

THE BEINGS OF SARCASM: TONING THE PUNS IN LANGUAGE

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Abstract:

Writers use sarcasm to criticize everything from religion and government to philosophers and other writers. Sarcasm is often even less understood in online communication. However it is a widely accepted form of communication, verbal or text which can be evidently explained through the medium of linguistics as well. The research aims at a comparative study between two major characters (Chandler Bing and Sheldon Cooper), contrasting at the levels of sarcasm, in order to provide a better understanding of the ideal concept of sarcasm and its usage. Although significant studies have been revised regarding pun but sarcasm has been paid less attention, especially in terms of pragmatics or intonation. The study does not provide a detailed insight into the various concepts of sarcasm or its usage but just analyses it in terms of how language and various factors in language create and affect sarcasm.

Key Words: *Sarcasm, pragmatics, intonation, humorous.*

Sarcasm is the use of remarks that clearly mean the opposite of what they say, made in order to hurt someone's feelings or to criticize something in a humorous way. The purpose of this research is to identify and analyze some of the major factors in language that affect or create or lead to sarcasm.

In recent years, an increasingly large body of research has examined the common situation in which one thing is said in order to express another. Although research has examined the understanding of figurative language such as metaphor in some depth, sarcasm has been less studied. Understanding sarcasm requires considering social and cultural factors but they also need to be understood in terms of pragmatics and intonation, which are often ignored in models of language.

The research aims to provide an insight into this problem by significantly focusing on two of the major factors that lead to sarcasm- puns and tone. To get a better understanding of this concept, the research takes up the two of the most prominent sitcoms of this field (*Friends* and *Big Bang Theory*) in order to show the gradual transformation built in the usage and understanding of 'sarcasm' through the characters Chandler Bing and Sheldon Cooper in their respective television shows. The paper also covers how such Television shows or such kind of a representation of 'sarcasm' in modern world has brought in a change in the mindset of the people as to how nowadays it is not taken in an 'offensive' manner and what are the social, political cultural factors that are affected by the use of sarcasm in language. Can the use of sarcasm in language be considered to be a healthy one? Does everyone find it comfortable? What is a positive sarcasm? What do you mean by a negative sarcasm? Do such television shows promote some sort of a social or a political message?

We argue here that in order to fully understand the processes of language processing, it is critical to consider the nature of the person who makes a statement, the nature of the person who receives it, and the context in which this social interaction occurs. The study tries to resolve such issues and also tries to understand the impact of tones or the way people speak or pronounce certain phrases to the reaction one gets to this. In recent times, we often utter a couple of things, actually we speak a lot of things but we hardly notice the linguistic emphasis or the importance of how these words are so effectively used to give not one, but several meanings and several interpretations. The research, with a descriptive analysis on the two

sitcoms of sarcasm, is an attempt to understand the relevance of pragmatics and intonation in reference to one of the most frequently used literary devices in our day to day speech- sarcasm.

Chandler Bing often considered to be the “Father of Sarcasm”, he can insult somebody as well as make sense and also keep us smiling like an idiot for the rest of the day just by thinking of his jokes. With his wit and humorous sarcastic come-backs, he went up the hall of fame with the staggering list of one-liners he made on the show. However, sometimes we tend to fail to notice that his sarcasm somewhere leaves you thinking about a social or a political cover that he flauntly he uses in his dialogues. Some of the instances are as follows:

1. Rachel: "Chandler, you have the best taste in men."

Chandler: "Like father like son."

This conversation is the result of Chandler's hatred towards his dad's sexual transformation. When Rachel compliments him on his good taste of men, Chandler efficiently comments that he could do that because him and his father share a common taste in selecting 'men' in their lives directing the homosexuality of his father. Also a major part of the tv show presents Chandler as a modern adult who finds it really difficult to accept his own father's sexual transformation. In retrospect, the entire show's treatment of LGBTQ issues is awful, a fault pointedly illustrated by the exhaustive clip-compilation “Homophobic Friends.” But Chandler's treatment of his gay father, a Vegas drag queen played by Kathleen Turner, is especially appalling, and it's not clear the show knows it.

It's one thing for Chandler to recall being embarrassed as a kid, but he is actively resentful and mocking of his loving, involved father right up until his own wedding (to which his father is initially not invited!). Even a line like “Hi, Dad” is delivered with vicious sarcasm. Monica eventually cajoles him into a grudging reconciliation, which the show treats as an acceptably warm conclusion.

This condition is prevalent in the modern times too. People always find it difficult to accept things that are different or uncommon. Most of us tend to follow the herd mentality. When we don't have a strong opinion about some issue, we always follow what majority of people think, thinking that if so many people think this way then it should more or less be correct. It is sad to even imagine a world where the very own youth is afraid to come out of this hole and accept the reality.

2. Joey: "Some girl ate Monica!"

Monica: "Shut up, the camera adds 10 pounds"

Chandler: "So how many cameras are actually on you?"

This is a scene which distinctly portrays Chandler's judgements on body- shaming. Monica is shown to be a thin, slim, fit woman in her 30's who had a pretty 'fat' childhood. All her friends, especially Mr. Bing loves making fun of the same. It is a scene where everyone is looking at an old picture of Monica where she is seen to be a very plump, healthy kid and Joey makes a joke about somebody eating up Monica as they are unable to identify their friend in the picture! Monica in return passes an excuse as to how it's just a technical error with the camera when chandler makes the joke as to how many cameras was she actually putting on herself! Body shaming is someone trying to make you feel bad for having a body that doesn't conform to cultural (or just their own personal) beauty ideals and what chandler did was a very funny example of this issue.

One pupil defined sarcasm as "a wise crack given in a mean fashion." (Briggs, 1928) Sarcasm is used by few great men and only by those whose virtues are so great as to palliate their brilliant cruelty. There are instances where Chandler is also seen stating the very obvious facts, news or sending important social or political messages across the television sets through his choice of words in his speech. Some of them are as follows:

1. **Joey: "I kind of had a dream. (Pause) But I don't wanna talk about it."
Chandler: "Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa! What if Martin Luther King had said that?"**
2. **Joey: Whoa! Jam! I love jam! Hey, how come we never have jam at our place?
Chandler: Because the kids need new shoes.**

The first example talks about the great American 'activist' and spokesperson of the Civil Rights Movement- Martin Luther King, who was best known for his role in the advancement of civil rights using the tactics of nonviolence and civil disobedience based on his Christian beliefs.

The second example flaunts a prominent scenario of what happens when you see an apartment rented by a couple of 'men'. Food being a major issue, Joey complains about why there is no jam in their house like Monica and Rachel have theirs. To this, Chandler adds a sarcastic comment by saying that their apartment is not a proper 'residential' one to have all the groceries and essentials inside their house.

Likewise, this being a very minor example, there are plenty other instances in the show where Chandler reeks sarcasm but also depicts a social, cultural or a political message through his dialogues. This he is able to do because of his fluency with puns in his language use.

Sarcasm is incomplete without puns. Even a cursory review of the various kinds of puns and their contexts will show that it is unlikely that students will be able to attend closely to them without being sensitized to the linguistic system. (Kopple, 1995) Words written or spoken have to be analyzed in terms of linguistic perspectives. The writer argues for language play, specifically puns, in the English classroom!

Punning is not only a harmless practice but even a beneficial one, thus making it desirable that teachers and parents remain open-minded about the proclivities of their children to play with words, with their sounds and meanings. Soon enough, the punster himself will learn to select and discard-granted, of course, that he is given a chance to express himself and to test his own abilities. (Lorberg, 1949)

It can be argued that nineties sitcom features themes are in some ways unacceptable to today's cutting-edge scolds. Again, the scold-meter can be focused on the character of Chandler Bing, played by Matthew Perry in *Friends*.

But through the eyes of a 2017 viewer even vaguely cognizant of modern gender politics, he's also the cringe-worthy one.

Chandler, identified in Season 1 as having a "quality" of gayness about him, is endlessly paranoid about being perceived as insufficiently masculine. He's freaked out by hugs, and by Joey having a pink pillow on his couch.

We also see social influences on processing of the sarcastic language. Figurative language plays an important role in conveying emotion and modulating emotional intensity (Gibbs, Leggitt, & Turner, 2002). The emotional effects can be different for the speaker and the listener, and a sarcastic comment is seen as more caustic and less funny by the victim than by the speaker (Katz, Blasko, Kasmersky, 2003, pp.187).

While one is mastering the art of sarcasm with his techniques in using puns in language, we have another significant sitcom character Sheldon Cooper (played by Jim Parsons) in *Big Bang Theory* who has nothing to do with sarcasm but the words spoken and the meaning communicated by his language is heavily dependent on the intonation. Henceforth, another important aspect of sarcasm is the usage of tonal variation. Interpretations of meanings and words can also be understood at a phonetic and a tonal level. Several facts support this interpretation as:

(1) The distribution of tones 2) There are morpho-phonological tone changes that can be explained only by assuming that the initial consonant determines the tone. Fundamental frequency is used as a contrastive property on the phonetic level (Svantesson, House, 2006).

When Big Bang Theory first appeared, there was a lot of discussion about whether Sheldon had Asperger's syndrome, a 'high-functioning' autism spectrum disorder (ASD) characterized by delayed social maturity, social reasoning and communication skills. People with ASD, among other things, tend to take things literally, have difficulty understanding nuance in language and nonverbal communication, have different kinds of introspection and self-consciousness to neuro-typical people, and tend to err on the side of intelligence rather than intuition when processing social information. In a nutshell, they just don't get sarcasm.

Sheldon Cooper is a theoretical physicist at Caltech who lives with his best friend, Leonard Hofstadter. Sheldon is known for his brilliant mind but also his quirky behaviour and idiosyncrasies. Sheldon has a hard time understanding sarcasm and is, with the exception of his close friends and girlfriend Amy, uncomfortable with most social situations. Sheldon is extremely logical, but this comes at a cost of often being rude or condescending to others. Although Sheldon's friends are often the subject of his put downs and narcissistic behaviour, they have generally learned to live with Sheldon's quirks. Bernadette says that Sheldon doesn't know when he's being mean as "the part of his brain that should know is getting a wedgie from the rest of his brain".

Most of Sheldon's dialogues have this characteristic feature of not understanding the concept of sarcasm, at all. The laughter is the result of his humour but majorly deals with the way he utters his dialogues. Hence, tonal variation is to be noticed. The following examples are some of the prominent examples to explain the phenomena.

1. Sheldon: Why are you crying?

Penny: Because I'm stupid.

Sheldon: That's no reason to cry. One cries because one is sad. For example, I cry because others are stupid, and that makes me sad.

Clearly, Sheldon did not get that Penny was passing just another random sarcastic comment. It's as if he gets the sarcasm and chooses not to pay any heed to the comment by just following the person on the other side. He is well and up ready for an impromptu response every time someone passes such a comment on him. The way he says it or the tone chosen also plays a massive role in expressing the humour.

2. Howard: Sheldon, don't take this the wrong way, but, you're insane.

Leonard: That may well be, but the fact is it wouldn't kill us to meet some new people.

Sheldon: For the record, it could kill us to meet new people. They could be murderers or the carriers of unusual pathogens. And I'm not insane, my mother had me tested.

3. Leonard: I did a bad thing.

Sheldon: Does it affect me?

Leonard: No.

Sheldon: Then suffer in silence.

The following examples evidently show his way of putting off a sarcastic comment or even a natural conversation that he encounters with people. All these dialogues were successful in getting the humour and the laughter out because of the particular tone he uses in his conversation. Although computational models of language processing have begun to address the basic question of how a language comprehender can understand the nonliteral sense of a statement, they have yet to be extended to the processing of sarcasm, nor have they acknowledged the important role of social factors in language comprehension

Chandler reeks sarcasm while Sheldon doesn't even understand sarcasm. Chandler can talk about a

table and still manage to break down the audience with laughter, while Sheldon with his rather scientific humour or a satire that decodes the meaning from the joke, would come out to be the humour figure without a hinge of that sarcasm. Both the characters exhibit certain characteristics of tonal variation and puns while cracking their jokes. The study of these characteristics gives a better understanding of the usage of sarcasm in contextual reference as well as verbal utterance.

How would you classify sarcasm? Is it a positive or negative skill, and is it a personality plus or minus?

Sarcasm is like joking with somebody in a very dry manner added in with a drop of practical things in everyday life. That skill can be rather useful in many ways and rather unnecessary in many circumstances. For example, sarcasm can be used in a positive way as to breaking the ice with your friends on awkward silence or to have a good laugh after a long tiring workday. On the negative side, sarcasm can be used during an argument which may further intensify the heat and intensity of the disagreement or make someone in an intimate relationship feel threatened or hurt by your attitude.

Simply, it depends on how you use sarcasm and when you use it. If you were to use sarcasm during a business meeting, it would be a negative influence to your boss and to the company or organization you are working for, because it would push away people who want serious business and make them think that you aren't interested in making a deal with them or making business with them. When it comes to business, other people like serious individuals...but sometimes, a little joking is fine as long as it is not too dry, sarcastic, or inappropriate at the time that it turns people off.

On the other hand, if you were to use sarcasm during a casual meeting with new friends, students, or people. Most likely, people in a casual meeting with you would appreciate your sarcasm as much as dry and funny jokes as well because everyone in that mood and environment is relaxed, calm, happy, and not feeling rushed or stressed in any way. Or, if you were to be hanging out in a formal party by your former high school classmates... sarcasm would be appropriate as well.

Simply, if the environment is relaxed, friendly/casual, and people there are not stressed or feeling rushed, you can use sarcasm in your favour. While on the other hand, using sarcasm during a business meeting, formal meeting with somebody, interview with someone important, interview for a job, etc.; though sometimes during an interview, it is okay to have a little sarcasm if the interviewer seems to be making dry humoured jokes to lighten things up a bit to keep it from getting awkward.

Therefore, in my opinion, sarcasm would be a positive trait in your personality. As long as you don't use it too much or use it in inappropriate settings, then it won't go into the "negative influences" category. The usage of sarcasm is also pivotal. Pupils, writers, teachers, everyone get their share of using this device efficiently. They consider that the user of sarcasm intends to be mean, bitter, stinging, scornful, contemptuous, spiteful, that he is unsympathetic and sneering, taking advantage of his position or training to inflict mental punishment and pain by belittling a pupil with intent to hurt.

One pupil defined sarcasm as "a wise crack given in a mean fashion." (Briggs, 1928) Sarcasm is used by few great men and only by those whose virtues are so great as to palliate their brilliant cruelty. Gone are the days of thrashing students with bamboo sticks or rulers. In current times, instead of a stick, they use a sharp tongue-and the sting goes deeper and does more lasting. (Chapman, 1948)

To conclude, as noticed in recent times, we often utter a couple of things, actually we speak a lot of things but we hardly notice the linguistic emphasis or the importance of how these words are so effectively used to give not one, but several meanings and several interpretations. The research analysed the relevance of pragmatics and intonation in reference to one of the most frequently used literary devices in our day to day speech- sarcasm.

The study tried to understand the impact of tones or the way people speak or pronounce certain phrases to the reaction one gets to this. Also, the findings of the research indicate a distinct shift from the sarcasm used in that particular period to a new perspective of sarcasm in today's world. The study does not

provide a detailed insight into the various concepts of sarcasm or its usage but just analyses it in terms of how language and various factors in language create and affect sarcasm. The research was an attempt to fill the gaps between sarcasm as a concept and how it is used in its modern day interpretations.

Findings indicate that sitcoms capture the linguistic features of natural conversation. The paper can be used as a basis for an in depth analysis of spoken language and language interpretation.

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