

Original Paper

Verbal Irony Comprehension in Adults who Speak English as an Additional Language

Marta Krygier-Bartz¹ & Melanie Glenwright^{1*}

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada

* Melanie Glenwright, Department of Psychology, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada

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Abstract

We examined whether adults who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) have a decreased ability to comprehend verbal irony compared to native English speakers. Participants watched a series of 30-second videos containing ironic and literal statements. Respondents identified speaker's belief, and rated speaker's attitude and humor. EAL speakers were less reliable than native English speakers in identifying the speaker's belief for both ironic and literal statements and showed lower humor ratings for ironic criticisms.

Keywords

English as an Additional Language (EAL), verbal irony, sarcasm, criticism, humor

1. Introduction

While a large percentage of the North American population speaks EAL, verbal irony comprehension among EAL adults has been given surprisingly little research attention. 21.5% of Americans speak a native language other than English at home (U. S. Census Bureau, 2020) and 22% of Canadians use a native language other than English or French (Statistics Canada, 2018). There is a growing body of research showing that verbal irony comprehension in second language learners is compromised (Ellis et al., 2021; Kim & Lantolf, 2016; Prichard & Rucynski, 2020; Taguchi et al., 2016). For example, Kim (2014) reported that EAL adults found verbal irony challenging to interpret because they associated ironic utterances only with criticism and missed the intended humor. Bromberek-Dyzman (2015) however, claimed that EAL adults' accuracy and processing time of ironic statements in English and in their native language did not differ. Based on these conflicting findings, it remains unclear regarding the extent to which EAL adults understand English verbal irony. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether EAL adults have a decreased ability to recognize the ironic speaker's belief, humor,

and attitude in comparison to native English speakers.

Interlocutors are often challenged to make sense of ambiguity pervasive in social interactions. While speakers intend to be understood by listeners, listeners can struggle to infer the speaker's true intentions (Barr & Keysar, 2005). Verbal irony is a complex pragmatic tool that produces an ambiguous interaction during which speakers' words contradict their true beliefs and emotions (Rockwell, 2005). For this reason, ironic speakers' statements may be easily misinterpreted by listeners who fail to recognize ironic utterances. The ability to understand verbal irony involves sophisticated socio-cognitive functions; listeners must not only conclude that the speaker's statement is not to be taken literally, but also identify the incongruities between the speaker's intended message and literal utterance (Hala, Pexman, Climie, Rostad, & Glenwright, 2010). Although there are multiple types of ironic statements, we examined comprehension of ironic criticisms and ironic compliments. An ironic criticism is worded positively, but expresses negative feelings (e.g., "*You're such an amazing chef*" stated to someone who burned dinner). An ironic compliment is worded negatively; however it conveys a positive message (e.g., "*Terrible grade*" said to someone who received 100% on a test).

Research suggests that verbal irony serves communicative functions that literal language does not. Verbal irony is a complex form of figurative language that can fulfill a wide range of communicative functions. Depending on social context, irony can allow speakers to mute their critical intent (Dews & Winner, 1995) or enhance it (Colston, 1997). Speakers who make ironic statements are perceived to be funnier than speakers who make literal remarks (e.g., Colston & O'Brien, 2000; Gibbs, 2000). Speakers may also use verbal irony to tease with humor (Colston & O'Brien, 2000), to express negative intent in a playful manner (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000), to serve politeness norms or to amuse the listener (Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg, & Brown, 1995). While the focus of the present study concerns the humorous side of verbal irony, we acknowledge that not all instances of irony are humorous and that it is important to view irony and humor as independent constructs (see Dynel, 2014).

Young adults between the ages of 20 and 40 years use verbal irony in 28% of their interactions with other adults (Gibbs, 2000). Moreover, ironic criticisms are used much more frequently than literal criticisms in daily discourse as they are perceived as less negative than literal criticisms. On the other hand, ironic compliments are seen as less positive than literal compliments and for that reason are used less frequently (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000). Because verbal irony provides a source of ambiguity in social interactions, it can lead to misunderstandings between speakers and listeners, particularly in the young adult population for whom use of verbal irony is abundant. Given the prevalence of verbal irony in young adults' speech, it is especially important to study the EAL adults' understanding of verbal irony as they may be vulnerable to misunderstanding ironic statements, and possibly feel offended by the speaker.

Verbal irony comprehension relies on the listener's socio-cultural knowledge (Holtgraves, 2005). Community membership (Gerrig & Horton, 2005) provides background knowledge that facilitates

verbal irony understanding based on membership in a socio-cultural group that shares a common knowledge base and personal experiences. Dress, Kreuz, Link and Caucci (2008) investigated the role of community membership in verbal irony usage. Interestingly, Northern US residents produced more negative ironic statements and at a higher frequency than their Southern US counterparts. Given the importance of community membership and the occurrence of the regional variations in the use of verbal irony, we speculated that EAL speakers might lack some cultural knowledge necessary to comprehend verbal irony conveyed in English. The parallel-constraint-satisfaction model posits that social experience with ironic knowledge can support the cognitive system during the irony interpretation process (Pexman, 2008). Research also demonstrates the importance of exposure to verbal irony in facilitating its understanding. Children whose parents are more likely to use verbal irony understand irony better (Hala et al., 2010) thereby demonstrating that social experience with verbal irony can enhance one's understanding of its communicative functions. We reasoned that because EAL speakers possess less experience with North American culture, less experience with English and a limited vocabulary, they might experience difficulties with understanding verbal irony. Based on the parallel-constraint-satisfaction model (Pexman, 2008), we theorized that EAL speakers would be at a disadvantage in interpreting verbal irony because they lack the social experience that facilitates the cognitive processes involved in irony appreciation.

In the current study, verbal irony understanding was measured using three types of questions: speaker belief, speaker attitude and speaker humor. These questions were developed for four statement types: ironic criticism, literal criticism, ironic compliment, and literal compliment. The speaker belief question tested comprehension of whether the speaker meant what he or she said. The speaker attitude question asked participants to rate how nice or mean the speaker was trying to be. The speaker humor question asked participants to rate how funny or serious the speaker was trying to be. Participants provided written answers in response to twelve 30-second videos selected from popular American TV shows containing three of each of the above statement types. Our main hypothesis was that EAL adults would display a decreased ability to understand verbal irony in comparison to the native English speakers with lower scores on the speaker belief measure and less of an appreciation of the ironic speaker's attitude and intended humor. We also expected, however, that the two participant groups should yield comparable scores for all dependent measures for the two literal statement types.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Participants were 128 undergraduate students recruited from introductory psychology courses at a large Canadian university. Seventy participants were classified as native English speakers (43 females, 11 males, 16 failed to provide their gender) and 58 as EAL speakers (30 females, 11 males, 17 did failed to provide their gender) and these frequencies were not significantly different, $\chi^2(1, N=95) = .55, p = .46$.

Native English speakers ($M = 19.71$, $SD = 4.55$) and the EAL speakers ($M = 19.56$, $SD = 2.45$) were comparable in age in years, $t(120) = .219$, $p = .83$. Thus, no gender or age differences existed between the two groups.

2.2 Procedure

Participants sat in a classroom equipped with a large projector screen visible to everyone. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire then watched 12 videos one at a time. After watching each video, participants judged speaker's belief, and rated speaker's intent and humor. Participants had 1 minute to answer the questions for each video in writing. The entire procedure took 20 minutes to administer.

2.3 Materials

Participants watched twelve 30-second videos selected from three television shows which were popular in North America from 1989 to 2004: Seinfeld, Friends and Frasier. The 12 videos were presented in English and contained three of each: ironic criticisms, literal criticisms, ironic compliments, and literal compliments (See Appendix A). Ironic criticisms were worded positively, however conveyed a negative attitude (e.g., "That was the best part? Good honeymooning, tiger", implying a negative attitude toward the quality of the honeymoon), whereas literal criticisms communicated disapproval (e.g., "You know, I don't mind you guys being tough on this place, but you could be a little nicer to the waitress" said to two dissatisfied customers). Ironic compliments were worded negatively but communicated a positive attitude (e.g., "I'm not really attracted to you" stated by a character who is clearly attracted to her date). Literal compliments were sincerely expressed praises (e.g., "You're going to be the handsomest gent at your friend's retirement party" said to someone who was dressed formally). Both ironic compliments and ironic criticisms were voiced with an exaggerated pitch and with a prolonged pronunciation; intonation characteristics shown to cue listeners to verbal irony (e.g., Ackerman, 1983, Capelli et al., 1990; de Groot et al., 1995). Literal compliments were voiced in a higher pitch and at a regular pace indicating warmth and sincerity while literal criticisms were voiced in a lower pitch and at a regular pace to sound cold and firm (Glenwright & Pexman, 2010). Videos that contained laugh tracks were shown as originally aired on television. We performed a post hoc interrater reliability test of our 12 video clips to ensure that they clearly depicted statements that were either ironic or literal. Two native English speaking blind coders categorized each final statement as literal or ironic. Coding between raters was compared with Cohen's Kappa and agreement was excellent ($\kappa = .88$). The videos were presented in a counterbalanced order such that each statement type had varied positions across multiple sessions.

After watching each video, participants responded to the three questions in writing. First, the speaker belief asked whether the speaker believed what he or she said, for instance, "Did Phoebe believe what she said to Chandler?" The correct answer to this question would reveal that participants understand that ironic speakers hold a belief that contradicts their statement. Participants then responded to the

speaker humor question, for example, “How funny or serious was Phoebe trying to be when she said: “That was the best part? Good honeymooning, tiger?” Participants rated speaker humor on a 6-point Likert scale where 1 = *very funny*, 2 = *funny*, 3 = *a little bit funny*, 4 = *a little bit serious*, 5 = *serious*, and 6 = *very serious*. Individuals who understand verbal irony should demonstrate this by rating ironic statements on the funny half of the scale with 1 to 3 ratings while rating literal statements as serious with ratings ranging from 4 to 6. Participants also rated speaker attitude by responding to questions such as: How nice or mean was Phoebe trying to be when she said: “That was the best part? Good honeymooning, tiger?” The answers were provided on a 6-point Likert scale where 1 = *very nice*, 2 = *nice*, 3 = *a little bit nice*, 4 = *a little bit mean*, 5 = *mean*, and 6 = *very mean*. For this measure, ironic compliments and literal compliments should be rated on the nice half of the scale with ratings ranging from 1 to 3 while ironic criticisms and literal criticisms should be rated as mean with ratings ranging from 4 to 6.

3. Results

A 2 (Group: Native English, EAL) x 4 (Statement: Ironic Criticism, Literal Criticism, Ironic Compliment, Literal Compliment) mixed model analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Group as a between-subjects factor and Statement as a within-subjects factor was conducted for each of the three dependent variables. All described post hoc t-tests were Bonferroni corrected.

3.1 Speaker Belief

Speaker belief responses were rated as correct when participants displayed an understanding that ironic statements conveyed a belief that was contrary to the literal sense of the message, and that literal statements were consistent with the speaker’s belief. The mean proportion of correct speaker belief responses was calculated for each participant across the four statement types and these values were compared with the above mixed model ANOVA. The statement by group interaction was not significant,

$F(3, 126) = 1.37, MSE = ., p = .25, \eta^2 = .02$. However, there was a main effect of group, $F(1, 126) =$

$22.26, MSE = 1.84, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$, as the mean proportions of correct responses for speaker

belief for ironic and literal statement types combined was significantly higher for native English speakers ($M = .79, SD = .13$) than for EAL speakers ($M = .67, SD = .16$; See Figure 1). The results also

displayed a main effect of statement, $F(3, 378) = 6.28, MSE = .46, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$, because

speaker belief accuracy for literal compliments ($M = .66, SD = .29$) was significantly lower than

speaker belief for literal criticisms ($M = .81, SD = .25$), $t(131) = 4.93, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$. There was no

difference for ironic statements.

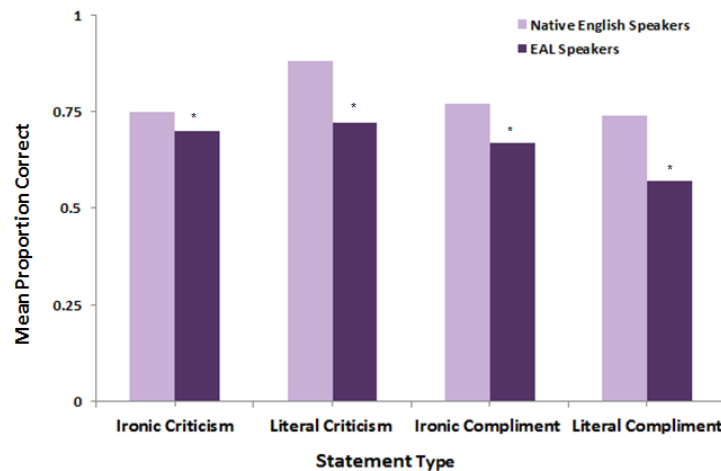


Figure 1. Mean Proportion Speaker Belief Accuracy for Native English and EAL Speakers by Statement Type

3.2 Speaker Humor

Participants were asked to rate all statements on a 6-point Funny/Serious Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very Funny) to 6 (Very Serious). The analysis included each participant's rating on the Funny/Serious scale when he/she correctly responded to the speaker belief question for that video. The mixed model ANOVA revealed a significant statement type by group interaction, $F(3, 330) = 7.25$, $MSE = 4.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$, because native English speakers rated ironic criticisms as funnier ($M = 2.17$, $SD = .71$) than EAL adults ($M = 2.70$, $SD = .84$), $t(121) = 3.72$, $p < .01$ (See Figure 2). There was a significant main effect of statement type, $F(3, 330) = 287.25$, $MSE = 194.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .72$, because ironic criticisms ($M = 2.39$, $SD = .80$) were rated as funnier than literal criticisms ($M = 5.09$, $SD = .72$), $t(122) = 26.68$, $p < .025$. Furthermore, ironic compliments ($M = 2.38$, $SD = .88$) were rated as significantly more funny than literal compliments ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.02$), $t(120) = 14.79$, $p < .025$. A main effect of group was not found, $F < 1$.

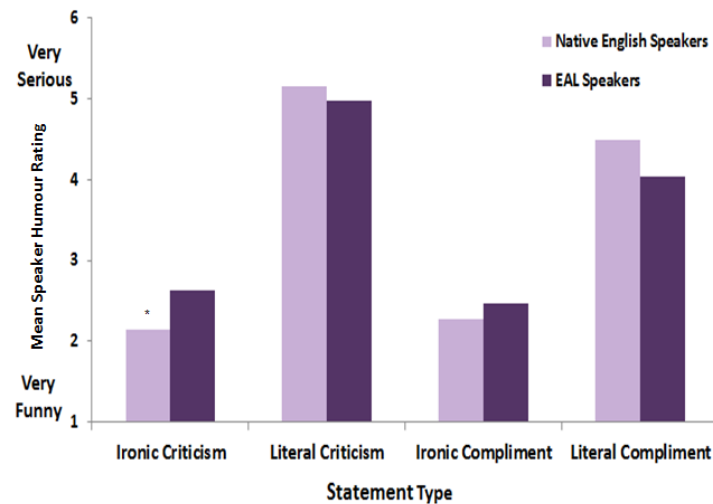


Figure 2. Mean Speaker Humor Ratings for Native English and EAL Speakers by Statement Type.

* $p < .01$.

3.3 Speaker Attitude

Participants rated speaker attitude for all statement types on a 6-point Nice/Mean Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very Nice) to 6 (Very Mean). The analysis included each participant's rating only when he/she responded correctly to the speaker belief question for that video. The mixed model ANOVA revealed a significant interaction of statement by group, $F(3, 324) = 3.64$, $MSE = 1.95$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$, because, on average, native English speakers rated literal criticisms as significantly meaner ($M = 4.46$, $SD = .61$) than EAL speakers ($M = 4.14$, $SD = .72$), $t(122) = 2.74$, $p < .01$. There was no main effect of group, $F(1, 108) = 1.69$, $p = .20$, however, there was a main effect of statement, $F(3, 324) = 246.47$, $MSE = 131.98$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .70$. Literal criticisms ($M = 4.32$, $SD = .67$) were rated as meaner than ironic criticisms ($M = 3.95$, $SD = .65$), $t(122) = 4.79$, $p < .025$, and literal compliments were rated as nicer ($M = 1.78$, $SD = .64$) than ironic compliments ($M = 2.82$, $SD = .99$), $t(118) = 10.13$, $p < .025$.

4. Discussion

We aimed to determine whether adults who speak EAL display a compromised ability to comprehend an ironic speaker's belief, attitude and humor in comparison to native English speakers. Consistent with our hypothesis, EAL adults showed lower levels of comprehension than native English-speaking adults for the speaker's belief or intended meaning for both ironic statement types. We were surprised, however, to find that EAL adults also showed lower speaker belief comprehension levels for literal statement types in comparison to native English speakers. A large proportion of participants struggled with speaker belief and ratings for literal compliments likely because they mistook them for ironic

criticisms. This finding however, although contrary to our predictions, supports prior research on complimenting behavior in North America. Because native English speakers employ a great number of compliments in their daily speech, a large number of EAL speakers consider them to be insincere (Dunham, 1992). We suspect that EAL participants mistook literal compliments for ironic criticisms due to a combination of their lack of experience with verbal irony in English as well as their knowledge of our experiment's purpose. That is, it is possible that they were anticipating ironic statements and displayed a response bias. Future research should address this issue by conducting studies wherein participants are not aware of the intent to study verbal irony comprehension.

While our videos clearly depicted statements that were either literal or ironic, the ironic criticisms could have also been classified as a rhetorical question (e.g., "Frasier, how'd you ever let this little peach get away?") and the ironic compliments included instances of understatement (e.g., Oh, yeah. And I'm not really attracted to you") and hyperbole ("Yeah, that's like the most ugliest dress I've ever seen"). We acknowledge that EAL participants may have found these statements difficult to understand thereby influencing their comprehension of ironic statements. We therefore suggest that future irony researchers aim to include pragmatically simple stimuli to avoid this confound.

Contrary to our predictions, EAL and native English-speaking participants showed comparable speaker attitude ratings for ironic criticisms and ironic compliments. Recall that speaker attitude ratings and speaker humor ratings were examined only when participants correctly attributed the speaker's belief. This finding indicates that, if an EAL adult is able to infer that the ironic speaker does not believe the literal meaning of an ironic criticism, she/he can likely also infer the speaker's intent to be mean or to criticize. Consistent with our predictions, however, we found that EAL participants rated ironic criticisms as less funny than native English participants thereby suggesting that verbal irony's humor function is not reliably apparent to this group. These findings are consistent with the report that EAL speakers who recognize ironic statements also view them as negative statements thereby disregarding humor (Kim, 2014). This pattern of results, where EAL adults understand the ironic speaker's belief and attitude but fail to grasp humor, is also displayed by English speaking middle school age children who are just developing their verbal irony interpretation skills (Dews et al., 1996; Harris & Pexman, 2003). Together these results show that both EAL adults and middle school age native English speakers may not fully appreciate the ironist's intent to convey humor in daily discourse.

Our findings show that EAL adults can struggle to fully understand ironic statements in comparison to native English speakers. Note that in the present study, the videos contained both verbal (i.e., ironic and literal intonation) and visual cues (i.e., speaker facial expression, body language, and context) to assist participants in recognizing ironic utterances. Individuals who are given a combination of verbal, visual, and vocal information rather than the verbal information alone, are more likely to accurately recognize speaker's intent (Rockwell, 2005). In an era where computer-mediated communication and text messaging is commonplace, EAL adults have difficulty understanding verbal irony without the aid of

these important cues (Prichard & Rucynski, 2022). The current research represents an important direction as it explores the impact of cultural and linguistic influences on verbal irony comprehension. We believe that, in a globalized world, there is a need to better understand the dynamics of ambiguous non-literal language understanding.

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Note. Video Scripts

Ironic criticisms.

1. Kramer is preparing a sandwich in Jerry's kitchen area.

KRAMER: Uhh, Jerry, you got no mustard, huh...

JERRY: It's on the door.

KRAMER: (examining a yellow squeeze bottle) What, this yellow stuff? No, I said mustard, Jerry. Dijon.

KRAMER: Ah, it's no good. No. That's bush league.

JERRY: Hey, hey. Wait... what, you're gonna leave it there? That's like half a pound of turkey!

KRAMER: No, no, I can't eat that. You can't eat a sandwich without Dijon.

JERRY: *Yeah, you're right. I really should keep more of your favorites on hand.*

2. Monica and Chandler are returning from their honeymoon.

PHOEBE: So how was the honeymoon?

MONICA: Oh, so much fun. But the best part is, we met this incredible couple on the way back.

PHOEBE: That was the best part? (To Chandler) *Good honeymooning, tiger.*

3. Lilith is visiting Martin and Frasier.

LILITH: Martin, I'm especially delighted to see you here tonight.

MARTIN: Oh yeah?

LILITH: Oh yes. Knowing as I do the history of your relationship with Frasier, when I heard that he'd taken you in, I immediately flipped to the weather channel to see if hell had indeed frozen over.

MARTIN: *Frasier, how'd you ever let this little peach get away?*

Literal criticisms.

1. George is eating a dip at a party.

TIMMY: What are you doing?

GEORGE: What?

TIMMY: Did...did you just double-dip that chip?

GEORGE: Excuse me?

TIMMY: You double-dipped the chip!

GEORGE: "Double-dipped"? What are you talking about?

TIMMY: You dipped the chip, you took a bite, and you dipped again.

GEORGE: So...?

TIMMY: *That's like putting your whole mouth right in the dip!*

2. Ross and Rachel are arguing after breaking up.

ROSS: No!! You know, you know, don't do me any favors. In fact, where, where's the rest of my stuff?! Huh? Like-like my umm, (picks up a book) Hey, this book is mine!! And, and, and, and that T-shirt you sleep in? I'd like that back too. Yes, I do.

RACHEL: You know how much I love that T-shirt! You never even wore that T-shirt!

ROSS: I'm just trying to help you, move on.

RACHEL: *Oh, you are a petty man.*

3. Martin, Niles and Frasier are eating at a restaurant.

MARTIN: Great service, huh?

NILES: Yes. With any luck we should be completing our dining experience in less than twenty minutes.

WAITRESS: If you're not ready I could put this under the heat lamp...

FRASIER: Oh no, no-no, that won't be necessary young lady, I'm as ready as I'll ever be...

WAITRESS: Alright. Let me know if I can get you anything else.

FRASIER: Yes, thank you.

MARTIN: *You could be a little nicer to the waitress.*

Ironical compliments.

1. Niles is waiting in line at a coffee shop.

BARISTA: Who's next here?

WOMAN: (cutting off Niles) I am! I'll have a cafe...

NILES: Oh, oh, oh, oh! No, you're not! You weren't next here, I am! I suppose people like you who glide through life wrapped in a cozy little cocoon of narcissism never notice such

things. But you'd do well to learn this lesson, sister! There's still such a thing as good manners in this world, and that's why I would like to insist that you let me buy you your coffee and also please try the poppy seed muffins.

WOMAN: Thank you.

NILES: You're welcome.

FRASIER: *Kind of brutal, weren't you?*

2. Elaine and Ben are eating at a restaurant.

ELAINE: So do most doctors like ER or do you guys just think it's fake?

BEN: I couldn't tell you. You know, I'm not really a doctor.

ELAINE: *Oh, yeah. And I'm not really attracted to you.*

3. Chandler is talking through a closed door to Monica.

CHANDLER: Oh you got a wedding dress? That's great!

MONICA: Yeah but I'm not keeping it.

CHANDLER: Well then why can't I see it?

MONICA: Oh. I guess you can. Okay but; I... I have to return it, so you can't like it.

CHANDLER: Okay I promise. I'll-I'll hate it. (She enters.) Wow! You, you look...hideous.

MONICA: Really?

CHANDLER: *Yeah, that's like the most ugliest dress I've ever seen.*

Literal compliments.

1. Ross and Rachel are arguing.

ROSS: And then, we could've gone from the ceremony to the reception with you in the sidecar!

RACHEL: Ross, it just wouldn't have been feasible.

ROSS: But having a dove place the ring on your finger would've been no problem?

RACHEL: *It was really fun being married to you tonight.*

2. Martin is showing off his new suit.

FRASIER: Well, we were on our way to Armani, when dad spotted this in the window of a discount clothing store.

MARTIN: It's sharkskin! Look at the way it changes color when I move my arm!

DAPHNE: (to Martin) *You're going to be the handsomest gent at your friend's retirement party.*

3. Carol is introducing Dr. Feffa and her baby to Elaine.

CAROL: Elaine! (Elaine enters) This is our pediatrician, Ben Feffa.

ELAINE: Hi.

CAROL: Look at him, Elaine. How gorgeous is he? I ask you, how gorgeous? (pointing at the newborn)

ELAINE: Pretty gorgeous.

BEN: Elaine, you have children?

ELAINE: Me? Oh no, but I'd love to have a baby, I mean, I can't wait to have a baby. I'm just dying to have a baby.

BEN: A beautiful woman like you should. *You're quite breathtaking.*