards them, implicit meanings are generated in conversation. Speakers engaged in conversation may follow or may not follow these maxims. Whether they do or not, conversational implicatures are generated (Ariel 2010). Conversational implicatures are defined

as “any meaning or proposition expressed implicitly by a speaker in his or her utterance of a sentence which is meant without being part of what is said in the strict sense” (Huang 2016, 156). Grice (1975) suggests three different groups that give an account of how conversational implicatures are generated: Group A—examples where the speaker seems to be following the Cooperative Principle—; Group B—cases where speakers have to violate one maxim in order to obey another—; and, finally, Group C—instances where implicatures are generated by floutings of maxims, which are cases where speakers deliberately disobey a maxim—.

With this proposal, Grice is offering an answer to how speakers and hearers behave in conversation and to how implicit meanings are generated, which can also be applied to the case of irony.

2.2. *Grice’s Account on Irony*

On Grice’s account, irony is a figure of speech and, as such, it falls under Group C of his proposal. This is, its use by speakers constitutes a flouting, in this case, a flouting of the first submaxim of the Maxim of Quality, i.e., “Do not say what you believe to be false” (Grice, 1975, 46). From this perspective, when speakers flout this maxim, the resulting implicature is the opposite of what is said (Garmendia and Korta 2007). As a way of example, Grice exposes a situation in which there are two friends (X and A) and X has revealed a secret of A. Then A, in front of people who are aware of the fact that X has betrayed A, says (2a). Strictly speaking, at the level of what is said, A would not be cooperating, as saying something which you do not believe to be true involves a violation of the first submaxim of Quality. However, Grice understands this example as a decision that A has taken on purpose in order to violate the first submaxim of Quality but cooperate at the level of what is implicated by expressing implicitly a different proposition, which would constitute a conversational implicature; in this case, as (2a) is an ironical utterance, the conversational implicature would be the opposite of what A has said (Grice 1975), hence (2b).

- (2) a. “X is a fine friend.” (Grice, 1975, 53)
- b. “X is not a fine friend.”

2.3. *Grice’s Theory applied to Communication*

The theoretical framework described in Sections 2.1 and 2.2 presents us with an approach that analyses how hearers manage to interpret implicit meanings and, more specifically, ironical utterances. In analysing the accuracy of this theory,

Clark (2013 as cited in Togame 2016) mentions that an appropriate account should provide an explanation on why misunderstandings that are related to the way in which hearers and listeners construct a context may arise when communication is taking place. In this sense, Bouton (1992 as cited in Togame 2016, 89) claims that “Grice himself had pointed out that [...] people must have a common perception of at least four crucial factors related to the context in which the utterance occurs”, all of them factors that require the existence of a robust common framework between speaker and hearer. As Togame (2016, 125) puts it, the construction of a shared context relies on previous text or discourse “but it can also be drawn from a subset of the hearer’s beliefs and assumptions about the world including personal memories of particular things [...], general cultural assumptions, religious beliefs, scientific knowledge.”

The role that extralinguistic factors such as culture can play in the construction of a shared context and, hence, in communication and potential communication breakdowns, makes the study of cross-cultural communication particularly interesting.

3. Cross-cultural communication

The fact that the Gricean theory indicated that the sharing of contextual assumptions between hearers and speakers is necessary for successful communication, together with the idea that disparities between the assumptions held by speakers and those held by hearers tend to appear more often in intercultural communication (see Section 2.3), fostered the carrying out of experiments such as that of Keenan (1976). In this study, where Keenan examined the communicative habits of Malagasies, the results found came to prove that cultural aspects influenced each person’s inferencing process in a specific way (Kavetska 2020).

Conclusions such as this one led others to test EFL learners’ ability to interpret conversational implicatures. One of these experiments was that of Bouton (1988), in which he tested ENNS’ and ENS’ ability to interpret implicatures based on Grice’s maxims. The objective was to analyse if someone’s cultural background had an impact on the derivation of meanings from implicatures and to test if those meanings that were extracted from implicatures varied between ENNS and ENS. The implicatures Bouton included in his implicature test ranged from a wide variety of types, where irony was included. Indeed, irony proved to be one of the most challenging types of implicatures to process. As irony is to a great extent culture-specific, Bouton interpreted these results as a consequence of the cultural background of participants and, thus, regarded culture as an element which had an impact on ENNS’ interpretations, considering that ENNS’ interpretations were different from those of ENS.

3.1. High Context and Low Context cultures

Culture as a concept has been broadly defined in literature (Hall 1959; Hall 1976; Hofstede et al. 2010 [1991]; Minkov et al. 2013), but for present purposes, culture will be considered following Hall's (1976) proposal (in line with Würtz 2005; Min 2016; Hornikx and le Pair 2017, among others).

Hall (1959 as cited in Nishimura et al. 2008, 784) defined culture as “the way of life of people: the sum of their learned behavioural patterns, attitudes and material things. Culture is often subconscious; an invisible control mechanism operating in our thoughts.” Apart from defining it, Hall (1976) developed further on the notion of culture and made a distinction between High Context (HC) and Low Context (LC) cultures. According to him, whether a country belongs to a HC or a LC culture will have an impact on the way its population communicates. Taking this idea as a base, Hall (1976, 91) defines HC communication as the “one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalised in the person, while very little in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message” and LC communication as “the opposite [to HC communication]; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code.”

In LC cultures, ties between people are weaker than in HC cultures, where close-knit groups predominate (Hall 1976; Würtz 2005). What is more, in HC cultures, society is clearly structured, and people are well aware of the established codes of behaviour (Kim et al. 1998 as cited in Nishimura et al. 2008; Würtz 2005). This explains why formulating direct questions about personal issues is deemed disrespectful in HC cultures. In fact, HC cultures, as opposed to LC cultures, tend to avoid direct confrontation and strive to keep up appearances (Rosenberg 2004; Würtz 2005). Moreover, HC cultures are fixed and stable societies which are featured for being reluctant to changes (Min 2016). These inherent characteristics of HC and LC cultures have a direct impact on the way people communicate: while LC communication is straightforward and people belonging to this group expect speakers to express what they mean clearly in their message, HC communication is less direct and listeners are expected to understand what is implicitly transmitted (Nishimura et al. 2008; Würtz 2005; Hornikx and le Pair 2017).

As this proposal gives an account of the patterns of behaviour underlying communication that different cultures show, its application to the derivation of implicatures by EFL learners could answer the question of whether the cultural background of a person influences this person's derivation of implicatures or not.

4. The present study

4.1. Research Questions

In view of the literature described in Sections 2-3, the present study aims to analyse if culture plays a role in the derivation of ironic implicatures by EFL learners.

Importantly, in this study, the culture variable is examined in a bidirectional way, this is: apart from investigating the possible influence of the participants' cultural background on the derivation of ironic implicatures, the level of acquaintance with the target language (TL) culture is also analysed. Thus, the research questions (RQs) are the following:

RQ1: do the EFL learners in our sample derive pragmatically felicitous ironic implicatures?

RQ2: does culture as a bidirectional factor influence the derivation of ironic implicatures in our sample of EFL learners?

Based on the literature review, these are the predictions to the previously exposed RQs:

Prediction 1: our sample of EFL learners will derive pragmatically felicitous ironic implicatures.

Prediction 2: culture as a bidirectional factor will influence the derivation of ironic implicatures in our sample of EFL learners.

4.2. Method

Considering the exploratory nature of the study, a pilot experiment was carried out, whereby participants were administered a questionnaire on site (see Appendix 1). Before they started to answer it, we clarified to them that their participation was voluntary and that their answers would be kept anonymous. In addition to this, we informed participants of the fact that there were neither correct nor incorrect answers, so that they did not feel under pressure when filling in the questionnaire. In any case, participants could find all this information at the top of the first page in the questionnaire (see Appendix 1). On average, participants answered the questionnaire in twenty minutes.

The results of the participants' answers were analysed with the IBM SPSS Statistics programme and, given that the sample's size was below twenty participants (see section 4.3), a set of nonparametric tests were carried out.

4.3. *Participants*

The participants of the present study were students of the third year of the English Studies degree at the Faculty of Arts of the University of the Basque Country. The data were gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic, when only a third part of students could attend classes (while the rest were online), in response to the health and safety measures imposed by the government. That situation restricted our sample, which was formed by twelve participants—ten women and two men, with a mean age of twenty-one years—. Out of the twelve participants, there were eleven whose country of origin was Spain and one whose country of origin was Morocco, thus, they were regarded as members of HC cultures, where HC communication predominates (Hall and Hall 1990 as cited in Nishimura et al. 2008).

All the participants were ENNS. They were attending the third year of the English Studies degree, where a C1-C2 English proficiency level is attained. Besides, they self-assessed their English proficiency level as good-excellent in the scale “very bad – bad – regular – good – excellent” (see Section 4.4).

4.4. *Instrument*

A questionnaire consisting of three different sections was created (based on Bester 2012): a Background Information Section, an Instructions Section and a Questionnaire Section (with the experimental items) (see Appendix 1). The Experimental Section consisted of fifteen questions, each of them giving rise to an ironical implicature. We included four questions from Bester (2012) and we designed the rest, given that not all of Bester’s questions dealt with irony. The questions we extracted from Bester (2012) were Question (Q) 1, Q2, Q4, and Q7. Out of the fifteen questions, ten were multiple-choice questions and had five possible answers: a semantically correct or incorrect interpretation, a pragmatically felicitous or infelicitous interpretation, and one possible answer named “other” whose election meant that participants thought that the other answers were not adequate and that they interpreted the sentence differently (e.g., they provided a neutral interpretation). Apart from the multiple-choice questions, the questionnaire also counted with five open questions, in which participants had to explain how they interpreted the corresponding sentences.

In order not to bias participants, multiple-choice questions were mixed together with open questions, so that every two multiple-choice questions, an open question was placed.

Questions were designed so that the two RQs (see Section 4.1) could be examined. In this sense, all the questions were used to reach a conclusion on the

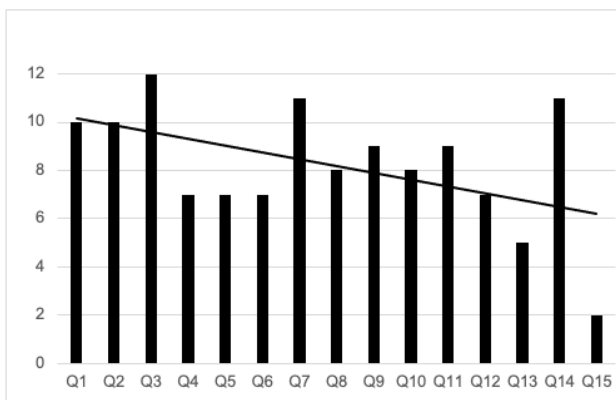
derivation of ironic implicatures (RQ1). Similarly, every question was analysed in order to answer if the cultural background of the participants influenced their interpretations, and Q8 and Q15 were the ones which were designed so as to know if acquaintance with the TL culture had an impact on the interpretation of ironic utterances (RQ2).

4.5. Results

4.5.1. Derivation of Ironic Implicatures (RQ1)

The data collected showed that the sample participating in the experiment derived pragmatically ironic implicatures. Figure 1 reveals the number of participants (y axis) that derived pragmatically felicitous interpretations for each question (x axis):

FIGURE 1. PRAGMATICALLY FELICITOUS IMPLICATURES

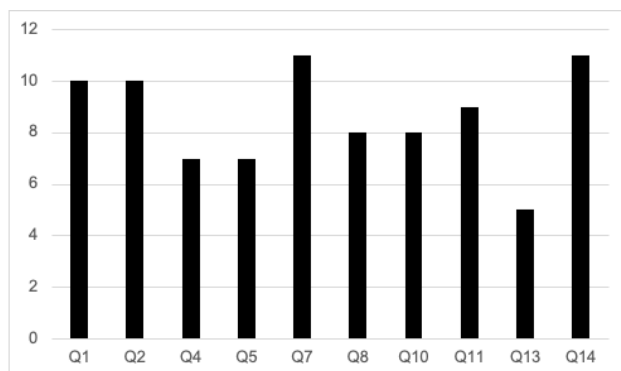


The trend line showed that the tendency of participants to derive pragmatically felicitous ironic implicatures was situated between 6 and 10, being the mean 8,2 (72,5%). This tendency to derive pragmatically felicitous implicatures was higher if the questions were presented as multiple-choice questions, where the mean of pragmatically felicitous implicatures was 8,7; in contrast, the mean of open questions was 7,4.

As for multiple-choice questions, Figure 2 reveals that those questions for which participants derived less pragmatically felicitous interpretations were Q13, which was interpreted in a pragmatically felicitous way by five participants (41,6% of the sample), and Q4 and Q5, which counted with seven pragmatically felicitous interpretations (58,3% of the sample). In the opposite sense, the

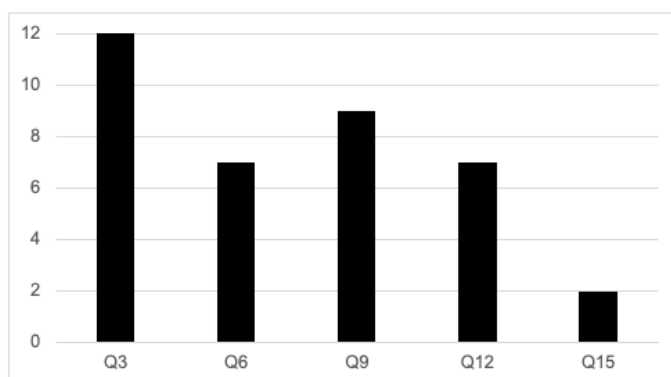
questions for which more participants chose the pragmatically felicitous option were Q8 and Q10 with eight participants (66,6% of the sample), Q11 with nine participants (75% of the sample), Q1 and Q2 with ten participants (83,3% of the sample), and Q7 and Q14 with eleven participants (91,6% of the sample).

FIGURE 2. MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS



In regards to open questions, Figure 3 displays the number of pragmatically felicitous interpretations that participants derived for each question. The one receiving less pragmatically felicitous interpretations was Q15, with two participants (16,6% of the sample). By contrast, Q3 obtained a pragmatically felicitous interpretation by the twelve participants (100% of the sample). On their part, Q6 and Q12 were interpreted in a pragmatically felicitous way by seven participants (58,3% of the sample), and Q9 by nine participants (75% of the sample).

FIGURE 3. OPEN QUESTIONS



4.5.2. Culture (RQ2)

Data showed that both the participants' cultural background and that familiarity with the TL culture played a role in the derivation of ironical implicatures. The fact that some questions were interpreted in a pragmatically felicitous way by nearly all the participants—such as Q14 (eleven participants, 91,6% of the sample) and Q2 (ten participants, 83,33% of the sample)—or that other questions such as Q13 were interpreted in a pragmatically felicitous way by less than half of the sample (five participants, 41,6% of the sample) shows that there was some underlying factor—in this case that all participants belonged to a HC culture—which drove participants to almost coincide in their interpretations of some questions.

Regarding the questions designed to answer if acquaintance with the TL culture played a role in the interpretation of ironical implicatures, Figure 1 results for Q8 and Q15 revealed that the participants' familiarity or lack of familiarity with elements belonging to the TL culture either helped them to derive a pragmatically felicitous interpretation or hindered this interpretation. For instance, one of the answers provided for Q15 was: "I don't know what Brummie is" (Participant 11), a fact which prevented this participant from deriving a pragmatically felicitous interpretation. In the case of Q8, Participant 3 chose option (e) (other) and specified that he could not "tell if she's [Margaret] being sarcastic or not without hearing her say it", which proves that the participant would rely on other cues, i.e., the speaker's voice, rather than on 'Chelsea' which was supposed to be the cue for participants in Q8 to perceive the ironical nature of the utterance.

After carrying out the statistical analysis, Q1 ($p=0,039$; binomial test for a sample), Q2 ($p=0,039$; binomial test for a sample), Q7 ($p=0,006$; binomial test for a sample), Q14 ($p=0,006$; binomial test for a sample), and Q15 ($p=0,039$; binomial test for a sample) were the questions which obtained a significant difference between the pragmatically felicitous and the pragmatically infelicitous answers.

5. Discussion

With the aim of knowing if participants would derive pragmatically felicitous ironical implicatures (RQ1), data were obtained, which showed that the analysed sample presented a high tendency to derive pragmatically felicitous interpretations in the case of ironical utterances ($m=8,2$). This tendency increased if questions were formulated as multiple-choice questions ($m=8,7$) rather than as open questions ($m=7,4$). This may respond to the fact that the possibilities a multiple-choice question offers may facilitate and act as a cue for

participants, who in the case of open questions had to interpret, without being given possibilities. Besides, as the participants of the sample were either from Spain or from Morocco, two countries where HC communication predominates, this high tendency to derive pragmatically felicitous interpretations could be understood as a consequence of Hall's (1976) definition (in line with Würtz 2005; Min 2016; Hornikx and le Pair 2017). As explained in Section 3.1, in HC cultures speakers and hearers are used to a mode of communication in which the message is implicitly transmitted and where hearers are supposed to understand those meanings which are not explicitly said (Nishimura et al. 2008; Würtz 2005; Hornikx and le Pair 2017). This is a plausible explanation as to why the participants of this pilot experiment were likely to derive pragmatically felicitous interpretations when it came to ironical utterances and confirms Prediction 1.

Additionally, in order to test whether culture as a bidirectional factor would influence the participants' derivation of ironical implicatures or not (RQ2), results were gathered and the sample's answers to some questions were in accordance with Hall's theory. For example, for Q14, the comparison between the pragmatically felicitous and the pragmatically infelicitous answers was significant ($p = 0,006$; binomial test for a sample). This question was interpreted in a pragmatically felicitous way by nearly all the participants (91,6% of the sample). If we consider that HC cultures are described as well-structured societies (Kim et al. 1998 as cited in Nishimura et al. 2008; Würtz 2005) where people are perfectly aware of both the social hierarchy and the politeness routines (e.g., not asking personal questions) (Tella 2005 as cited in Nishimura et al. 2008), the results are not surprising: the great majority of the sample interpreted Mr Lewis's father's words as ironical, because the fact that you should not ask the age to the person that is interviewing you for a potential job is a fact rooted in HC cultures (like Spain or Morocco) and known by the vast majority of their inhabitants.

Just as Q14, the answers provided for Q13 by some of the participants who did not choose the pragmatically felicitous interpretation may be understood as a consequence of the fact that they are part of a HC culture. This is so because four participants chose option (a), which constituted a pragmatically infelicitous interpretation involving a negative comment. As exposed in Section 3.1, HC cultures avoid direct conflict and tend to express themselves indirectly so that appearances are maintained (Rosenberg 2004; Würtz 2005). This may have led participants to understand Lucy's words as a way of implying that she does not want Amy to go to the hen party, rather than as an ironical comment she has made in order to encourage Amy to attend the hen party. In the case of this question, the nonparametric test revealed that there was not a significant difference between the pragmatically felicitous and the pragmatically infelicitous answers ($p = 0,774$; binomial test for a sample). This might be due to the

sample's size or even to the very nature of the question itself, since it may need reformulation, but further research should be conducted.

Notwithstanding, there was another question, Q1, for which the nonparametric test showed that the difference between the pragmatically felicitous and the pragmatically infelicitous answers was significant ($p= 0,039$; binomial test for a sample) and which can also be explained following the HC cultures' characteristic of being societies that express themselves implicitly and which avoid direct confrontation (Rosenberg 2004; Würtz 2005). In Q1, almost all the participants (83,3% of the sample) interpreted John's words as an ironical comment he was making in order to imply that the meeting, in fact, had not gone well. Taken that participants belong to a HC culture, the fact that they had no problem in reaching the pragmatically felicitous interpretation can be read as a result of the fact that they are used to understanding those meanings which are implicitly transmitted, but especially if the comment they are to interpret involves a negative remark (i.e., the fact that the meeting was unsuccessful), because communication becomes even more implicit in these cases.

Similarly, the results obtained in the nonparametric test for Q7 demonstrated that the difference between the pragmatically felicitous and the pragmatically infelicitous answers was significant ($p= 0,006$; binomial test for a sample). In this question, eleven participants derived the pragmatically felicitous interpretation. As explained in Section 3.1, people belonging to HC cultures are familiar with the politeness routines (Tella 2005 as cited in Nishimura et al. 2008). The customer's behaviour, which constitutes a clearly identified impolite behaviour by the members of the sample, may have led them to interpret Gwen's comment as an ironical one, and thus, to derive the pragmatically felicitous interpretation for this question. This is so because the customer is behaving in such a way that only the fact that he is angry can make the participants, who are all members of a HC culture, understand his behaviour.

A further inherent characteristic of HC cultures which was perceived in the answers participants provide is the fact that these cultures are characterised for relying on history, for being fixed, and for being reluctant to changes (Nishimura et al. 2008; Würtz 2005). For instance, Q2 was interpreted as ironical by nearly all the participants (83,33% of the sample) and the results of the nonparametric test showed that there was a significant difference between the pragmatically felicitous and the pragmatically infelicitous answers ($p= 0,039$; binomial test for a sample). The idea that, because a man is dancing with a woman, this man is being disloyal to his friend (the woman's husband) is part of a mentality that is undergoing change. Nevertheless, the vast majority of participants interpreted that Bill was not acting as a good friend should with Peter and, thus, Peter's words were interpreted as ironical. This showed that the fact that a man dances

with a woman who is his friend's wife was still understood as a disloyal gesture towards a friend by the participants of the sample, who were all members of HC cultures. Although the majority of the sample regarded Peter's words as ironical, two participants selected different options: (b) and (c), which treated the situation described in Q2 as something usual. This could reveal that this vision is starting to change among some of the members of HC cultures.

As culture was regarded as a bidirectional factor, we also analysed if acquaintance or lack of acquaintance with the TL culture influenced the way participants interpreted ironical sentences. The results showed a tendency that appeared to confirm that it actually does. For example, the answers given for Q15 (with 16,6% of pragmatically felicitous interpretations) were consistent and the difference between the pragmatically felicitous and the pragmatically infelicitous answers was significant ($p = 0,039$; binomial test for a sample). This demonstrated that it was particularly challenging for participants to perceive the dissociation in Benjamin's words. The item 'Brummie' was included because Brummie is a widely despised variety by many people in the UK; even mass media and speakers of the variety themselves sometimes show a negative attitude towards it (Hurst 2015). However, participants in the sample were not clear about Benjamin's words, since some answered that "He [Benjamin] could be being sarcastic [...] but maybe he means that her [Laura's] accent will reach the audience" (Participant 1); others derived a semantically correct interpretation of Benjamin's words and answered that "He [Benjamin] is proposing Laura to be the speaker" (Participant 3); others also pointed at the fact that "It depends on how he says it, on the tone. He could be serious or ironic" (Participant 7); and another participant answered that he did not know what Brummie was (Participant 11). All these answers showed that lack of familiarity with what 'Brummie' was made them disregard this item which was the one giving them the cue to realise that Benjamin was actually employing irony.

As opposed to Q15, probably because Q8 was designed as a multiple-choice question, the results of the nonparametric test for Q8 demonstrated that the difference between the pragmatically felicitous and the pragmatically infelicitous answers was not significant ($p = 0,774$; binomial test for a sample). However, the answers provided by those speakers who did not derive a pragmatically felicitous interpretation seemed to signal that the lack of familiarity with what 'Chelsea' was hindered their interpretation of Q8 as an ironical one. Taken the popularity of this London neighbourhood, which is additionally among the most expensive ones to have a house in (Tarver 2020), the item was employed to act as a cue for participants and to help them perceive the dissociation of Margaret with her own words' content. However, out of the four participants that did not derive a pragmatically felicitous interpretation, two selected option (b) and one chose

option (a), both of which were choices that showed that the item 'Chelsea' did not act as a cue for them, as they did not perceive the dissociation. In addition, Participant 3 chose option (e) and explained that he needed to hear Margaret in order to be able to say whether she was being sarcastic or not. His answer revealed too that his lack of familiarity with the item 'Chelsea' was preventing him from reaching a conclusion on whether Margaret's words were ironical or not and, thus, that he needed some further cue, which in this case would be the tone.

These findings confirm Prediction 2, as the collected data provided evidence for the effect of the participants' HC cultural background on the answers of our sample and also validated the idea that familiarity with the TL culture influences these participants' derivation of ironical implicatures.

6. Conclusions and further research

The results and the discussion presented in Sections 4.5 and 5, respectively, show that the participants in our sample derived pragmatically felicitous ironical implicatures. Additionally, the results found provide evidence on the influence that the participants' HC cultural background had when they were asked to derive ironical implicatures. Some of the results obtained in the nonparametric tests showed that there was some common behaviour underlying the derivation of ironical implicatures that was shared by nearly all the sample's participants. This seems to signal that at least some of the characteristics of HC cultures and of their way of communicating, such as preferring to convey information implicitly or trying to avoid direct criticism, have come into play when the participants were interpreting the ironical sentences. Concerning the bidirectional nature of the culture variable, the obtained results seem to provide evidence that reveals that lack of familiarity with items belonging to the TL culture could hinder a pragmatically felicitous interpretation. This is particularly exemplified by the results for Q15, which was an open question that was interpreted in a pragmatically felicitous way by only two participants (16,6% of the sample).

Notwithstanding, the results obtained in this exploratory study count with some limitations regarding, chiefly, the size of the sample, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. This underscores the need not to regard the results of the present study *ex cathedra* while, at the same time, stresses the significance of further investigating irony comprehension. Limitations of the study can also be detected in the lack of variety as concerns the cultural background of participants and their age or even in the very nature of irony itself, since irony is an element for which prosodic cues such as tone constitute an important factor. In view of these limitations, broadening the sample would be interesting, so that more

participants from different age ranges and cultural backgrounds would be tested. Additionally, in order to provide participants with a more natural simulation of communication, the questions could be presented as audios instead of being written, so that participants are not biased by not hearing the speakers' voice. Finally, even if the main aim of this study was to examine whether culture as a variable played a role in the derivation of ironical implicatures by the EFL learners in our sample, considering distinct English proficiency levels would be of interest for future research, since EFL learners' language proficiency level in the TL might also have an impact when deriving ironical implicatures.

All in all, this research has managed to bridge the gap between what is said and what is meant and serves as a preliminary investigation on the derivation of pragmatically felicitous ironical implicatures by a sample of EFL learners. The primary contribution of this study lies in its exploratory nature, highlighting the significance of investigating irony comprehension in the context of English language learning, cultural backgrounds, and familiarity with the TL culture.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire (adapted from Bester 2012)

(This explanation has been omitted, as it contains personal information).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 1) How old are you?
- 2) Which is your gender?
- 3) Which is your country of origin?
- 4) Are you a native speaker of English? If not, answer question 5.
 - 4.1) Speaking: Very bad – Bad – Regular – Good – Excellent
 - 4.2) Listening: Very bad – Bad – Regular – Good – Excellent
 - 4.3) Reading: Very bad – Bad – Regular – Good – Excellent
 - 4.4) Writing: Very bad – Bad – Regular – Good – Excellent
- 6) What language(s) do you speak with your family and friends?
- 7) How often do you do the following?
 - 7.1) Reading books in English
 - 7.2) Watching films/series in English
 - 7.3) Watching TV programmes from British/American televisions
 - 7.4) Any other activity in English (specify).

INSTRUCTIONS

Read the following excerpts and then choose one of the five possibilities (a-e) that are given to you for questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, and 14. In case you choose option (e) in any of those questions, explain why you have chosen that option. For questions 3, 6, 9, 12, and 15, a written answer explaining your interpretation of the speakers' utterances is needed.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. After a difficult meeting where clients did not like any of their ideas for a new advertising campaign, two colleagues leave the boardroom.

John: **That went well.**

John means:

- a) The meeting went very well.
- b) The meeting did not go well.
- c) It could have been worse.
- d) He is thankful that at least they didn't get fired.
- e) Other

2. Bill and Peter work together in the same office. They are good friends. They often have lunch together and Peter has even invited Bill to have dinner with him and his wife at their home several times. Now Peter's friends have told him that they saw Bill out dancing with Peter's wife recently while Peter was out of town on a business trip.

Peter: **Bill certainly knows how to be a really good friend, doesn't he?**

Peter means:

- a) Bill is not acting the way a good friend should.
- b) Peter's wife and Bill are becoming really good friends.
- c) Peter and Bill are good friends, so Peter can trust him.
- d) Nothing should be allowed to interfere with the friendship.
- e) Other

3. James, Olivia's brother, is complaining because he is in charge of washing the dishes. Olivia has arrived home from work and continues working from her laptop. James continues to complain and Olivia says:

Olivia: **As I have been the whole day doing nothing, I can do it for you.**

How do you interpret Olivia's words?

4. A few friends are at a house party. A fellow guest who is not looking where he is going bumps into Dadrian and spills his drink all over Dadrian's brand new leather jacket. Dadrian grabs the offender by the collar and throws him against the wall, yelling at him. Sam, one of Dadrian's friends, turns to one of his buddies:

Sam: **You think he's angry?**

Sam means:

- a) He thinks Dadrian doesn't have reason to be so angry.
- b) He is not sure whether Dadrian is as angry as he looks.
- c) It is obvious Dadrian is very angry.
- d) He wants to know why Dadrian is so angry.
- e) Other

5. Marie must choose in a maximum of two weeks the university where she would like to study her Medicine degree. Her neighbour sees Marie's father and asks him how is Marie doing with the decision. Marie's father answers:

Marie's father: **She is sitting on the fence, you know, Marie is very good at making decisions.**

Marie's father means:

- a) Marie is sitting on the fence because she has already taken the decision.
- b) Marie has changed her mind and will now study a different degree.
- c) Marie is not a good decision maker.
- d) Marie is a good decision maker.
- e) Other

6. John, Alex, and Mark had a group presentation and John did not prepare his part, so when it was his turn to speak, his mind went blank.

Mark: **Certainly, God gave him the gift of the gab.**

How do you interpret Mark's words?

7. A customer in a clothing store starts yelling loudly at a sales person, ranting and raving and waving his arms about. Another customer looking at shoes nearby says to her friend:

Gwen: **You can tell he's a little upset.**

Gwen means:

- a) You can tell the customer is a little upset.
- b) You can tell the customer is very upset.
- c) It's not clear how upset the customer is.
- d) The customer has nothing to be upset about.
- e) Other

8. Tom and Margaret are preparing a surprise party in London for their friend Ryan. When talking about how they will pay the party, Tom tells Margaret that as she has just been promoted and works in one of the most prestigious law firms, she should pay for everything. To this, Margaret answers:

Margaret: **Of course I could bear the costs and also, if you wish, we could celebrate the party at my place in Chelsea.**

Margaret means:

- a) Margaret will do anything that's needed from her in order to make her friend Ryan happy.
- b) Margaret agrees with Tom's proposal.
- c) Margaret thinks that as she has been promoted, it is fair enough that she pays.
- d) Margaret has not liked Tom's proposal.
- e) Other

9. Elizabeth has had an exam this morning for which she has not studied. When her friends ask her how it has gone, she answers:

Elizabeth: **The teacher will marvel with my wise, elaborated answers.**

How do you interpret Elizabeth's words?

10. During a school meeting, parents are discussing which could be the new extracurricular activity that the school should add to the list of the already offered activities. Lucas, a father, suggests that the school should offer children the possibility to learn cooking. Martha, another mother, answers:

Martha: I see eye to eye with Lucas, that's why I want to propose ballet as an alternative.

Martha means:

- a) Martha agrees with Lucas.
- b) Martha does not like Lucas' proposal.
- c) Children won't like Lucas' proposal.
- d) Martha has not heard Lucas' proposal.
- e) Other

11. Frans takes his girlfriend Magda out for a sundowner picnic. He goes to great trouble to make sure that everything is perfectly organized. But everything goes wrong: they get attacked by mosquitoes as the sun sets, the wine bottle breaks and spills over everything, and Magda twists her ankle in a hole as they walk to the top of the hill. In the meantime, dark clouds move closer and drops begin to fall.

Frans: At least it's not raining.

Frans means:

- a) Well, at least it is not raining too hard yet.
- b) And as if things couldn't possibly get worse, it is raining too.
- c) The rain is the least of our problems right now.
- d) The weather forecast said nothing about rain.
- e) Other

12. The members of a company will meet with some potential investors in order to make a deal. The office manager asks the workers to clean the meeting room but they answer that that is a workspace and that as such, it can't be impeccable. When the boss of the company arrives at the meeting room and asks why that mess is not yet cleaned, the office manager answers:

Office Manager: Cleaning? What for? It is a truth universally acknowledged that investors enjoy chaos.

How do you interpret the office manager's words?

13. Lucy and Amy, two close friends, are discussing whether they should go to Jessica's hen party or not. Amy is not really into it and Lucy tells her:

Lucy: **Be careful, your parents may punish you if you go to the party.**

Lucy means:

- a) Lucy does not want Amy to go to the hen party.
- b) Lucy would like Amy to go to the party but is worried about the reaction Amy's parents will have if she goes.
- c) Lucy is advising Amy not to go because Amy's parents will punish her if she goes.
- d) Amy's parents are quite intransigent.
- e) Other

14. During a job interview, Mrs Maseras, the interviewer, asks Mr Lewis, the interviewee, how old he is. Mr Lewis answers by asking Mrs Maseras the same question. After the interview, Mr Lewis is told that he will not be hired. During a phone call with his father, Mr Lewis' father tells him:

Mr Lewis' father: **In order to be hired, the next time you should ask the interviewer her age first.**

Mr Lewis' father means:

- a) It has not been a good idea asking the interviewer her age.
- b) The interviewee must always ask the age first.
- c) One good option in order to be hired is asking the interviewee his/her age.
- d) He wants his son to be hired so he is giving him the best advice he can give in order for him to be hired.
- e) Other

15. A group of five mates will give a talk in front of an audience in a conference taking place at the University of Cambridge. When they are about to choose who the spokesperson will be, Benjamin, one of the members of the group, says:

Benjamin: **Laura's Brummie accent will win over the public without any doubt.**

How do you interpret Benjamin's words?