

## **A Psycho-pragmatic Study of Sarcasm in Iraqi EFL Context**

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### **Abstract**

Sarcasm is diffuse in everyday interaction. It is considered less rough than criticism. The present study is concerned with investigating Iraqi EFL learners' recognition of sarcastic utterances and expressions from a psycho-pragmatic perspective. It represents an attempt to answer the following questions: 1. Do Iraqi EFL students at the University of Babylon/ College of Education for Human Sciences/ Department of English face difficulties in recognizing sarcastic utterances and expression and why? 2. Which gender faces more difficulties in recognizing sarcastic utterances and expressions and why? 3. Which psycholinguistic theory is more pertinent in recognizing sarcastic intentions? To answer the previous questions, the related literature on sarcasm and the related psycholinguistic theories is reviewed and a test is conducted on 50 male and female students from the University of Babylon/ College of Education for Human Sciences/ Department of English. The study comes up with the conclusion that Iraqi EFL female students are more dexterous in recognizing sarcastic utterances because they tend to be more polite even in their criticisms. Accordingly, sarcasm is a female-dominated form of communication.

**Key words:** sarcasm, standard pragmatic model, echoic mention theory, Iraqi EFL learners.

### **1. The Concept of Sarcasm**

For Attardo (1994: 11), sarcasm is “a play on words that also involves aggression”. The aggression and negativity of sarcasm is directed towards others who could be physically present or absent. Furthermore, sarcasm is considered as “a form of impolite speech” which is intended to offend others. However, the intended offense is communicated through polite utterances. Accordingly, sarcasm is regarded as a type of ‘mock politeness’ (i.e., the utilization of politeness to communicate impoliteness).

For McDonald (1999: 486), sarcasm is “an indirect form of speech intentionally used to produce a particular dramatic effect on the listener”. Thus, it is intentionally utilized as a form of verbal aggression. It is considered by some people as “a male-dominated form of communication used mostly among peers”.

Moreover, sarcasm is often used to convey implicit criticism or a polite form of criticism with a specific target (McDonald, 1999: 486-7). Toplak (2000: 14) mentions that the use and degree of sarcasm in everyday communication is affected by various factors including:

“exaggeration, nature of the speaker, relationship of speaker to victim, severity of the criticism, and whether or not the criticism is being made private or in front of an audience”. Toplak concludes that what is essential to sarcasm is that "with speaker's intent in mind, sarcasm is used as a means of verbal aggression; with victim's reactions in mind, sarcasm is taken as a more severe form of criticism than found when criticism is directly expressed".

### 1.1 Sarcasm vs. Irony

Some authors like Capelli et al. (1990) assimilate sarcasm to irony; however, others like Hairman (1998) differentiate between them demonstrating that sarcasm must be “communicated by people and must involve intention”, while irony may “deal with situations and can lack intention”. Sarcasm differs from irony in that sarcasm is intentional and consciously used while irony is unintentional and unconsciously employed

McDonald (1999: 486-7) argues that although sarcasm and irony are both ways of communicating one thing and intending another, they still differ. Sarcasm is “more deliberate in its reversal of meaning, while irony may be very fine”. Moreover, sarcasm is accompanied by disapproval, contempt, and scorn (Sperber and Wilson, 1981:297-8). For example:

- "It's such lovely weather outside!" when the weather is rainy (Irony).
- "Your intelligence astounds me!" when the intended meaning is the opposite (Sarcasm).

Thus, interpreting sarcasm involves grasping the intentions conveyed in the situations and may include processes of social cognition and theory of mind (Winner, 1988: 45).

### 1.2 Sarcasm as a Form of Mock Politeness

Haugh (2014: 278) defines mock politeness as “an ostensibly polite stance, which is indicated through the occurrence of a linguistic form or practice that would in other circumstances be associated with a polite attitude, masks or disguises an “impolite” stance that arises through implicature”

Culpeper (1996: 45) lists sarcasm as a negative politeness strategy; a kind of mock politeness strategies because it involves the use of politeness to convey impoliteness.

### 1.3 Sarcasm and Social Cognition

Dews and Winner (1999: 1579) note that using sarcasm as an implicit criticism is intended to achieve various social cognitive functions such as “increasing the perceived politeness of the criticism, decreasing the perceived threat and aggressiveness of the criticism and creating a humorous atmosphere”. Dews and Winner argue that any deficit in understanding sarcastic utterances may reflect an impaired ability to understand social cues such as ‘intentions’, ‘beliefs’, and ‘emotions’. Accordingly, sarcastic utterances should be expounded in relation to

the situation which requires, from relevance theory perspective, the ‘recognition of the speaker's attitude’ and the ‘shared knowledge between the participants’.

### **1.4 Understanding Sarcasm Psycholinguistically**

Gibbs and Colston (2007: 174) argue that there is a lack of experimental research in psychology discussing what goes on cognitively in understanding sarcastic intentions. One of the related psycholinguistic theories is called the ‘Standard Pragmatic Model’. This theory puts forward the idea that “a hearer must first analyze the literal interpretation of an expression before deriving its non-literal, sarcastic meaning similar to the way indirect requests, idioms, and metaphorical utterances are interpreted”. According to this theory, a sentence such as "You are a fine friend" (intended to mean "You are a bad friend") could be explained in three steps: a person computes the literal meaning of the utterance independently of its context; decides whether or not the literal meaning is the speaker's intended meaning; if the literal interpretation is inappropriate, computes the non-literal meaning by assuming the opposite of the literal interpretation. (Gibbs and Colston, 2007: 175).

The other psycholinguistic theory which could grab what goes on psychologically in grasping sarcasm is the ‘Echoic Mention Theory’ (Sperber and Wilson, 1981: 33). Within this theory, there is no literal and non-literal interpretations. Rather, the speaker immediately echoes a previous situation. For example, if Jack tells his friend, "You are a big help," when his friend has not helped him, the sarcasm comes from the fact that Jack “has echoed some previously mentioned statement or belief, or perhaps some unspoken agreement” between him and his friend. That is, Jack’s friend might previously offered him a help. When Jack says "You are a big help," he is quoting this previous statement or verbalizing a mutually shared belief that his friend is supposed to help him as part of his job (Sperber and Wilson, 1981: 33).

### **1.5 The Role of Pragmatics in Understanding Sarcasm**

Pragmatics is essential in interpreting sarcastic intentions (i.e., what speakers mean by what they say). Gibbs and Colston (2007: 188) shed light on the significance of certain pragmatic information, which must be shared between interactants in interpreting sarcastic utterances.

For Gibbs and Colston (2007:196), a speaker who says to his friend with a sarcastic intention "You are a big help" assumes that his friend has in common “enough pragmatic knowledge concerning the contextual setting and the speaker's beliefs and attitudes to interpret the utterance”. So, the shared pragmatic information could cue the friend to compute the reverse of what is literally said to gain the sarcastic intention.

Gibbs and Colston (2007:196) state that interactants tend to use pragmatic information very early in understanding sarcastic intentions. This does not mean that prosody has no role in interpreting sarcasm. Yet, many sarcastic utterances do not have clearly stated literal meanings as in "You are the cream in my coffee" (which might mean "You are a burden to me").

## **2. The Sample of the Study**

The sample of the study consists of 50 fourth year students from the University of Babylon/ College of Education for Human Sciences/ Department of English during the academic year (2022-2023). The students are divided equally into males and females. All the students are native speakers of Arabic who are learning English as a second language.

## **3. The Test**

### **3.1 Test Objectives**

The present test was primarily organized to examine the extent to which Iraqi EFL students at the University of Babylon/ College of Education for Human Sciences/ Department of English recognize sarcastic utterances in English. The test is designed to measure their performance at the recognition level only.

### **3.2 Material Selection**

Most of the items of the test were minutely chosen from books of pragmatics as well as from the internet.

### **3.3 Test Design**

The test consists of two questions (See the Appendix). The questions are set to measure the students' performance at the recognition level only. The first question includes (5) items intended to measure the students' ability to select the utterances which express sarcasm out of other utterances expressing other speech acts. The students are given the situations in which the utterances occurred. The second question consists of (10) items intended to measure the students' performance in determining whether given underlined expressions in certain contexts are sarcastic or not. The contexts in which the expressions occurred are also obvious because without context the intended sarcastic meaning will not be correctly interpreted.

### **3.5 Test Virtues**

A good test should be valid, reliable, and practical (Harrison, 1993: 10). Practicality is achieved by conducting a test with economy and ease. Validity is "the degree to which a test measures what it claims, or purports, to be measuring" (Brown, 1996: 231). Reliability is "the extent to which the results can be considered consistent or stable" (Brown, 1996: 192).

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The test of the study, which appears in Appendix 1, is assumed to be practical, valid and reliable. It is practical because it is economic and easy to be solved; it is valid because it measures what it is supposed to measure, that is Iraqi EFL students' performance in recognizing sarcastic utterances; it is reliable because the results of the pre-test and posttest are stable and consistent (the same test has been conducted twice on the same students).

### 3.6 Results of the Test

Before conducting the test, the researcher explained to the students the concept of sarcasm, its main foci, and how it could be intentionally expressed through resorting to politeness to issue impolite intentions. Moreover, the researcher clarified how sarcasm differs from irony and related speech acts such as criticism. After conducting the test, the following results, which are summarized in two tables, are reached at:

Table (1): The Performance of the Subjects in Question (1)

Item	Number of correct answers		Percentage of correct answers		Number of incorrect answers		Percentage of incorrect answers	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
1	7	13	17.5%	32.5%	13	7	32.5%	17.5%
2	4	15	10%	37.5%	16	5	40%	12.5%
3	5	16	12.5%	40%	15	4	37.5%	10%
4	5	18	12.5%	45%	15	2	37.5%	5%
5	6	17	15%	42.5%	14	3	35%	7.5%
total	27	79	13.5%	39.5%	73	21	36.5%	10.5%

The first question measures the students' performance at the recognition level. It consists of five items each of which aims at measuring the students' ability in recognizing certain aspects of the topic under question. In this question the students are given various utterances under each item with different situations and are asked to tick the sarcastic one. Table (1) above shows that the numbers and percentages of correct answers by female students are more than that by male students. This result contradicts McDonald's view that "sarcasm is a male-dominated form of communication" (See McDonald, 1999). In fact, sarcasm is an implicit criticism; it is a polite way of being aggressive and showing negative feelings towards others. Males, generally are described as being direct in showing censure, while females are described as being indirect in reflecting censure for the sake of politeness which is insincere.

Table (2): The Performance of the Subject in Question (2)

Item	Number of correct answers		Percentage of correct answers		Number of incorrect answers		Percentage of incorrect answers	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
1	8	15	20%	37.5%	12	5	30%	12.5%
2	7	18	17.5%	45%	13	2	32.5%	5%
3	5	20	12.5%	50%	15	0	37.5%	0%
4	9	20	22.5%	50%	11	0	27.5%	0%
5	10	20	25%	50%	10	0	25%	0%
6	5	19	12.5%	47.5%	15	1	37.5%	2.5%
7	6	18	15%	45%	14	2	35%	5%
8	6	16	15%	40%	14	4	35%	10%
9	8	19	20%	47.5%	12	1	30%	2.5%
10	6	14	15%	35%	14	6	35%	15%
total	70	179	16%	45%	130	21	33%	6%

Question Two, also, aims at measuring the students' performance at the recognition level , but in a different way. The students are given certain underlined expressions within given contexts and are asked to determine whether these underlined expressions are sarcastic or not. The study of meaning in context is the main focus of pragmatics. Table (2) makes it obvious that the performance of the female students is astonishing. Most of them answered the items correctly. This proves that they are champs at understanding sarcasm. At the same time, the performance of male students is disappointing because most of them responded to the questions incorrectly. This means that they take words literally.

Accordingly, the results of the test as a whole show that male students, on one hand, face difficulties in recognizing sarcastic utterances and expressions. They should be trained well to understand and distinguish them and they should focus on the differences between sarcasm, irony, criticism and other similar speech acts. Female students, on the other hand, are champs at sarcasm because sarcasm is an important tool for communication among women. They are able to process the non-literal meaning of what is said on the contrary to males who take words literally what makes them fail in understanding sarcasm as females do. Females pretend to be polite even when they are criticizing through having recourse to sarcasm which is viewed as

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implicit criticism. Males, on the other side, tend to be aggressive, whether orally or physically. They also tend to be direct in their speech.

To find out how sarcasm is psychologically interpreted, the researcher explained the two psycholinguistic theories, 'The Standard Pragmatic Model' and 'The Echoic Mention Theory', to the students after conducting the test and asked them to state which theory they have made use of in responding to the given items of the test. The results show that most of the male students who have responded correctly have resorted to 'The Standard Pragmatic Model' because they first analyzed the literal interpretation of the expressions before deriving their non-literal sarcastic meaning. On the other hand, most female students have resorted to 'Echoic Mention Theory' because they right away echoed some previously mentioned statements or beliefs in the contexts where the sarcastic expressions appear.

### **4. Final Remarks**

Sarcasm is generally a polite form of criticism. In one hand or another, it involves an implicit aggression directed towards others who may not be physically present. It is accompanied by disapproval, contempt and scorn. Most Iraqi EFL male students at the University of Babylon/ College of Education for Human Sciences/ Department of English face difficulties in recognizing sarcastic utterances and expressions. Unlike most female students, most male students responded incorrectly to the given items of the test. This could be attributed to the fact that males always tend to be direct even in their aggressiveness that is why they face difficulties in interpreting polite utterances intended to convey impolite implications. They regard directness as a mark of closeness, solidarity, and informality. Moreover, their failure to understand sarcastic intentions may remark their impaired ability to understand social cues such as intentions and emotions, as . Female students, on the other hand, are skilled in recognizing sarcastic utterances and expressions. They generally tend to obviate the use of direct criticism and try to be indirect in showing their truculence. Moreover, in obviating the use of direct criticism, they tend to show themselves as being prestigious. As a result, females are more subtle in interpreting the non-literal intended meaning. As for the psycholinguistic theory which is more pertinent in recognizing sarcastic intention, it has been found that female students have a propensity to Echoic Mention Theory, while male students resort to the Standard Pragmatic Model in interpreting sarcastic intentions. Accordingly, there is a difference in the ways males and females use and interpret language.

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**Appendix 1**

**Q.1/** The following extracts are either sarcasms, criticisms, praise, thanking or mere assertions.

Determine which of the following extracts are sarcastic:

1.

- "You are a bad friend" said to a friend who refused to help.

- "You are a fine friend" said to a friend who offered help.

- "You are a fine friend" said to a friend who refused to help.

2.

- "You haven't helped" said to a friend who was merely looking while his friend was working

- "You are a big selfish" said to a friend who was merely looking while his friend was working

- "You're a big help" said to a friend who did not help.

- "Thanks for your help" said to a friend who has really offered a help.

3.

- "Your intelligence astounds me" said to a lazy student.

- "You are lazy and stupid" said to a lazy student.

- "Your stupidity astonished me" said to a lazy student.

4.

- "You have created something of value" said to someone who has done nothing valuable

- "You have created nothing of value" said to someone who has done nothing valuable.

5.

- "I appreciate that you assisted me preparing the dinner" said to a husband who helped his wife preparing the dinner.

- "I appreciate that you assisted me preparing the dinner" said to a husband who did not help his wife preparing the dinner.

**Q.2/** Determine whether the underlined expressions in each of the following contexts have a sarcastic target or not:

1. Harry was building an addition to his house. He was working real hard putting in the foundation. His younger brother was supposed to help. But he never showed up. At the end of a long day, Harry's brother finally appeared. Harry was a bit upset with him. Harry said to his brother, "you are a big help."

2. Greg was having trouble with calculus. He had a big exam coming up and he was in trouble. Fortunately, his roommate tutored him on some of the basics. When they were done, Greg felt he'd learned a lot. "Well," he said to his roommate, "You are a big help"
3. Gus just graduated from high school and he didn't know what to do. One day he saw an ad about the Navy. It said that the Navy was not just a job, but an adventure. So, Gus joined up. Soon he was aboard a ship doing all sorts of boring things. One day as he was peeling potatoes, he said to his buddy, "this sure is an exciting life."
4. Sam and John were long -time pals. But one time when Sam was away on business trip, John stole Sam's money. When Sam found out about it afterwards, he was upset. He confronted John and said to him "you are a terrible friend."
5. Kim hasn't performed well in a tennis game. His trainer says "you are the one who was coming over laden with prizes."
6. Billy and Joe were long-time pals. One time, Billy was in desperate need of money. His car had broken down and he needed 300\$ to fix it. So, he asked Joe for a loan. Joe said he could lend Billy the money. This made Billy happy and he said to Joe, "you 're a terrible help."
7. Mr. Smith, the boss, catches his employee, Suzan, taking a nap instead of working. He addresses her saying "Suzan, don't work too hard."
8. Mary was watching TV. She changed the channel; a politician was speaking. She addressed her mother saying "politicians never lie."
9. Jill and Jane are friends. One day they are invited at Jack's house. Jack is their mutual friend. Jill gossiped behind Jane's back. Jane addresses Jack while looking at Jill, "you can always depend on Jill."
10. Karl is a lazy student. He does not prepare his homework. He keeps talking during the lecture. One day, the teacher asks him a question, Karl smiles and says "I don't know." The teacher says "your intelligence astounds me."