

Humor as a psycholinguistic mechanism of emotional regulation under stress

Vira Syniakova ^a

^a *Interregional Academy of Personnel Management, Ukraine*

Received December 22, 2025; Revised January 14, 2026; Accepted February 18, 2026

Abstract. The article examines humor as a psycholinguistic mechanism of emotional regulation under conditions of psychological stress. The study is grounded in the view of emotional regulation as a language-mediated process, in which humor is conceptualized as a form of cognitive reappraisal realized through semantic reinterpretation and pragmatic reframing of experience. The aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between humor use as a coping strategy, affective states, and stress indicators, as well as to experimentally test the short-term regulatory effects of humorous linguistic stimuli. The research combined correlational and experimental approaches. The survey sample included 384 adult participants. The experimental component employed a pre-post design with a complete-case subsample of 40 participants assigned to experimental and control groups. Measures included the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-14), a Visual Analogue Scale of situational stress (VAS), the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), and an author-developed questionnaire assessing humor as a coping strategy. Experimental manipulation involved brief exposure to humorous linguistic stimuli following a stress-inducing cognitive task. The results indicated that greater use of humor as a coping strategy was associated with lower perceived and situational stress and with a more adaptive affective profile characterized by higher positive affect and lower negative affect. Adaptive humor styles, particularly self-enhancing and affiliative humor, showed stronger associations with favorable emotional outcomes than potentially maladaptive styles. Experimental findings demonstrated that humorous linguistic stimuli led to short-term reductions in situational stress and negative affect and to increases in positive affect, whereas neutral content produced no comparable changes. These findings support a conceptual model in which humor influences stress indirectly through affective regulation and highlight humor as a functional language-mediated mechanism of emotional adaptation under stress.

Keywords: *humor, psycholinguistics, emotional regulation, stress, cognitive reappraisal, affect.*

Синякова Віра. Гумор як психолінгвістичний механізм емоційної регуляції в умовах стресу.

Анотація. У статті досліджено гумор як психолінгвістичний механізм емоційної регуляції в умовах підвищеного психологічного стресу. Теоретичною основою дослі-

Vira Syniakova,  0000-0002-9750-6942,  vsinyakova@ukr.net

© Syniakova, Vira, 2026. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>) .
East European Journal of Psycholinguistics, 13(1), 439–454, <https://doi.org/10.29038/eejpl.2026.13.1.syn>

дження є уявлення про емоційну регуляцію як мовно опосередкований процес, у межах якого гумор розглядається як форма когнітивної переоцінки, що реалізується через семантичне переосмислення та прагматичне перефреймінгування досвіду. Метою дослідження було виявити зв'язок між використанням гумору як копінг-стратегії, афективними станами та показниками стресу, а також експериментально перевірити короткочасний регуляторний ефект гумористичних лінгвістичних стимулів. Дослідження поєднувало кореляційний та експериментальний підходи. У вибірку опитування увійшли 384 дорослі респонденти. Експериментальна частина проводилася з використанням дизайну pre-post та включала 40 учасників (експериментальну і контрольну групи). Використовувалися шкала сприйманого стресу (PSS-14), візуальна аналогова шкала ситуативного стресу (VAS), опитувальник PANAS, а також авторський інструмент для вимірювання гумору як копінг-стратегії. Експериментальна маніпуляція передбачала експозицію коротких гумористичних лінгвістичних стимулів після стрес-індукувального завдання. Результати показали, що використання гумору пов'язане з нижчим рівнем сприйманого та ситуативного стресу, а також з більш адаптивним афективним профілем. Адаптивні стилі гумору (самопідтримувальний та афіліативний) мали сильніші зв'язки з позитивними емоційними показниками. Експериментально встановлено, що гумористичні стимули сприяють зниженню негативного афекту та ситуативного стресу і підвищенню позитивного афекту. Отримані дані підтверджують модель опосередкованого впливу гумору на стрес через афективну регуляцію та розширюють психолінгвістичне розуміння ролі мови в емоційній адаптації.

Ключові слова: гумор, психолінгвістика, емоційна регуляція, стрес, когнітивна переоцінка, афект.

Introduction

In contemporary psycholinguistic research, increasing attention is devoted to the interaction between language, cognition, and emotion, particularly in contexts of heightened psychological stress. Emotional regulation is increasingly conceptualized not merely as an intrapsychic process, but as a linguistically mediated phenomenon, in which language plays a crucial role in structuring experience, interpreting events, and modulating affective responses (Gross, 1998, 2002; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). From this perspective, psycholinguistics offers a productive framework for examining how linguistic mechanisms contribute to emotional adaptation under stress.

One such mechanism is humor, which represents a complex psycholinguistic phenomenon integrating linguistic processing, cognitive flexibility, and emotional evaluation (Martin, 2007). Humor comprehension relies on semantic incongruity, pragmatic reinterpretation, and contextual integration, making it a salient example of how language mediates emotional experience (Ruch & Heintz, 2014). Through humorous framing, individuals may distance themselves from stress-inducing stimuli, reinterpret threatening situations, and reduce emotional tension via linguistic reappraisal (Samson et al., 2014).

Recent advances in psycholinguistics and affective science increasingly conceptualize emotional regulation as a dynamic, language-dependent process grounded in semantic interpretation and pragmatic meaning construction. Contemporary research highlights that emotional responses are shaped not only by situational appraisal but also by linguistic framing, lexical choice, and discourse-level reinterpretation, emphasizing the active role of language in modulating affective experience (Hinojosa et al., 2020; Preece et al., 2020; Bloore et al., 2020).

Importantly, recent experimental and quasi-experimental studies have begun to address humor explicitly as a linguistically mediated form of cognitive reappraisal. Evidence from laboratory and applied settings demonstrates that humorous reinterpretations of stressful or threatening situations engage semantic restructuring and pragmatic perspective shifting, leading to measurable reductions in negative affect and stress indicators (Braniecka et al., 2019; Papousek et al., 2023). Neurocognitive and affective-linguistic approaches further suggest that such effects are tied to language-related mechanisms of incongruity resolution and meaning revision rather than to nonspecific mood elevation (Hinojosa et al., 2020).

Within this contemporary framework, humor can be understood as a language-based regulatory strategy that operates through flexible semantic reframing and pragmatic distancing. This perspective aligns with recent psycholinguistic discussions emphasizing everyday language practices as key resources for emotional adaptation, particularly under conditions of prolonged or socially induced stress (Kuiper et al., 1995; Papousek et al., 2023).

Within cognitive psychology and the psychology of language, humor has been associated with processes of cognitive reappraisal, which are central to emotional regulation (Gross, 1998; Samson et al., 2014). From a psycholinguistic standpoint, reappraisal is inherently language-dependent, as it involves verbal restructuring of meaning and reinterpretation of situational content (Pavlenko, 2005; Hinojosa et al., 2020). Humor may thus be understood as a specific form of linguistic reappraisal, whereby stressful experiences are reframed through playful, ironic, or incongruent language patterns, leading to a reduction in negative affect (Fredrickson, 2001; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

An influential framework for understanding humor is Martin's model of humor styles, which distinguishes between adaptive (self-enhancing and affiliative) and maladaptive (self-defeating and aggressive) forms of humor (Martin et al., 2003; Martin, 2007). These styles differ not only in their psychological outcomes, but also in their communicative functions and pragmatic orientation. Adaptive humor styles are oriented toward emotional self-regulation and social bonding, whereas maladaptive styles may involve self-directed or other-directed negativity (Abel, 2002; Ruch & Heintz, 2014). Such

distinctions are highly relevant for psycholinguistic research, as they reflect different modes of language use, discourse goals, and interactional strategies.

Empirical studies have shown that humor is associated with lower perceived stress, reduced anxiety, and higher levels of positive affect (Abel, 2002; Samson et al., 2014). At the same time, humor has been linked to greater emotional flexibility and resilience (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). However, much of the existing research conceptualizes humor primarily as a personality trait or general coping style, paying limited attention to its psycholinguistic nature as a language-based regulatory mechanism. In addition, experimental evidence demonstrating the immediate effects of humorous linguistic stimuli on emotional state remains relatively scarce (Papousek et al., 2023).

Recent psycholinguistic research has increasingly emphasized the role of semantic reinterpretation, pragmatic reframing, and language-mediated reappraisal in emotional regulation (e.g., Hinojosa et al., 2020; Papousek et al., 2023). However, experimental investigations explicitly linking these language-based mechanisms to short-term stress regulation remain limited. The present study addresses this gap by integrating contemporary psycholinguistic theory with experimental manipulation of humorous linguistic input.

This gap is particularly salient in contexts of prolonged social stress, where language-mediated coping strategies may play a crucial role in maintaining psychological balance. Under such conditions, humor may function as an emotional buffer by enabling individuals to reinterpret stressful information in a less threatening linguistic frame. Studying humor in these contexts allows for a deeper understanding of how language contributes to emotional regulation in real-life stress situations.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining humor as a psycholinguistic mechanism of emotional regulation under stress. By integrating standardized measures of stress and affect with an experimental manipulation involving humorous linguistic stimuli, the study adopts a multidimensional approach. Rather than focusing solely on stress outcomes, the study emphasizes the mediating role of emotional regulation and the linguistic characteristics of humor use.

Unlike many previous studies that conceptualize humor primarily as a personality trait or a general coping style, the present study adopts a psycholinguistic perspective by focusing on humor as *linguistically structured input*. By examining how specific language-based mechanisms of humorous framing operate under stress, the study aims to clarify the role of semantic reinterpretation and pragmatic reframing in emotional regulation.

Building on the theoretical premise that humor functions as a language-mediated form of cognitive reappraisal and social meaning-making, the present study empirically examines its regulatory potential under stress. Accordingly,

the study addresses the psycholinguistic role of humor in emotional regulation under stress. *The object of the study* is humor as a psycholinguistic mechanism of emotional regulation in conditions of stress. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is the use of humor as a coping strategy related to perceived and situational stress under conditions of prolonged social strain?
2. How does humor use relate to affective states, specifically positive and negative affect?
3. Do different humor styles differ in their associations with stress and emotional indicators, reflecting adaptive versus potentially maladaptive psycholinguistic strategies?
4. Does exposure to humorous linguistic stimuli lead to a reduction in situational stress and improvements in emotional state compared to neutral content?
5. Is the magnitude of stress reduction following humorous exposure associated with individual differences in humor use?

Recent psycholinguistic research has increasingly emphasized the role of language-mediated reappraisal in emotional regulation. However, experimental studies explicitly examining humor as a linguistically structured regulatory mechanism remain limited. The present study addresses this gap by integrating contemporary psycholinguistic theory with experimental manipulation of humorous linguistic input under stress.

Methodology

Participants

The survey phase included 384 adults aged 24–45 years recruited via social media using an online questionnaire (Google Forms). Participants were residents of Ukraine, predominantly living in large urban areas, and most reported higher education. Participation was voluntary; all respondents provided informed consent, and anonymity and confidentiality were ensured.

For the experimental phase, $n = 124$ participants entered the pre–post procedure. Due to attrition and incomplete post-test responses, complete paired pre–post data were available for $n = 40$, which constituted the complete-case subsample used for experimental comparisons (experimental group $n = 18$, control group $n = 22$). This analytic strategy ensured internal validity of the pre–post comparisons.

Measures

Perceived stress was assessed using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-14; Cohen et al., 1983). Situational (current) stress was measured with a Visual Analogue Scale (VAS) ranging from 0 (no stress) to 10 (maximum stress). Affective states were assessed using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988), yielding indices of positive and negative affect.

The author-developed humor-as-coping questionnaire was designed as an exploratory instrument grounded in Martin's (2003) humor styles framework. In the present sample, the overall scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$). Internal consistency for the adaptive humor subscale (self-enhancing, affiliative) was $\alpha = .79$, and for the potentially maladaptive humor subscale (self-defeating, aggressive) $\alpha = .74$. Given its exploratory nature, findings based on this measure are interpreted with caution. While these instruments are psychological in nature, they were employed as outcome measures to capture stress and affective changes resulting from a language-based experimental manipulation, consistent with an interdisciplinary psycholinguistic approach.

Procedure

The study was conducted online and consisted of three stages.

Stage 1 (baseline). All participants in the survey phase ($N = 384$) completed baseline assessments including PSS-14, VAS, PANAS, and the humor-as-coping questionnaire.

Stage 2 (stress induction and exposure). Participants who entered the experimental phase ($n = 124$) completed a brief time-limited cognitive task designed to induce moderate situational stress through time pressure and sustained attention demands. Immediately after the task, participants were exposed to either humorous or neutral linguistic material. The experimental group was presented with humorous linguistic stimuli, conceptualized as language-based mechanisms of cognitive reappraisal operating through semantic incongruity, pragmatic reinterpretation, and meaning restructuring. The control group interacted with emotionally neutral content matched in format, length, and duration, but lacking humor-related linguistic features.

Stage 3 (post-test). Situational stress (VAS) and affective state (PANAS) were reassessed immediately after exposure to capture short-term changes attributable to the linguistic manipulation. Pre-post effects were analyzed on the complete-case subsample ($n = 40$).

Humorous Linguistic Stimuli

Humorous stimuli consisted of short, language-based materials designed to elicit humor through semantic incongruity and pragmatic reinterpretation, which are central processes in psycholinguistic models of humor comprehension. The stimulus set included: (a) brief ironic or sarcastic one-two sentence statements; (b) short wordplay or pun-like items relying on ambiguity or semantic shift; (c) visual-verbal meme-style formats in which a short caption prompted reinterpretation of a simple image.

Aggressive or derogatory humor, explicit content, and references to identifiable persons or traumatic events were excluded to avoid additional negative affect induction. All stimuli were presented in Ukrainian (with occasional widely used loanwords), matching participants' everyday language environment and minimizing comprehension load.

Immediately after the stress-inducing task, participants in the experimental condition viewed 10 humorous items presented sequentially in the online form. Each item was displayed for 15 seconds (total exposure approximately 2.5 minutes). Participants were instructed to attend carefully to each item; progression was time-limited to standardize exposure. The control group viewed 10 neutral items (short factual statements and neutral captioned images) matched to the humorous set by format, length, and duration.

Illustrative examples of humorous stimuli (non-copyright):

1. *Irony*: “Я зовсім не хвилююся – просто моя тривога вирішила сьогодні бути дуже продуктивною.” (I'm not worried at all – it's just that my anxiety has decided to be very productive today).
2. *Semantic shift / wordplay*: “План на день простий: спочатку все встигнути, потім здивуватися, як я це зробив(ла).” (My plan for the day is simple: first, get everything done; then, be amazed at how I managed it).
3. *Meme-style caption*: “Коли кажуть ‘нічого страшного’, а мозок уже намалював три сценарії апокаліпсису.” (When people say ‘it's nothing to panic about’ but your brain has already conjured up three apocalyptic scenarios).

These examples illustrate how stressful experiences are linguistically reframed through playful or ironic language, enabling affective distancing and emotional regulation.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, these humorous stimuli rely on specific language-based mechanisms of meaning construction and reinterpretation. Irony operates through a discrepancy between literal meaning and intended pragmatic meaning, prompting reinterpretation of the emotional content of the utterance. Wordplay and semantic shift engage lexical ambiguity and flexible semantic mapping, requiring the reader to revise an initially

activated meaning. Meme-style visual-verbal formats combine minimal verbal input with contextual cues, encouraging discourse-level reframing of a stressful situation.

Across stimulus types, humor comprehension involves resolving semantic incongruity and shifting pragmatic perspective, which facilitates affective distancing from stress-inducing content. This process corresponds to language-mediated cognitive reappraisal, whereby the emotional significance of a situation is altered through verbal meaning restructuring rather than through avoidance or suppression.

This focus on the linguistic structure and meaning-construction properties of humorous stimuli distinguishes the present design from approaches that treat humor solely as an individual difference variable.

Taken together, the methodological design focuses on language-based meaning construction processes, allowing the study to examine humor as a psycholinguistic mechanism rather than solely as a psychological coping variable.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were computed for the full survey sample ($N = 384$). Experimental effects were tested on the complete-case subsample ($n = 40$) using paired-samples *t*-tests for within-group pre-post changes and independent-samples *t*-tests for between-group comparisons. Effect sizes were estimated using Cohen's *d*. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Ethics

The study complied with ethical principles of psychological research. Participants were informed about study procedures, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

Results

Participant Flow and Analytic Samples

Experimental Effects of Humorous Exposure on Stress and Affect

Pre-post comparisons within the experimental group indicated significant improvements in situational stress and affective state after exposure to humorous linguistic stimuli. Specifically, situational stress (VAS) decreased,

positive affect increased, and negative affect decreased, with large effect sizes (see Table 1). In contrast, the control group, which interacted with neutral content, did not show statistically significant pre-post changes (see Table 2). This pattern suggests that the observed changes are attributable to the experimental manipulation rather than to repeated measurement effects.

Table 1

Pre-Post Changes in Stress and Affect in the Experimental Group After Humorous Exposure (Complete-Case Subsample, N = 18)

Variable	Pre-test M ± SD	Post-test M ± SD	t (df = 17)	p	Cohen's d
VAS stress	6.8 ± 1.5	5.1 ± 1.4	4.12	< .001	.97
PANAS-PA	27.2 ± 6.4	31.6 ± 6.1	-3.88	.001	.91
PANAS-NA	32.5 ± 5.9	27.9 ± 5.4	3.54	.002	.83

Note. Paired-samples t-tests were used. Higher PANAS-PA scores indicate higher positive affect; higher PANAS-NA scores indicate higher negative affect.

Table 2

Pre-Post Changes in Stress and Affect in the Control Group After Neutral Exposure (Complete-Case Subsample, N = 22)

Variable	Pre-test M ± SD	Post-test M ± SD	t (df = 21)	p
VAS stress	6.6 ± 1.4	6.4 ± 1.5	0.91	.37
PANAS-PA	27.4 ± 6.1	27.9 ± 6.0	-0.68	.50
PANAS-NA	31.9 ± 5.7	31.5 ± 5.6	0.74	.46

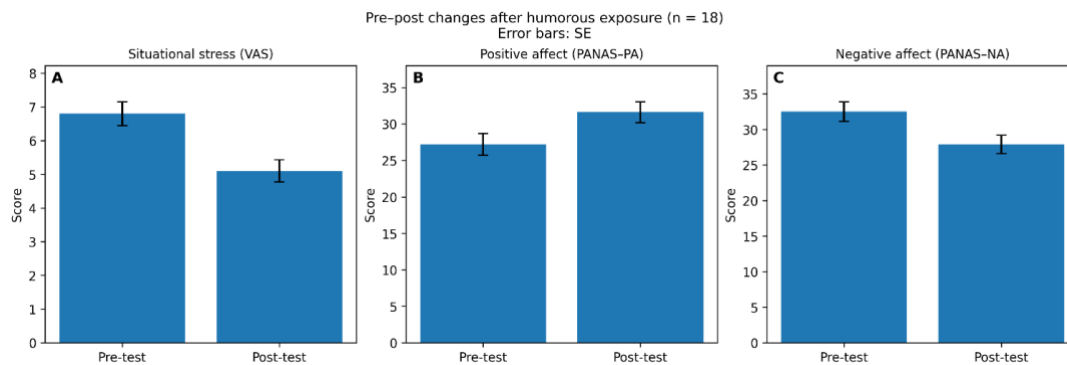
Note. No statistically significant pre-post changes were observed in the control group.

To visualize the within-group dynamics, Figures 1–2 present pre-post mean levels of VAS stress, positive affect, and negative affect for the humorous and neutral exposure conditions. The pattern is characterized by a clear pre-post decrease in VAS stress and PANAS-NA alongside an increase in PANAS-PA in the humorous condition, whereas the neutral condition remains largely stable.

As shown in Figure 2 (Panels A–C), no statistically significant pre-post changes in situational stress or affective state were observed in the neutral-exposure control group.

Figure 1

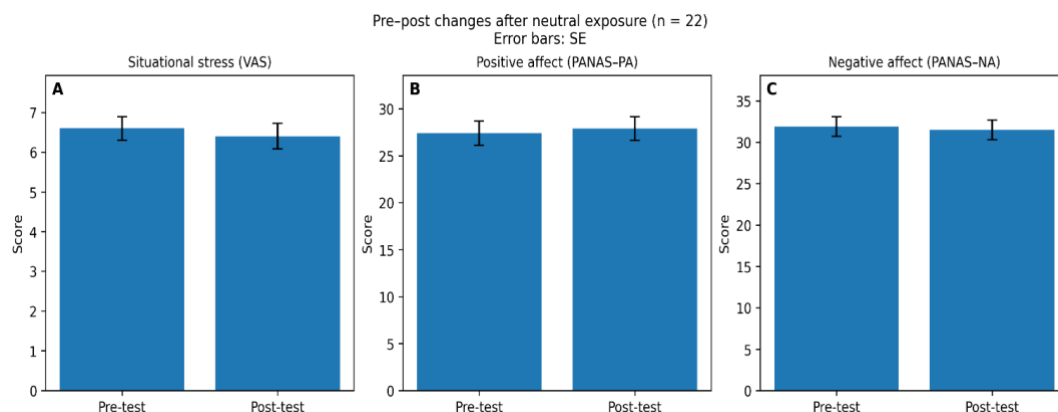
Pre-post Changes in Situational Stress and Affect in the Humorous-Exposure Group (Complete-Case Subsample, N = 18)



Note. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

Figure 2

Pre-post Changes in Situational Stress and Affect in the Neutral-Exposure Control Group (Complete-Case Subsample, N = 22)



Note. Panel A shows changes in situational stress (VAS), Panel B shows changes in positive affect (PANAS-PA), and Panel C shows changes in negative affect (PANAS-NA). Bars represent mean values at pre-test and post-test; error bars indicate standard errors of the mean.

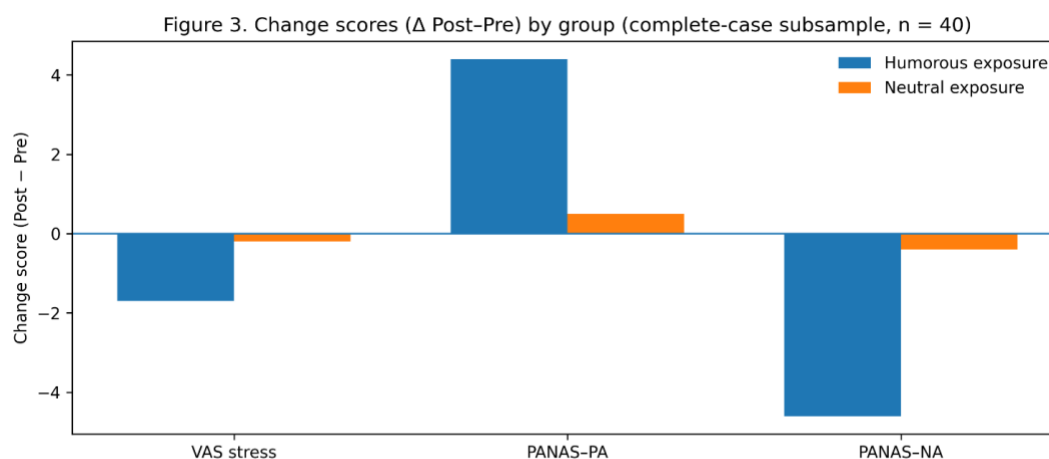
Between-Group Comparison Using Change Scores (Δ Post-Pre)

To compare the magnitude of change attributable to the experimental manipulation, change scores (Δ post-pre) were computed for each outcome and contrasted between the experimental and control groups (complete-case $n = 40$). Change-score analysis was used to directly compare the magnitude of pre-post effects between groups. As shown in Figure 3, the humorous-exposure group

demonstrated a larger reduction in situational stress and negative affect, as well as a larger increase in positive affect, compared to the control group.

Figure 3

Mean Change Scores (Δ Post-Pre) for Situational Stress (VAS), Positive Affect (PANAS-PA), and Negative Affect (PANAS-NA) in the Humorous and Neutral Exposure Groups (Complete-Case Subsample, $N = 40$)



Note: Negative values indicate reductions (VAS stress, PANAS-NA); positive values indicate increases (PANAS-PA).

Note. Negative values indicate reductions; positive values indicate increases.

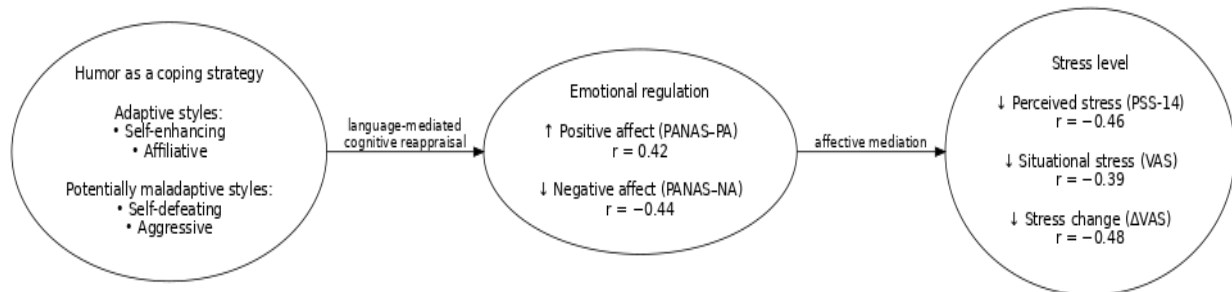
Summary of Experimental Findings

Overall, the experimental results indicate that exposure to humorous linguistic stimuli following a stress-inducing task is associated with short-term improvements in emotional regulation, reflected in decreased situational stress and negative affect and increased positive affect, whereas neutral content does not produce comparable changes. These findings are consistent with the proposed interpretation of humor as a psycholinguistic mechanism facilitating rapid affective shifts through language-based reappraisal. These experimental results provide empirical support for the conceptual SEM model proposed in Figure 4, in which humor influences stress indirectly through affective regulation.

Building on these experimental results and the conceptual model in Figure 4, the Discussion section interprets humor as a language-mediated mechanism of emotional regulation and considers how affective shifts may account for observed changes in stress indicators.

Figure 4

Conceptual SEM-style Model Illustrating the Indirect Association Between Humor As a Coping Strategy and Stress Through Affective Regulation



Note. Humor use is linked to positive affect (PANAS-PA) and negative affect (PANAS-NA), which in turn relate to perceived stress (PSS-14), situational stress (VAS), and stress change (Δ VAS). Arrows indicate hypothesized directional relationships; coefficients represent Pearson correlation values.

Discussion

From a psycholinguistic perspective, the observed stress-reducing effects should be interpreted not merely as outcomes of humor exposure, but as consequences of language-mediated meaning restructuring. The humorous stimuli enabled participants to reinterpret stress-inducing content through semantic incongruity resolution and pragmatic perspective shifting, thereby facilitating cognitive reappraisal at the level of linguistic meaning rather than at the level of general mood change.

The present study examined humor as a psycholinguistic mechanism of emotional regulation under conditions of stress by integrating correlational evidence with an experimental manipulation of humorous linguistic stimuli. The findings provide consistent support for the assumption that humor contributes to stress regulation primarily through language-mediated affective processes rather than through direct modification of stressors (Gross, 1998, 2002).

At the correlational level, the use of humor as a coping strategy was associated with lower levels of perceived and situational stress, as well as with a more adaptive affective profile characterized by higher positive affect and lower negative affect. These results are in line with previous research demonstrating stress-buffering effects of humor (Papousek et al., 2023); Samson et al., 2014). Importantly, the present study extends existing findings by framing humor explicitly as a psycholinguistic phenomenon, emphasizing its role in linguistic meaning construction and reinterpretation of stressful experience rather than conceptualizing it solely as a personality disposition (Martin, 2007).

The differentiation between humor styles further clarifies the psycholinguistic nature of humor-based regulation. Adaptive humor styles, particularly self-enhancing and affiliative humor, showed stronger associations with favorable emotional outcomes compared to potentially maladaptive styles. From a psycholinguistic perspective, this distinction may be explained by differences in pragmatic orientation and communicative function (Martin et al., 2003; Ruch & Heintz, 2014). Adaptive humor facilitates positive recontextualization of experience and cognitive distancing through playful or ironic linguistic framing, whereas maladaptive humor may reinforce negative self-referential meanings or interpersonal tension. These findings indicate that the regulatory potential of humor depends not on humor use per se, but on the qualitative characteristics of linguistic framing and discourse intent.

Results involving humor styles should be interpreted as exploratory and require further validation using standardized psychometric instruments. The experimental results provide direct evidence for the short-term regulatory effects of humorous linguistic input. Exposure to brief humorous stimuli following a stress-inducing task resulted in a significant reduction in situational stress and negative affect, accompanied by an increase in positive affect. Given that the humorous materials relied on linguistic incongruity, semantic shift, and pragmatic reinterpretation and were presented in participants' native language, these effects may be interpreted as reflecting rapid language-mediated cognitive reappraisal rather than general distraction or mood induction (Samson et al., 2014; Papousek et al., 2023).

Importantly, the magnitude of stress reduction following humorous exposure was associated with individual differences in habitual humor use. Participants who more frequently reported using humor as a coping strategy demonstrated greater decreases in situational stress. This finding supports psycholinguistic accounts emphasizing the interaction between situational linguistic input and the individual's habitual modes of interpretation and meaning-making. In other words, humorous language appears to be more effective as a regulatory tool when it aligns with the individual's established communicative and cognitive strategies.

While previous studies have often interpreted humor effects in terms of personality traits or general coping tendencies, the present findings suggest that the stress-reducing effects observed may be more directly attributed to language-mediated meaning restructuring. By engaging semantic incongruity resolution and pragmatic perspective shifting, humorous stimuli facilitated cognitive reappraisal at the level of linguistic interpretation rather than at the level of dispositional humor.

Taken together, the findings support a model in which humor influences stress indirectly through affective regulation mediated by language. Rather than eliminating or suppressing stressors, humorous language modifies their

emotional significance by enabling semantic reinterpretation, pragmatic reframing, and affective distancing—processes central to psycholinguistic accounts of emotion–language interaction (Pavlenko, 2005; Kousta et al., 2009). In contexts of prolonged social stress, language-based strategies that allow flexible reinterpretation of threatening information may be particularly important for maintaining emotional balance.

Limitations of the Study

The present study has several limitations. First, the experimental analyses were conducted on a complete-case subsample, which limits statistical power and generalizability of the findings. Second, reliance on self-report measures restricts conclusions about underlying cognitive and neural mechanisms involved in humor-based regulation. Future research could employ longitudinal designs, discourse-analytic approaches to naturally occurring humorous language, or experimental paradigms combining humor exposure with behavioral or neurocognitive measures to further elucidate psycholinguistic pathways of emotional regulation.

Despite these limitations, the present study makes a meaningful contribution to psycholinguistic research by empirically demonstrating that humor functions as a language-mediated mechanism of emotional regulation under stress. By integrating correlational patterns with experimentally induced affective change, the study advances understanding of how linguistic processes contribute to emotional adaptation in stressful contexts.

Conclusions

The study set out to examine humor as a psycholinguistic mechanism of emotional regulation in stressful conditions using both correlational data and experimental manipulation. The results confirm that humor plays a regulatory role by operating as a language-mediated form of cognitive reappraisal that shapes affective experience and subjective stress.

Correlational analyses showed that greater use of humor as a coping strategy is associated with lower perceived and situational stress, alongside a more adaptive affective profile marked by elevated positive affect and reduced negative affect. In particular, self-enhancing and affiliative humor styles demonstrated stronger links to beneficial emotional outcomes than potentially maladaptive forms of humor. This pattern underscores the significance of pragmatic orientation and qualitative features of humorous language use in emotional regulation.

Experimental evidence further demonstrated that brief exposure to humorous linguistic stimuli after a stress-inducing task produces short-term regulatory effects, including reductions in situational stress and negative affect and increases in positive affect. The lack of comparable changes in the control condition suggests that these effects are attributable to humor-specific, language-based reinterpretation processes rather than nonspecific distraction.

The findings demonstrate that humor operates not only as a coping disposition but as a psycholinguistic mechanism grounded in semantic and pragmatic language processes. The study also contributes to the growing body of research on emotion–language interaction by demonstrating that brief exposure to humorous linguistic stimuli can produce measurable changes in emotional state. This finding underscores the functional role of everyday language practices in emotional regulation and highlights humor as a readily accessible linguistic resource in stressful situations.

Overall, the study contributes to psycholinguistic research by providing empirical evidence that humor constitutes a functional language-based mechanism of emotional regulation under stress.

Disclosure Statement

The author reported no potential conflicts of interest.

Generative AI Statement

During the preparation of this work the author used ChatGPT (GPT-4.o) in order to draft and edit parts of the manuscript text and to search for and summarise relevant literature. After using this service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

References

- Abel, M. H. (2002). Humor, stress, and coping strategies. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 15(4), 365–381. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.15.4.365>
- Bloore, R. A., Jose, P. E., & Roseman, I. J. (2020). General emotion regulation measure (GERM): Individual differences in motives of trying to experience and trying to avoid experiencing positive and negative emotions. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 166, 110174. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110174>
- Braniecka, A., Hanć, M., Wołkowicz, I., Chrzczonowicz-Stępień, A., Mikołajonek, A., & Lipiec, M. (2019). Is it worth turning a trigger into a joke? Humor as an emotion regulation

- strategy in remitted depression. *Brain and Behavior*, 9(2), e01213. <https://doi.org/10.1002/brb3.1213>
- Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 24(4), 385–396. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2136404>
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 218–226. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.218>
- Gross, J. J. (1998). The emerging field of emotion regulation: An integrative review. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(3), 271–299. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.3.271>
- Gross, J. J. (2002). Emotion regulation: Affective, cognitive, and social consequences. *Psychophysiology*, 39(3), 281–291. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0048577201393198>
- Hinojosa, J. A., Moreno, E. M., & Ferré, P. (2020). Affective neurolinguistics: Towards a framework for reconciling language and emotion. *Language, Cognition and Neuroscience*, 35(7), 813–839. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23273798.2019.1620957>
- Kousta, S.-T., Vinson, D. P., & Vigliocco, G. (2009). Emotion words, regardless of polarity, have a processing advantage over neutral words. *Cognition*, 112(3), 473–481. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2009.06.007>
- Kuiper, N. A., McKenzie, S. D., & Belanger, K. A. (1995). Cognitive appraisals and individual differences in sense of humor: Motivational and affective implications. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 19(3), 359–372. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-8869\(95\)00072-E](https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-8869(95)00072-E)
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.
- Martin, R. A. (2007). *The psychology of humor: An integrative approach*. Elsevier Academic Press.
- Martin, R. A., Puhlik-Doris, P., Larsen, G., Gray, J., & Weir, K. (2003). Individual differences in uses of humor and their relation to psychological well-being: Development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 37(1), 48–75. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566\(02\)00534-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566(02)00534-2)
- Papousek, I., Rominger, C., Weiss, E. M., Perchtold, C. M., Fink, A., & Feyaerts, K. (2023). Humor creation during efforts to find humorous cognitive reappraisals of threatening situations. *Current Psychology*, 42, 16176–16190. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-019-00296-9>
- Pavlenko, A. (2005). *Emotions and multilingualism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Preece, D. A., Becerra, R., Robinson, K., & Gross, J. J. (2020). The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire: Psychometric properties in general community samples. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 102(3), 348–356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223891.2018.1564319>
- Ruch, W. F., & Heintz, S. (2014). Humour styles, personality and psychological well-being: What's humour got to do with it? *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 1(4), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2013.1.4.ruch>
- Samson, A. C., Glassco, A. L., Lee, I. A., & Gross, J. J. (2014). Humorous coping and serious reappraisal: Short-term and longer-term effects. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 10(3), 571–581. <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v10i3.730>
- Tugade, M. M., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2004). Resilient individuals use positive emotions to bounce back from negative emotional experiences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86(2), 320–333. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.86.2.320>
- Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(6), 1063–1070. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.54.6.1063>