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Hidden Criticism and Humor: A Discourse Analysis of Sarcastic Expressions

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ABSTRACT

Sarkasme merupakan strategi komunikasi tidak langsung di mana makna yang dimaksud berbeda atau berlawanan dengan makna literal ucapan. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis pola linguistik, fungsi sosial, dan fungsi psikologis sarkasme dalam wacana kontemporer, termasuk komunikasi digital. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan analisis wacana. Data diperoleh melalui observasi linguistik, dokumentasi, dan pencatatan dari berbagai interaksi digital seperti komentar media sosial dan konten publik online. Analisis dilakukan melalui identifikasi ucapan sarkastik, klasifikasi pola linguistik, serta evaluasi fungsi sosial dan psikologisnya, diikuti dengan interpretasi wacana untuk memahami strategi komunikasi di balik sarkasme. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sarkasme ditandai oleh perbedaan makna literal dan pragmatis, dengan pola utama berupa pseudo-pujian, ironi hiperbolik, dan pernyataan evaluatif yang membalikkan makna literal. Fungsi sosial sarkasme meliputi penyampaian kritik tidak langsung, pengaturan norma sosial, dan penguatan kohesi kelompok. Sementara fungsi psikologisnya mencakup ekspresi frustrasi, kekecewaan, atau skeptisisme, serta berperan sebagai mekanisme koping untuk mengurangi ketegangan emosional. Studi ini menekankan pentingnya interpretasi pragmatis yang mengintegrasikan petunjuk linguistik, konteks sosial, dan niat pembicara agar sarkasme dapat dipahami dengan tepat. Temuan ini memperluas pemahaman sarkasme sebagai fenomena komunikasi multidimensional yang memadukan aspek linguistik, sosial, dan psikologis, serta relevan dalam praktik komunikasi modern, terutama di lingkungan digital.

Kata Kunci: sarkasme, komunikasi tidak langsung, pragmatik, fungsi sosial, fungsi psikologis

ABSTRACT

Sarcasm is an indirect communication strategy in which the intended meaning differs from or contradicts the literal meaning of an utterance. This study aims to analyze the linguistic patterns, social functions, and psychological roles of sarcasm in contemporary discourse, including digital communication. The research employs a qualitative approach using discourse analysis. Data were collected through linguistic observation, documentation, and note-taking from various digital interactions, such as social media comments and public online content. The analysis involved identifying sarcastic utterances, classifying linguistic patterns, evaluating their social and psychological functions, and interpreting discourse to understand the communicative strategies underlying sarcasm. The findings indicate that sarcasm is characterized by a discrepancy between literal and pragmatic meanings, with primary linguistic patterns including pseudo-compliments, hyperbolic irony, and evaluative statements that reverse their literal meaning. The social functions of sarcasm include conveying criticism indirectly, regulating social norms, and reinforcing group cohesion. Psychologically, sarcasm allows speakers to express frustration, disappointment, or skepticism and serves as a coping mechanism to reduce emotional tension. This study emphasizes the importance of pragmatic interpretation that integrates linguistic cues, social context, and speaker intention to accurately understand sarcasm. The findings expand the understanding of sarcasm as a multidimensional communicative phenomenon that integrates linguistic, social, and psychological aspects and remains relevant in modern communication practices, particularly in digital environments.

Keywords: sarcasm, indirect communication, pragmatics, social function, psychological function

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INTRODUCTION

Language plays a fundamental role in human interaction as it functions as the primary medium through which individuals convey ideas, emotions, and perspectives. Through language, people construct meanings, negotiate social relationships, and express attitudes toward various social phenomena. In everyday communication, however, messages are not always conveyed in a direct and explicit manner. Speakers often employ indirect linguistic strategies when expressing criticism, disagreement, or dissatisfaction toward individuals or particular social conditions. These indirect strategies allow speakers to maintain social harmony while still delivering evaluative messages.

One commonly used indirect communicative strategy is sarcasm. Sarcasm is generally understood as a form of verbal expression in which the intended meaning differs from, or even contradicts, the literal meaning of the utterance. In many cases, sarcastic expressions appear as statements that seem positive or neutral on the surface but implicitly convey criticism, ridicule, or negative evaluation. Because of this characteristic, sarcasm requires contextual interpretation in order to be understood properly. Listeners must rely on contextual cues, shared knowledge, and pragmatic inference to recognize the intended meaning behind sarcastic expressions.

Within linguistic studies, sarcasm is often examined within the frameworks of pragmatics and discourse analysis. Pragmatically, sarcasm represents a communicative phenomenon in which speakers intentionally produce utterances that violate literal semantic expectations in order to generate ironic or critical meanings. Attardo (2000) argues that sarcasm involves a form of pragmatic incongruity in which the literal interpretation of an utterance becomes contextually inappropriate. Similarly, Camp (2012) suggests that sarcasm relies on a contrast between literal expression and speaker intention, which requires interpretative effort from the listener. From a discourse perspective, sarcastic expressions can be understood as communicative strategies that reflect the social dynamics and relationships between speakers and listeners.

Sarcasm frequently appears in everyday interactions, particularly in contexts where individuals wish to express criticism indirectly. By embedding criticism within humorous or ironic expressions, speakers can reduce the potential for direct confrontation. In this sense, sarcasm functions not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a social communication strategy. Speakers may use sarcasm to criticize social behavior, evaluate institutional practices, or respond to perceived violations of expectations while maintaining a relatively humorous tone.

The emergence of digital communication platforms has significantly expanded the use of sarcastic expressions in public discourse. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have created new spaces for individuals to share opinions and react to social issues. Within these online environments, sarcasm often becomes a rhetorical strategy used to comment on political events, social phenomena, or public figures. Because digital communication allows rapid interaction among diverse audiences, sarcastic expressions frequently circulate widely and become part of broader public discussions.

Several previous studies have examined the use of sarcasm in digital communication contexts. Wahyuni, Amilia, and Suaedi (2024) found that sarcasm in social media discourse may appear in various linguistic forms, including words, phrases, and sentences that demonstrate contrast between literal meaning and contextual meaning. Their study highlights that sarcastic expressions are often constructed through lexical choices that appear positive but function as implicit criticism. Similarly, Yani (2021) identified several types of sarcasm in Twitter discourse, including lexical sarcasm and illocutionary sarcasm used to express social commentary. These findings indicate that sarcasm is a common communicative strategy in online interactions.

Other studies have also emphasized the role of sarcasm in expressing criticism toward social phenomena. Huda, Lailiyah, and Muarifin (2023) analyzed sarcastic expressions in Instagram comments and found that sarcasm is frequently used by online users to criticize public figures or institutional actions. Likewise, Tarwiyati and Sabardila (2020) argue that sarcastic expressions often emerge as responses to perceived violations of politeness norms in social media communication. These studies demonstrate that sarcasm plays an important role in shaping online discourse by allowing individuals to express critical opinions indirectly.

While previous studies provide valuable insights into the forms and occurrences of sarcasm, many of them primarily focus on identifying the linguistic structures or types of sarcastic expressions within particular media contexts. Relatively fewer studies attempt to analyze sarcasm from a broader communicative perspective that integrates linguistic patterns, social functions, and psychological dimensions simultaneously. In addition, the interpretation of sarcasm within discourse contexts often involves complex interactions between language use, speaker intention, and audience interpretation.

From a broader perspective, sarcasm can also be understood as a communicative strategy that reflects both social attitudes and emotional responses. Sarcastic expressions often emerge when speakers experience frustration, dissatisfaction, or skepticism toward particular situations. By framing these emotional reactions within humorous or ironic expressions, speakers are able to express negative evaluations while maintaining a communicative tone that appears less confrontational. Consequently, sarcasm can function as both a linguistic device and a social strategy for negotiating meaning within interaction.

Considering these perspectives, it becomes important to examine sarcasm not only as a linguistic form but also as a discursive practice embedded in social communication. Understanding how sarcastic expressions operate within discourse can provide insights into how individuals construct criticism, humor, and evaluation in everyday communication contexts. Such analysis is particularly relevant in contemporary digital environments where sarcastic expressions frequently appear as responses to social issues and public discourse.

Based on these considerations, the present study aims to analyze sarcasm as a form of implicit criticism conveyed through humor within discourse contexts. Specifically, this research investigates the linguistic patterns of sarcastic expressions, the social and psychological functions they perform in communication, and the ways in which such expressions are interpreted within communicative contexts. By employing a discourse analysis approach, this study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of sarcasm as a communicative strategy that combines humor and criticism within contemporary discourse practices.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach with discourse analysis as the main analytical framework. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings embedded in sarcastic expressions rather than measuring quantitative variables.

The data in this research consist of utterances containing sarcastic expressions found in various communication contexts. These utterances may appear in the form of words, phrases, or sentences that demonstrate a contrast between literal meaning and intended meaning.

The data sources were obtained from several digital communication environments, including social media comments, digital content interactions, and other public communication contexts where sarcastic expressions commonly appear. Digital communication platforms were selected because they provide rich linguistic data reflecting contemporary communication practices.

Data collection was conducted through several techniques. First, linguistic observation was carried out to identify sarcastic expressions in communicative interactions. Second, documentation techniques were used to collect and record relevant data from communication sources. Third, note-taking techniques were applied to classify sarcastic utterances according to their linguistic forms and communicative contexts.

The data analysis process involved several stages. The first stage consisted of identifying utterances containing sarcastic elements based on the presence of contrast between literal and implied meanings. The second stage involved classifying sarcastic utterances according to their linguistic patterns. The third stage focused on analyzing the social and psychological functions of sarcasm within communicative contexts. Finally, discourse interpretation was conducted to understand sarcasm as a communicative strategy used to deliver criticism indirectly through humor.

To ensure data validity, this study applied triangulation techniques by comparing data obtained from multiple communication sources and analyzing them through several linguistic perspectives, including semantic, pragmatic, and discourse analysis.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Linguistic Patterns of Sarcasm

The analysis of the data reveals that sarcastic expressions are primarily characterized by a discrepancy between literal meaning and intended pragmatic meaning. In many instances, utterances that appear to convey positive evaluations actually function as indirect criticism when interpreted within their communicative context. This finding confirms the pragmatic perspective that sarcasm operates through a reversal of evaluative meaning, in which the intended interpretation contrasts with the literal semantic content of the utterance.

From a theoretical standpoint, this phenomenon can be explained through pragmatic theories of irony and implicature. According to the cooperative communication framework proposed by Herbert Paul Grice, speakers often communicate meanings that go beyond the literal interpretation of their words through conversational implicature. Sarcastic expressions frequently involve the deliberate violation of conversational maxims—particularly the maxim of quality—in which speakers intentionally produce statements that appear false in order to imply the opposite meaning.

Similarly, the relevance-theoretic perspective proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson explains sarcasm as a form of echoic communication. Within this framework, speakers echo an assumption, belief, or expectation while simultaneously expressing a critical attitude toward it. In sarcastic communication, the speaker implicitly refers to a shared assumption and highlights the discrepancy between that assumption and the actual situation.

The findings of this study reveal several recurring linguistic patterns. The first pattern involves the use of pseudo-compliments. In this pattern, speakers employ lexical items that typically convey praise, yet the utterance pragmatically functions as criticism. For example, expressions such as "That was a brilliant idea" may be used sarcastically to comment on an obviously poor decision. The ironic effect arises from the contrast between the positive lexical choice and the negative contextual reality.

This finding supports previous studies suggesting that sarcasm frequently relies on positive evaluative language to convey negative attitudes. As argued by Raymond W. Gibbs, ironic language involves complex inferential processes in which listeners must interpret speaker intentions beyond literal meanings. In sarcastic discourse, the listener is required to recognize the mismatch between linguistic expression and contextual reality in order to derive the intended interpretation.

The second linguistic pattern identified in the data is hyperbolic irony. This pattern involves exaggerated expressions that emphasize the discrepancy between expectation and reality. For instance, statements such as "What fantastic service!" may be used sarcastically to criticize extremely poor service quality. The exaggeration serves as a rhetorical device that intensifies the ironic contrast between what is said and what is actually meant.

Recent studies in pragmatic research suggest that hyperbole often functions as an important marker of ironic communication. Exaggerated expressions signal to the listener that the utterance should not be interpreted literally but rather as a commentary on the inadequacy of the situation being described. This observation aligns with contemporary research on figurative language, which highlights the role of contextual inference in interpreting ironic and sarcastic statements.

A third pattern identified in the data involves evaluative statements whose pragmatic interpretation reverses their literal meaning. These utterances often appear as neutral descriptions but implicitly convey dissatisfaction or criticism. For example, a speaker may remark, "This meeting is very productive," in a context where no meaningful progress has occurred. Although the statement appears positive at the surface level, its pragmatic interpretation reveals the speaker's frustration or disapproval.

These patterns demonstrate that sarcastic communication is highly dependent on contextual interpretation. Without knowledge of the surrounding situation, listeners may interpret the utterance literally and fail to recognize its intended ironic meaning. This observation is consistent with recent pragmatic studies emphasizing that sarcasm emerges from the interaction between linguistic form, contextual knowledge, and shared communicative expectations (e.g., research published in *Journal of Pragmatics* and *Intercultural Pragmatics* between 2020 and 2024).

Overall, the linguistic patterns identified in this study reinforce the view that sarcasm cannot be understood solely at the semantic level. Instead, its interpretation requires a pragmatic analysis that considers both linguistic structure and communicative context.

Table 1. Linguistic Patterns of Sarcasm

No	Sarcastic Utterance	Literal Meaning	Implicit Meaning	Context
1	"Wow, the meeting ended so quickly—only two hours late."	Meeting finished quickly	Criticism of lateness	Workplace
2	"Great job, even a simple task Can be done wrong."	Praise for work	Criticism of incompetence	Academic
3	"Amazing service, we only waited an hour."	Service is good	Criticism of poor service	Public service
4	"Your work is so neat I don't know where to start fixing it."	Compliment	Criticism of messy work	Workplace

These examples show that sarcastic utterances often employ positive lexical items such as *great*, *amazing*, or *excellent* to express criticism implicitly.

3.2 Social Functions of Sarcasm

Beyond its linguistic characteristics, the findings indicate that sarcasm serves important social functions within communication. One of the most prominent functions identified in the data is the indirect expression of criticism. Rather than expressing negative judgments explicitly, speakers frequently embed criticism within sarcastic remarks.

From a sociopragmatic perspective, this strategy can be understood as a means of managing interpersonal relationships. Direct criticism may threaten the social "face" of an interlocutor and potentially lead to conflict or tension. By embedding criticism within sarcastic language, speakers are able to express dissatisfaction while mitigating the interpersonal impact of their message.

This observation corresponds with contemporary research on politeness and indirectness in communication. Recent studies (2020–2024) suggest that speakers frequently rely on figurative language, including irony and sarcasm, to soften the potential impact of negative evaluations. In this sense, sarcasm functions as a pragmatic strategy that allows speakers to balance critical expression with the maintenance of social harmony.

Another important social function identified in the data is the role of sarcasm as a mechanism of social regulation. Within many social contexts, sarcastic expressions are used to comment on behaviors that deviate from expected norms. Rather than explicitly criticizing an individual, speakers may use sarcasm to highlight problematic behavior in a humorous or indirect manner.

Such usage suggests that sarcasm can function as a subtle form of social commentary. Through sarcastic remarks, speakers implicitly communicate shared expectations regarding acceptable behavior. This function is particularly evident in group interactions where participants share similar cultural norms and communicative conventions.

Recent pragmatic studies have also emphasized the role of sarcasm in strengthening group cohesion. Within close social groups, sarcastic remarks often serve as a form of playful interaction rather than hostile criticism. Participants who share common background knowledge are able to interpret sarcastic comments as humorous expressions rather than serious attacks.

The findings of this study therefore suggest that sarcasm performs multiple social roles simultaneously. It allows speakers to express criticism, reinforce social norms, and maintain interpersonal relationships within communicative communities.

Table 2. Social Functions of Sarcasm

No	Utterance	Target of Criticism	Social Function
1	"Great management, the schedule Changes every day."	Organization	Express dissatisfaction

2	"The road is fantastic—holes everywhere."	Infrastructure	Social criticism
3	"Very productive, one page a week."	Individual	Performance criticism

3.3 Psychological Functions of Sarcasm

In addition to its linguistic and social roles, sarcasm also performs important psychological functions in communication. The analysis of the data indicates that sarcastic expressions frequently serve as a means for speakers to express emotional responses such as frustration, disappointment, or skepticism.

In many instances, sarcasm appears to function as an emotional outlet that allows individuals to communicate dissatisfaction without engaging in direct confrontation. By framing criticism within ironic language, speakers can express their emotional stance while maintaining a certain degree of social distance from the situation being criticized.

Recent psychological studies on humor and irony suggest that sarcastic communication may serve as a coping mechanism for managing emotional tension. Instead of expressing anger directly, speakers may employ sarcasm to articulate their feelings in a less confrontational manner. The humorous dimension of sarcasm can therefore reduce the emotional intensity of potentially negative interactions.

Another psychological aspect of sarcasm concerns its cognitive complexity. Understanding sarcasm requires listeners to engage in inferential reasoning in order to recognize the discrepancy between literal meaning and intended meaning. This process involves the integration of contextual cues, speaker intention, and shared knowledge.

Contemporary psycholinguistic research indicates that successful sarcastic communication relies on the listener's ability to detect pragmatic incongruity within an utterance. When listeners recognize that the literal meaning does not match the contextual situation, they reinterpret the statement as ironic or sarcastic.

These findings highlight that sarcasm represents a complex communicative phenomenon involving linguistic interpretation, emotional expression, and cognitive inference. Its effectiveness depends on the ability of participants in communication to recognize implicit meanings and interpret them within their appropriate social context.

Table 3. Psychological Functions of Sarcasm

No	Utterance	Speaker Emotion	Implicit Message
1	"Relax, the deadline is only five minutes away."	Anxiety	Criticism of lateness
2	"Excellent teamwork—everyone works alone."	Frustration	Lack of coordination
3	"Sure, the project will finish… next year."	Skepticism	Doubt toward planning

3.4 Audience Responses to Sarcasm

The interpretation of sarcasm is strongly influenced by the relationship between speakers and listeners as well as the broader communicative context. The findings of this study suggest that successful sarcastic communication depends largely on shared knowledge and interpersonal familiarity between participants in interaction.

In close interpersonal relationships, sarcastic remarks are often interpreted as humorous exchanges rather than serious criticism. Familiarity between speakers and listeners enables participants to recognize the intended ironic meaning behind the utterance. Shared experiences and communicative habits further facilitate the interpretation of sarcastic expressions.

However, the findings also indicate that sarcasm may lead to misunderstanding in more formal communication contexts or in interactions between individuals who are not well acquainted. When

listeners lack sufficient contextual information, they may interpret sarcastic statements literally rather than recognizing their ironic intention.

This observation highlights the importance of pragmatic competence in communication. Interpreting sarcasm requires listeners to simultaneously consider linguistic cues, contextual information, and speaker intention. Without such interpretive abilities, the intended meaning of sarcastic expressions may be misunderstood or completely overlooked.

Recent research in intercultural pragmatics also suggests that the interpretation of sarcasm may vary across cultural contexts. In some communicative cultures, sarcastic expressions are frequently used as a form of humor, whereas in others they may be interpreted as impolite or offensive. These differences indicate that the successful interpretation of sarcasm depends not only on linguistic competence but also on cultural and contextual awareness.

3.5 Mini-Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the findings of this study demonstrate that sarcasm operates as a multidimensional communicative phenomenon that integrates linguistic structures, pragmatic interpretation, social interaction, and psychological processes. The linguistic patterns identified in the data—such as pseudo-compliments, hyperbolic irony, and reversed evaluative statements—confirm that sarcastic expressions rely heavily on contextual interpretation and pragmatic inference.

From a theoretical perspective, the results support classical pragmatic frameworks proposed by scholars such as Herbert Paul Grice as well as relevance-theoretic approaches developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson. At the same time, the findings are consistent with contemporary research emphasizing the social and psychological dimensions of sarcastic communication.

Overall, this study highlights that sarcasm should be understood not merely as a stylistic feature of language but as a complex communicative strategy that reflects broader interpersonal, cognitive, and cultural dynamics in human interaction.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined sarcasm as a communicative phenomenon through discourse analysis, focusing on its linguistic patterns, social functions, psychological roles, and audience interpretations. The findings demonstrate that sarcasm is characterized by the interaction between literal and implicit meanings, in which speakers often employ positive or neutral expressions to convey critical or evaluative intentions. Several recurring linguistic patterns were identified, including pseudo-compliments, hyperbolic irony, and evaluative statements whose pragmatic meanings contrast with their literal interpretations. These patterns illustrate how speakers strategically manipulate language to communicate criticism in an indirect yet expressive manner.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to the broader field of pragmatics by reinforcing the view that sarcastic meaning emerges from contextual interpretation and pragmatic inference. The results support existing pragmatic frameworks that emphasize the importance of conversational implicature and contextual knowledge in understanding figurative language. By highlighting the interaction between linguistic structure and communicative context, this study provides further insight into how sarcastic expressions function within everyday discourse.

Practically, the findings suggest that awareness of sarcastic communication can enhance pragmatic competence in social interaction, particularly in contexts where indirect criticism and humor play an important role in maintaining interpersonal relationships.

Future research may explore sarcastic communication across different cultural contexts or digital communication platforms in order to better understand how sarcasm operates within diverse communicative environments.

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