

A Pragmatic Study of Sarcasm in Selected TV Shows

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ABSTRACT

Sarcasm as a linguistic strategy is a universal property of all languages which means it can be found in any language. However, this research proposes a pragmatic study of sarcasm in the English Language, American TV shows. Sarcasm could also be pragmatically defined by linking it to Grice's Maxims which means that the utterance is violating one of Grice's maxims to communicate something indirectly. This approach suggests that sarcasm is a vital notion in spoken and written language. It shows that the utterance is used to achieve another purpose that is not literal. The research paper contains five sections. Section one deals with the definition of sarcasm pragmatically. Section two shows sarcasm as a pragmatic notion or phenomenon. Section three discusses Grice's Maxims and how they are considered a model that speakers should follow for successful communication. Section four talks about the types of violations of the maxims. Section five tackles how the utterances from a TV show under investigation are violating the maxims to carry out the indirect meaning. The research closes off with the conclusion reached which is followed by the bibliography.

1. Introduction

There is a lack of studies and research papers that tackles Sarcasm as a pragmatic notion. Therefore, this research is meant to help to bridge that gap. This research aims to focus on Grice's maxims in deciding the functions of Sarcasm pragmatically in a wildly watched TV show that is known for its sarcastic lines in the world. This research shows the pragmatic nature of Sarcasm used by various characters in one of the most popular American TV shows of all time. The show is titled "Friends" which is released in 1994. This TV show is set in New York City and is about a group of friends dealing with life in the city in different ways. This research will tackle verbal irony, sarcasm which shows the gap between the literal meaning of the utterance and the speaker's intended meaning. The researchers hypothesize that Sarcasm is a pragmatic notion that violates one or more of Grice's Maxims at the same time. The research sheds light on a very significant pragmatic notion in spoken language. It will help so many students and researchers who are watching TV shows to improve their comprehension of the English language or improve their listening skills.

1.1 What is Sarcasm

There is no clear and exact definition of sarcasm in linguistic and pragmatic theories. However, researchers have reached the conclusion that 5-6-year-old children are usually able to recognize a sarcastic utterance (Creusere, 1999; Nakassis and Snedeker, 2002).

Researchers and writers have always considered verbal irony or sarcasm a pragmatic phenomenon. Sarcasm is often considered as a special case of irony, which means if the insult is indirect it is more positive than the direct insult (Dews and Winner, 1995). Creusere defines sarcastic utterances as utterances with positive literal meaning, negative intended meaning, and verbal targets (Creusere, 1999).

Clark and Gerrig (1984) tackle irony based on Grice and Fowler and called their theory the "Pretend Theory". They think the speakers pretend to be imprudent, or ignorant speaking to the audience who are expected to figure out the pretense and understand the speaker's intended meaning or attitude.

Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995) claimed that ironic utterances failed to meet the maxim of sincerity which leads the listener's attention to that failed expectation. They called their explanation the "Allusional Pretence" of irony. Wilson (1981) also thinks that the literal meaning of an utterance usually gives a hint about (echo) the expectation that has not been met.

There are many experiments that had been done by researchers to study the identification of sarcasm. One of the studies is by Kreuz and Caucci (2007) who make an experiment on factious utterances. They took out the phrase "said sarcastically" from the stories and asked psychology undergraduate students to find the sarcastic utterances. The students could differentiate between sarcastic and non-sarcastic utterances.

Though irony has many forms and is considered to be elusive (Muecke, 1970), researchers seem to agree that there are two distinct types of irony: verbal irony and situation irony. Verbal irony is often called sarcasm which we will be investigating and exploring in this paper. Our data contain cases of verbal irony or sarcasm because it is widely used in TV shows.

2. Pragmatics of Sarcasm

The early approach suggests that sarcasm as a pragmatic phenomenon violates only one maxim which is the maxim of quality. The utterance is being interpreted as the opposite of the literal meaning of "what is being said". According to this view, sarcasm is the same as an implicature. However, there are many problems with this approach since it focuses on one maxim and ignores the other three. It also seems to consider sarcasm as a decorative device and not a communication phenomenon. So, it is so hard to link sarcasm with this approach since it seems that the interpretation of irony is more complicated than just the contradiction of the literal meaning (Xose Sequeiros,,1)

Although this view of sarcasm has its own problem which is mentioned by Grice himself in his book (Grice1989:53), this approach is still the most reliable approach available to understand the sarcastic utterances that are commonly used in TV shows.

There is another approach that is proposed by Grice, irony is seen as a trope, which involves changing the literal meaning of the expression in question for a figurative, non-literal interpretation. In the case of irony, the change involves the substitution of what has been said literally with its opposite. Grice follows this classical tradition and argues that:

[in irony] it is perfectly obvious to A [the speaker] and his audience that what A has said or has made as if to say is something he does not believe, and the audience knows that A knows that this is obvious to the audience. So, unless A's utterance is entirely pointless, A must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward. This must be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is contradictory to the one he [the speaker] purports to be putting forward (Grice 1989:34)

Krueze (1996) proposes that sarcasm is easier to be understood between people which common or similar social grounds, which also indicates that speakers will not use a sarcastic comment unless they are sure it will be interpreted in a correct way. He called this the "principle of infertility". Therefore, one can assume that sarcasm is less common among strangers and more common among friends and family members.

This line of reasoning suggests that irony results from flouting the maxim of quality (i.e. do not say what you believe to be false). This violation allows the hearer to infer the opposite of what has been said in order to restore the assumption that the maxim has in fact been obeyed

3. Grice's Maxims

Paul Grice is a philosopher and linguist who created his Cooperative Principle that states "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" since listeners and speakers should cooperate and accept each other in order to understand each other. Grice's approach is one the most interesting approaches in pragmatics (Levinson 97). It is based on that principle, Grice proposed his four Conversational Maxims, which are:

1. **The maxim of quantity:** The speakers give as much information as they possibly can.
2. **The maxim of quality:** The speaker should be truthful and avoid false or unverified information.
3. **The maxim of relation:** The speaker's utterance should be relevant to the topic.
4. **The maxim of manner:** The speaker has to be very clear and straightforward. Ambiguity and obscurity should be avoided.

The Maxims also overlap with each other, for example, one can violate the Maxim of Relation and Manner to show that his speech is sarcastic, such as the utterance by Chandler "You have to stop the Q-Tip when there is resistance". Chandler violated more than one Maxims and it is unclear which Maxim has more weight in making his utterance understood as a sarcastic one (Mey, 2002, 76-77)

Grice's Maxims are not rules that everyone follows in their speech. The speaker can violate the Maxims intentionally or unintentionally to convey a specific meaning that is different from the literal meaning. Actually, The Maxims are violated (flouted) quite often which can be intentional in order to convey a particular meaning such as sarcastic comments. Those violated are used by the speakers to express different pragmatic meanings, such as verbal irony or sarcasm.

Therefore, those Maxims are often violated by comedians and actors to achieve a hidden implicature. The Cooperative principle is still happening in the previous utterance on the denotative meaning. The researcher has, thus, state that the intentional violation of the Maxims can serve a purpose just as important as the following the Maxims does (Wardhaugh, 2005:).

4. Types of Violations

Grice himself was aware of the fact that speakers can violate the Maxims he proposes. However, he shows that some speakers can violate the Maxims and still convey the meaning they want to (Levinson, 106), such as irony and sarcasm. Those violations can be unintentional or intentional. Unintentional violations cause miscommunication while intentional result in irony and sarcasm.

4.1 The unintentional violation of Grice's Maxims

Those four Maxims presented by Grice in 1975 are always looked at as very fundamental for maintaining smooth and successful communication. Linguists have agreed that normal communication should follow those four Maxims in order to achieve mutual understanding in conversation (Okanda, M., et al., 2015, 1).

When the speaker violates the Maxims, the listener can rectify the miscommunication by asking questions about the speaker's intended meaning. Talib (2006) is one of the researchers who argues that " a breakdown of communication may not occur even if the listener perceives that the speaker has not been very cooperative with regard to a particular utterance, as the listener may have the opportunity to ask for confirmation or elaboration, ..."

4.2 The intentional violation of Grice's Maxims

Those Maxims are sometimes violated purposefully to communicate information that the connotative meaning can't convey alone or to give the audience the freedom to assume the denotative meaning of the utterance. When knowing that the speaker is aware that he is violating the Maxims, the audience usually ignores the connotative meaning and focuses on the denotative meaning in which the Maxims are violated (Okanda, M., et al., 2015, 1).

5. Violations of the Maxims

This research paper is written to judge the type and meaning of the violation of the maxim in a selected line from the TV show "Friend". It is an attempt to explore sarcastic utterances. Here is a detailed examination of each maxim's violation:

5.1 Maxim of quality

In the show, the characters have violated this maxim a lot to be sarcastic for example:

All: Hey! Paul! Hi! The Wine Guy! Hey!

Chandler: I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name. Paul, was it?

The One Where Monica Gets a New Roommate

In the previous quote, all characters knew the guest they are meeting but chandler decided to ask for their name just to mock the situation and show that they have heard about him. Another example of violating this maxim and not being truthful is what Joey said to Monica:

Monica: (taking a drink from Joey) Are you through with that?

Joey: Yeah, sorry, the swallowing slowed me down.

The One With the Sonogram at the End

Joey is not telling the truth because he is scared of Monica, so he told her that he has not finished his cup because of his swallowing, which is a very natural thing.

Another example of not being truthful is what Chandler told the characters when Ross invited everyone to come to his place. Ross mentioned that Chandler and Joy will be helping him assemble furniture and Chandler replied as follow:

Ross: Right, you're not even getting your honeymoon, God. No, no, although, Aruba, this time of year... talk about your- (thinks) - big lizards... Anyway, if you don't feel like being alone tonight, Joey and Chandler are coming over to help me put together my new furniture.

Chandler: (deadpan) Yes, and we're very excited about it.

The One Where Monica Gets a New Roommate

Chandler states that he is excited about assembling furniture which is exactly the opposite of what he thinks of excitement. He has violated the maxim to show the others that he is not happy or excited about helping his friend with furniture.

5.2 Maxim of quantity

The characters of the show the writer investigating, have violated the maxim of quantity a lot by providing little information and are not commonly relevant as a response to what the speaker is talking about, for example, the following:

Ross: I'm divorced! I'm only 26 and I'm divorced!

Joey: Shut up!

Chandler: You must stop!

The One Where Monica Gets a New Roommate

As friends, Joey and Chandler did not say any statements to show support to their friend, Ross, who seems to be no happy with what is going in his life. In the contrast, Joey and Chandler told him just to stop taking, which violates the maxim of quantity because that statement does not carry enough information. The characters want to achieve sarcasm by stating too little. On the other hand, characters have violated this maxim by saying too much or providing too much information. The following is an example:

Phoebe: Give her a break, it's hard being on your own for the first time.

Rachel: Thank you.

Phoebe: You're welcome. I remember when I first came to this city. I was fourteen. My mom had just killed herself and my step-dad was back in prison, and I got here, and I didn't know anybody. And I ended up living with this albino guy who was, like, cleaning windshields outside port authority, and then he killed himself, and then I found aromatherapy. So believe me, I know exactly how you feel.

The One Where Monica Gets a New Roommate

In the previous example the Character, Phoebe, has provided too much information about her personal life when one of her friends seems to be supported to go through life without any support from her family. Phoebe violates this maxim to show in a sarcastic way that what Rachel is going on is nothing compared to the hardship she went through when she was only fourteen and her parents left her.

5.3 Maxim of relation

The characters also violate the maxim of relativity in the show to communicate a sarcastic viewpoint, Chandler is one of the characters who use this violation a lot and the following is an example:

Ross: I just feel like someone reached down my throat, grabbed my small intestine, pulled it out of my mouth, and tied it around my neck...

Chandler: Cookie?

The One Where Monica Gets a New Roommate

shaving a very hard time accepting that his wife is leaving him. Ross is talking to Chandler about how hard his life has become after his wife's decision to file a divorce, Chandler in the other side offered him a cookie which indicates that chandler used this offer to tell his friend that what he might really need is a cookie and not a wife.

Another example that shows that Chandler has violated the maxim of relation one more time in the following lines:

Rachel: Yeah, well, it's a Mercedes if I move back home. Oh, it was horrible. He called me *young lady*.

Chandler: Ooh, I hate when my father calls me that.
The One With the East German Laundry Detergent

Rachel was telling her friends that her dad has promised to give her a Mercedes if she moves back with her parents, and she also mentioned that her dad tried to make her feel uncomfortable by addressing her as a "young lady" which is a phrase used in formal situations. Chandler's reply was not relevant to the topic because he talks about his dad using that same phrase to address him. He wants to make fun of his friend's problem by stating that he is a guy and his dad still calls him that, which also refers to his struggle to show that he is always perceived as gay, even by his own dad, just because his dad is gay.

5.4 Maxim of manner

Characters usually violate these maxims by being vague and not explaining what he/she is meaning. Chandler is one of the main characters in the show we are investigating, has used this violation a lot throughout the entire show to make fun of his friends. The following example is one of the lines that was not understood by a lot of the show fans who are not Americans because of the cultural reference:

Joey: Why don't you go see Frankie? My family's been goin' to him forever. He did my first suit when I was 15. No, wait, 16. No, 'scuse me, 15. (still confused) All right, when was 1990?

Chandler: Okay. You have to stop the Q-tip when there's resistance!
The One With Ross's New Girlfriend

Here, Chandler is telling Joey to not push The Q-tip, which is a brand of cotton swabs sold in America, because it is damaging his brain. He wants to communicate to his friend Joey that he is stupid because of his damaged mental abilities. Another example in the show is what Ross told Monica when he started to think of dating again after his failed marriage:

Monica: See ya... Wait wait, what's with you?

Ross: I just grabbed a spoon. (Ross exits and Monica has no idea what that means.)
The One Where Monica Gets a New Roommate

In the previous quote, Ross is referring to another conversation with Joey who compared women to ice-cream flavors and told Ross that he should start dating a new woman. Monica, his sister, did not know what he meant, since she was not there when Joey came up with this comparison and Ross did not explain it to her.

6. Conclusion

In this research paper, the writers have investigated Sarcasm as a pragmatic phenomenon. At first, they tried to define sarcasm and differentiate it from irony. The researchers choose the Grice model to analyze sarcasm because it is the most widely used model among researchers to tackle the indirect meaning of an utterance and no one has used this model to examine sarcastic utterances before.

In order to analyze using the Grice model, it is significant to make clear what this approach is about and the main domains it is trying to cover the maxims. Then, the researchers point out the types of the violations and select the suitable type for analysis. At last, the examination shows that in TV shows, the characters have violated all the maxims to make fun of their friends or to mock a specific situation. Those violations have achieved their purpose and communicated the hidden meaning of the utterance.

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