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## **SARCASM AS AN INDEPENDENT PRAGMATIC CATEGORY OF NONLITERAL LANGUAGE**

*“Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, but the highest form of intelligence.”*  
Oscar Wilde

*The present paper aims at creating a theoretical framework for the study of sarcasm as an independent pragmatic category of nonliteral language. The analysis into the existing theories on sarcasm has revealed that there is a need to create a more comprehensive framework to give a holistic understanding of sarcasm as a linguistic and pragmalinguistic phenomenon. Despite numerous studies on the subject, linguistic sarcasm research is still in its early stages. The paper addresses the fundamental definitions and characteristics of the concept of sarcasm, which are necessary for a better understanding of how sarcasm emerges and materializes as a form of nonliteral language.*

**Key words:** *sarcasm, irony, verbal irony, pragmatics, pragmatic category, nonliteral language, indirect speech acts*

Everyday communication consists of not only literal language, but also the use of nonliteral language, such as idioms, proverbs, metaphors, indirect requests, sarcasm and conversational implicatures. To understand nonliteral language, the listener must go beyond the literal meaning of the utterance and rely on the utterance's situational context, as well as the listener's and speaker's knowledge of the world, to arrive at the implied (non-literal) meaning.

The present article gives an evaluative review of existing theories and approaches to the study of sarcasm with the aim to provide a theoretical framework for the future research of sarcasm as an independent pragmatic category of

nonliteral language. It has been shown that if these approaches to the pragmatics of nonliteral language can be merged then a lengthy gap in regards to the pragmatics of sarcasm will have been bridged.

So far sarcasm has mainly been viewed from the perspective of different linguistic and language-related discourses such as cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, humor studies, semiotics, social sciences, and so on. Sarcasm as a linguistic phenomenon has a lot to do with context and conversation, thus it is important to treat sarcasm relevantly in order to draw out its functional characteristics in the speech-language paradigm.

The study of sarcasm as an independent category of linguistic analysis has been a challenge for numerous theorists. There is still a lot of miscommunication around the research of sarcasm as it is. Some studies prefer the term conversational irony to explain the sarcastic nature of utterances /Leech, 2014; Gibbs & Colston, 2007; Grice, 1975/, and some view sarcasm as a category of “cheap talk” /Haiman, 1998/. Sometimes it is even debatable whether to classify sarcasm as a category of politeness /Leech, 2014/ or impoliteness /Culpeper, 2011/ in pragmatic studies of nonliteral language. Other studies present sarcasm as a manifestation of verbal irony, as a form of figurative or nonliteral language /Sperber, 1984; Kreuz, 2019; Gibbs & Colston, 2007/.

Since pragmatics is devoted to the study of the meaning in context and the role of the context in understanding the meaning, it can be assumed that the study of sarcasm if based on a sum total of existing pragmatic approaches will guarantee a more comprehensive and holistic vision of this notion.

There has always been a lack of consensus on whether sarcasm is an interdependent or independent category of interdisciplinary studies, usually, because of its close pragmatic kinship to the concept of irony. This ambiguity in sarcasm studies can be traced in various discourses. The general interpretation of sarcasm and sarcastic intentions of utterances are negative, yet we believe that this is a one-sided and incomplete approach to the study of sarcasm since its pragmatic functions as a form of nonliteral language are so far not thoroughly studied and revealed.

According to Gibbs and Colston, it is difficult to define sarcasm as it is closely related to the concept of irony and very often ironic utterances are viewed to be sarcastic. The ultimate goal of his study is to demonstrate that sarcastic utterances have unique pragmatic qualities that influence how they are perceived and remembered /Gibbs & Colston, 2007: 173-174/.

Since sarcasm has been generally viewed as a subtype of irony, we propose to have a look at the conceptualization of sarcasm from the perspective of irony studies. Two theories of irony are relatively well known in linguistics. First, irony involves an act of pretense /Grice, 1975: 53/. Haiman states that “the sarcast

pretends to have an attitude that he or she does not feel and expects a privileged audience to recognize that he or she is indeed pretending. Like all pretense, then, and like all theater, sarcasm is a form of speech play. It is ultimately motivated by the same impulse that inspires people to play pretend games of any sort” /Haiman, 1998: 25/. In his essay, “A Modest Proposal” /1729/, Jonathan Swift ironically suggested serving Irish children as food to the rich. In this essay he quite methodically and seriously discussed and outlined the positive aspects of this plan, among them that these children would provide a new source of income for the poor and add a new dish to tavern menus. The concept is so ridiculous that no one could have taken it seriously. Swift pretended to speak to the English audience as a member of the English ruling class. He expected his readers to recognize the pretense and to see how, by acting pretentious, he was criticizing English attitudes toward Irish people /Clark, Gerrig, 1984: 123/.

Second, irony involves mention rather than use of words /Sperber & Wilson, 1981: 303/. The sarcastic “quotes or otherwise repeats other people's words or possibly just the very words he or she used earlier and, by repetition, draws attention to their peculiar inappropriateness. A sarcastic may quote not only another's actual words but also another's diction and syntax. There are many cases when sarcasm is achieved by derisory mention, i.e. repetition and quotation of inappropriate words” /Haiman, 1998: 25/.

According to Gibbs and Colston, it is linguistic, philosophical, and literary theorists who have shown most of the interest in sarcasm. They have been primarily concerned with a rationalistic account of the factors involved in understanding sarcasm. In the most traditional view, the so-called Standard Pragmatic Model, a hearer must first analyze an expression's literal interpretation before coming to its nonliteral, sarcastic meaning. Sarcastic utterances are interpreted in three steps. For instance, to interpret the utterance “You are a fine friend” (meaning “You are a bad friend”), a person must:

- a) calculate the utterance's literal, context-independent meaning;
- b) determine whether the literal meaning is the intended meaning of the speaker;
- c) if the literal interpretation is unsuitable for the given context, compute the nonliteral meaning by assuming the opposite of the literal interpretation /Gibbs & Colston, 2007: 174/.

Although this concept does not completely distinguish whether an utterance is viewed as sarcastic or not as well as cannot be applied to all sarcastic expressions since the evolution of non-literal language has enhanced the scope of language modeling, it does represent a somewhat applicable model for detecting sarcasm within various contexts. Thus, in further observation of the subject, we are inclined to use this concept as a base form and incorporate other theoretical notions of

sarcasm studies into the latter for emerging a much broader and more comprehensive model of the research.

Gibbs and Colston believe that the Standard Pragmatic Model may not be an accurate representation of the processes involved in comprehending sarcasm. Very often it is difficult to describe exactly how listeners arrive at speakers' sarcastic intentions. For example, if your friend says "Thanks", when he or she does not appreciate what you have done, it is completely inappropriate, and you must make it appropriate by determining how the sentence and speaker meanings differ. Sarcastic interpretation is frequently assumed to be the inverse of literal meaning. In this case, your friend's opposite comment would be something like "No thanks," but this does not convey the speaker's true sarcastic intent /Ibid: 175/.

These statements show that the Standard Pragmatic Model fails to completely specify how people in fact comprehend sarcasm. Here comes another theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson which is the Echoic Mention Theory. According to this theory, there is no nonliteral proposition that hearers must substitute for the literal proposition. Rather, the hearer is reminded in some echoic manner of some familiar proposition (the truth value of which is irrelevant) and of the speaker's attitude toward it. There are various types and degrees of echoic mention; some are immediate echoes, while others are delayed; some are based on actual utterances, while others are based on thoughts or opinions; some have real sources, while others have imagined ones; some can be traced back to specific individuals, while others have a hazy origin /Sperber, Wilson, 1981: 309/. The echoic use of language occurs when speakers simply repeat the utterances of other speakers in order to achieve a specific communicative effect, typically to convey a specific attitude toward the relevant utterance. such as pleasure, surprise, disbelief, skepticism, mockery, etc. /Wilson, 2006: 1730/. These attitudes reflect the sarcastic nature of the utterance.

Let us consider the example when a speaker says to his or her friend "You came and helped a lot". Sarcasm comes from the fact that the speaker echoes a previously mentioned statement that the friend had offered saying "I'll come and help you", but in fact did not put a lot of effort.

Sarcasm depends on language with literal positive meaning to communicate a negative message /Miron-Spektor et al., 2011: 6/. Sarcasm involves humor and figurative speech to deal with anger-evoking situations. When a guest is displeased with the service of a hotel and sarcastically utters "What a great service you have" meaning "The service is awful", he or she ostensibly delivers a pragmatic solution to that anger situation in a less threatening way. Hence, we can see that the beliefs that sarcasm serves as a way to mock or hurt someone's feelings are not appropriate, as sarcastic speech acts help us to express ourselves in a proper pragmatic perspective and are a more polite way to deal with different scenarios.

In Miron-Spector, Efrat-Treister, Rafaeli and Schwarz-Cohen's study, it is stated that sarcasm has also been shown to stimulate creative thinking and problem solving in real-life situations.. From a pragmatic point of view, sarcasm is a speech act with a metamessage to intentionally use ironic utterances, therefore it is very important to treat sarcasm as the speaker's choice on how to deal with complex problems. Sarcasm is the linguistic interpretation of the speaker's intention to show his or her way of creative thinking in different situations and highlights the speaker's attitude towards them /Miron-Spektor et al., 2011: 8/.

As McDonald claims, in his neuropsychological study of sarcasm, sarcastic comments are typically associated with a mocking or scornful attitude toward the recipient of the comment. Sarcastic inferences and the process by which they are generated have been extensively discussed in linguistic literature. Parallel research into sarcasm comprehension deficits following brain injury can help with the study of normal speakers /McDonald, 2007: 217/. As this review suggests, accurate assessment of the speaker's emotional state aids comprehension of sarcasm but is neither necessary nor sufficient for detecting the full pragmatic force of the sarcastic comment. Ability to think flexibly and conceptually, on the other hand, appears to be an important prerequisite for drawing inferences from sarcastic comments. Having said that, for some brain-injured patients, recognizing the counterfactual inference generated by the less transparent forms of sarcastic remark appears rather difficult. The issue in such cases appears to be a failure to understand what the speaker is thinking and to infer the intention behind the sarcastic remark /Ibid: 227/. Though these statements focus on the study of sarcasm from a neuropsychological point of view, they assist us to understand sarcasm as a linguistic phenomenon.

Sarcasm is also viewed as a form of ironic speech used to criticize implicitly. There is positively worded sarcasm (criticism) that is viewed as more positive than negatively worded sarcasm (praise) /Slugoski, Turnbull, 1988/.

Many scholars believe that sarcasm and irony are strongly bonded linguistic concepts and it's hard to differentiate their essential similarities /Muecke, 1969; Kreuz, 2019/. There is an extremely close connection between sarcasm and irony, and literary theorists in particular often treat sarcasm as "simply the crudest and least interesting form of irony" /Muecke, 1969:20/. Other theorists attempt to classify sarcasm and irony as separate categories /Haiman, 1998; Sperber, Wilson, 1981/.

According to Haiman, there are two conceptual distinctions between sarcasm and irony. Firstly, things can be ironic, but only people have the ability to be sarcastic. Secondly, while people may be ironic unintentionally accidentally sarcastic, sarcasm takes deliberate intent. Sarcasm is defined as overt irony utilized as a kind of verbal aggression by the speaker, and it can therefore be distinguished

from other aggressive speech acts such as put-on, outright insults, curses, vituperation, nagging, and condescending /Haiman, 1998: 20/.

Sarcasm and irony are closely interconnected speech genres and sometimes it is not easy to distinguish whether an utterance conveys a sarcastic or an ironic speech act.

Sarcasm is a form of verbal irony. In classical rhetoric, verbal irony is considered to be a trope, and as such involves the substitution of a figurative for a literal meaning. Irony is defined as the trope in which the figurative meaning is the opposite of the literal meaning /Gibbs, Colston, 2007: 36/. According to Grice the ironist deliberately violates the maxim of truthfulness, implicating the opposite of what was literally said. The only significant difference between this and the classical rhetorical account is that what was classically analyzed as a figurative meaning is re-considered as a figurative implication or implicature /Grice, 1975: 53/. Referring to Fowler /1965/ Gibbs and Colston state that “even though it is possible to make sarcastic remarks without being ironic, most sarcasm uses irony to get its bitter, caustic effect. Sarcastic utterances have special pragmatic properties, which affect how they are understood and remembered” /Gibbs, Colston, 2007: 174/.

The most distinctive demarcation line between sarcasm and irony is suggested by Haiman (1998). First, according to Haiman irony, unlike sarcasm, can be both unintentional and unconscious. To make the conceptual distinction clear he gives the following example of contrast. In Jonathan Demme’s film *Married to the Mob* (1988), the heroine, a mobster’s widow, says to an FBI agent, “You’re no different from the mob!” He responds: “Oh, there’s a big difference, Mrs. De Marco. The mob is run by murdering, thieving, lying, cheating psychopaths. We work for the President of the United States of America.” The irony of this statement is apparent, but the FBI agent character’s utterance is sincere in the film, with no sarcastic intention /Haiman, 1998: 20/. Thus, sarcastic utterances require an intention by the speaker and satisfy the terms of the notion of the use-mention theory of sarcasm. Meanwhile, utterances that convey ironic nature situationally can be void of sarcastic intentions.

The second major distinctive feature between sarcasm and irony according to Haiman is that “irony is relativistic, while sarcasm is absolute. The sarcastic perceives only two versions of reality: that which obtains on the stage among the characters where he or she pretends to be and that which obtains for the playwright in real life, where the sarcast really stands. The sarcast’s perspective is that of the know-it-all wise guy, who rolls his eyes while he mouths the lines of his “role”, demonstrating that he appreciates their absurdity. The ironist, on the other hand, perceives that “all the world’s a stage”, and that what he or she honestly perceives as the absolute truth may be, from a loftier perspective, as limited and arbitrary as

the stage he or she ridicules, or even, possibly, that the stage truth is closer to ultimate reality than what he or she thinks is “real life” /Haiman, 1998: 21/.

The term *verbal irony* has often been used by various theorists to discuss the pragmatic role of sarcasm in nonliteral communication. According to Kreuz, verbal irony is one example of a far larger family of speech forms that deviate from the literal meaning /Kreuz, 2019: 12/. He believes that many scholars simply linked sarcasm with verbal irony or concentrated on a specific discourse purpose connected with this form of language, such as humor. In the instance of verbal irony, a theory that may explain one sort of sarcastic discourse may not account for another /Kreuz, 2019: 62/.

Utsumi defines verbal irony as “an intelligent, witty figure of speech found in many language activities” /Utsumi, 2000: 1777/. He was convinced that both linguistic /Grice, 1975; Haverkate, 1990/ and psychological or cognitive studies /Sperber, Wilson, 1981; Clark, Gerrig, 1984/ of irony fail to differentiate ironic utterances from those of non-ironic. The reason according to him for this inadequacy is due to the implicit character of verbal irony. Verbal irony is fundamentally implicit, not explicitly expressed /Utsumi, 2000: 1778/.

Kreuz singles out two commonly used definitions of verbal irony both of which he believes are problematic /Kreuz, 2019: 36/. The first one is when the speaker means something else than what they literally say. As an example, when someone might say “What a fantastic game” during a boring football match as an expression of their frustration. The other definition is when the speaker means the exact opposite of what is said, for instance uttering “I love rainy weather” while the hearer is aware that it is the exact opposite. However, these definitions do not specify clearly whether all uttered opposite or different meanings presuppose a usage of verbal irony. Any discussion of verbal irony takes into account how it links to the concept of sarcasm. Scholars have long debated whether sarcasm is a synonym for verbal irony, or whether it is a variant of it. If everyone agreed on this, the semantic disagreement would be reduced to a simple preference for one term or the other. However, it should be noted that not all ironic comments are sarcastic, and not all sarcastic ones are ironic. As a result, one concept cannot truly replace the other.

That is why it appears to be very important to take into consideration the concerns about the role of pragmatic information in comprehending what speakers mean by what they say. Gibbs and Colston consider this as a particularly important problem for metaphoric language, in which sentence and speaker meanings are thought to differ /Gibbs, Colston, 2007: 196/. A speaker who sarcastically calls the addressee “a fine person” assumes that the hearer shares enough pragmatic knowledge concerning the contextual setting and the speaker’s beliefs and attitudes to interpret the utterance.

Sarcastic utterances have special pragmatic properties, which affect how they are understood and remembered /Gibbs, Colston, 2007: 174/. In their study of natural language understanding, Gibbs and Colston highlight the relevance of pragmatic information in determining what speakers intend when they say something. He believes that it is of great importance for metaphoric language, in which sentence and speaker meanings are considered to differ. A speaker who says sarcastically to an addressee “You helped a lot” assumes that the hearer shares enough pragmatic knowledge concerning the contextual setting and the speaker’s beliefs and attitudes to interpret the utterance /Ibid: 196/.

Understanding sarcasm depends on identifying the mentioned material and the speaker’s attitude towards it. It entails determining the literal meaning of the utterance, but more specifically, determining the literal meaning of the utterance as interpreted in light of the pragmatic information shared by speakers and hearers /Ibid: 197/. When the speakers and hearers mutually share certain pragmatic knowledge and information the use of sarcasm becomes more comprehensible and on point.

Sarcasm can be easily interpreted and decoded if there is a mutual understanding, chemistry, and rapport between a speaker and a listener. The idea of “common ground” suggested by Clark and Marshall (1981) is an important component in the process of understanding sarcasm. People who share experiences, perceptions, and knowledge are more likely to recognize sarcastic utterances from each other. These utterances may include some echoed background information that is familiar to the interlocutors, and it makes the sarcasm more comprehensible. Moreover, it is believed that the use of sarcasm is more appropriate and polite between the interlocutors who share this “common ground”, thanks to the previous uses of sarcastic utterances.

It is apparent that as linguistic phenomena sarcastic expressions are characterized to speak about one’s intentions to say something by meaning something else or meaning the opposite of what is being uttered. It is context-dependent whether an expression will serve as a sarcastic verbal act or not. The expression “you are a great help”, besides being a common way of appreciating somebody’s help, may also be considered as sarcastic in a situation when the speaker says it not being satisfied with the expected help supposedly from a friend, so we can say that it is only possible to distinguish sarcastic expression in a specific context considering speaker’s intention to use it as well.

There are also cases when speakers actually do mean what they literally say but are still speaking sarcastically /Sperber, Wilson, 1981: 299/. For example, during a football game, one of the side’s fans may say to an opposite side’s fan: “I adore your team’s defense!” The speaker absolutely means it and is still being sarcastic as, thanks to the poor defending of the rival team, his or her team is

winning. So, in this case, the sarcastic attitude is not expressed by meaning the opposite of what is being uttered but it is still context-dependent and used intentionally.

Any verbal act may be performed in a sarcastic tone of voice if the speaker desires so. This can be stated for two reasons. First, sarcasm is not one possible message among several but rather a commentary on any possible message. Second, sarcasm is predominantly expressed by intonational or even paralinguistic means. Sarcasm is a speech genre and Haiman even proposes sarcasm to be grammaticalized as a mood (sarcastive) like the traditional subjunctive “because it has the function of indicating a speaker’s attitude toward the propositional content of his or her message” /Haiman, 1998: 28/.

As sarcasm conveys the metamessage “I don’t mean this”, it should not be confused with lying. The sarcasm, unlike the liar, has no desire to deceive; sarcasm differs from falsehood in the presence of the honest metamessage. In Goffman’s terms sarcasm is keyed and contrasts with fabrications /Goffman, 1974: 65/. One may legitimately inquire how a sarcastic “thanks a lot” differs from that of a lie. Examining the two, it is clear that the liar’s single statement is both message and metamessage, whereas the sarcasm is actually making two clearly separated statements at the same time: first, a message “X,” and second, commentary along the lines of “X is bunk” /Haiman, 1998: 21/.

Scholars like Brown and Levinson (1978), Grice (1975), and others conceptualize sarcasm as an indirect form of speech with the intention of negating indirectly rather than using direct messages. McDonald sees this as one advantage of sarcasm being an efficient form of communication thanks to its morphological simplicity and flexibility /McDonald, 1999: 487/. For example, the sarcastic utterance “What a smart idea” is meant to implicitly negate a statement that is considered to be stupid by the sarcasm.

In his revolutionary article “Logic and Conversation” Grice (1975) discusses non-conventional implicatures and represents the *Cooperative Principle* including specific subclasses of conversational implicatures called *maxims*, namely, maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Under the category of Quality Grice puts the concept of the supermaxim “Try to make your contribution one that is true” and two more specific maxims:

- (1) Do not say what you believe is false.
- (2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence /Grice, 1975: 46/.

According to Kreuz Grice’s *Cooperative Principle* suggests that certain nonliteral forms of language, such as metaphor, exaggeration, and verbal sarcasm, also known as sarcasm, appear to contradict the Quality principle /Kreuz, 2019: 60/. However, in the case of irony, the listener can comprehend clearly inaccurate

statements by examining related propositions, such as the opposite of what has been uttered.

Since sarcasm usually conveys an opposite meaning of what is uttered and does not presuppose a conceptual meaning of the utterance, we apparently come across a breach of the first specific maxim (1) Grice proposes. On the one hand, the sarcastist indirectly performs a speech act where he/she implicates an opposite meaning, on the other hand, the sarcastist does actually believe in the truthfulness of his/her intended meaning of the utterance yet conveys it indirectly. When the speaker performs a sarcastic speech act it would also be strange not to possess ironic intention and to overtly demonstrate it. Sarcasm involves the expression of attitudes, feelings, or evaluations, and when such remarks are accompanied by a proper tone of voice, the listener should be able to decode the speaker's nonliteral intention.

The discussed notions of pragmatic studies of sarcasm as a linguistic phenomenon lead us to the assumption that sarcasm does play an independent role as a form of nonliteral or indirect language since its pragmatic properties of meaning do not fully correlate with those of irony, humor, verbal irony, and other forms of indirect speech acts. Sarcasm does not only convey a negative message in terms of expressing verbal aggression but it also relies on the language as positive criticism which will be a subject of further practical research.

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**Ա. ՉՈՒԲԱՐՅԱՆ, Հ. ԴԱՆԻԵԼՅԱՆ – Սարկազմը որպես փոխաբերական լեզվի լեզվագործաբանական կարգ.** – Հոդվածի նպատակն է քննության ենթարկել այն տեսական դրույթներն ու մոտեցումները, որոնք հնարավոր են դարձնում սարկազմը դիտարկել որպես լեզվագործաբանական կարգ: Սարկազմի վերաբերյալ գոյություն ունեցող տեսությունների վերլուծությունը ցույց է տալիս, որ անհրաժեշտ է ստեղծել ավելի ընդգրկուն շրջանակ՝ սարկազմի՝ որպես լեզվական և լեզվագործաբանական երևույթի համալիր ընկալման համար: Հոդվածում

անդրադարձ է կատարվում սարկազմ հասկացության հիմնական սահմանումներին և առանձնահատկություններին, որոնք անհրաժեշտ են ավելի լավ հասկանալու, թե ինչպես է սարկազմը նյութականացվում որպես փոխաբերական լեզվի առանձին տեսակ:

**Բանալի բառեր.** սարկազմ, հեգնանք, լեզվագործաբանություն, գործաբանական կարգ, փոխաբերական լեզու, անուղղակի խոսքային ակտեր

**А. ЧУБАРЯН, А. ДАНИЕЛЯН – Сарказм как лингвопрагматическая категория фигурального языка.** – В статье рассматриваются существующие теоретические положения и подходы, позволяющие определить сарказм как лингвопрагматическую категорию. Анализ теорий сарказма показывает, что необходимо создать более комплексную основу для полного понимания сарказма как лингвопрагматического явления. В статье рассматриваются основные определения понятия сарказма и выявляются признаки, необходимые для лучшего понимания процесса материализации сарказма как отдельного вида фигурального языка.

**Ключевые слова:** сарказм, ирония, вербальная ирония, лингвистическая прагматика, лингвопрагматическая категория, фигуральный язык, косвенные речевые акты

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