

The Representation of Sarcasm in “How I Met Your Mother Season 2”: A Pragmatics Study

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Abstract

The aims of this study were to investigate the maxims flouted by the major characters, the realization of sarcasm based on the scene, and the reasons for sarcastic utterances found in “How I Met Your Mother Season 2” using a pragmatics study. The study was conducted using a textual research. The data of this study were taken from the transcripts of “How I Met Your Mother Season 2”. The data of this study were the sarcastic utterances that appeared in “How I Met Your Mother Season 2”. The data analysis was taken by coding and developing theme from the data based on the theory proposed by Braun and Clarke. The findings indicated that all four maxims were flouted by the major characters in “How I Met Your Mother Season 2”. In addition, there were several sarcastic utterances in which the characters flouted more than one maxim. Based on the research results, the most frequently flouted maxim was the maxim of quality. It could be seen that the situations in which sarcasm appeared in “How I Met Your Mother Season 2” mostly occurred at night. Then, it was also found that all purposes of sarcasm were present in the sarcastic utterances. There were even several sarcastic utterances which served more than one purpose. Sarcasm which served as an evaluation was most frequently used by the characters in order to hide the negative effects of their criticism and also to create the positive effects of their sarcastic praise towards their interlocutors.

Keywords: *How I Met Your Mother Season 2; maxim flouting; pragmatics; sarcasm.*

INTRODUCTION

Sarcasm can be found in various human activities, even in daily actions. It happens in conversations between peers, older people or younger people, and even between strangers. Mostly, sarcasm occurs intentionally by the speaker. Cutting (2002) mentions that sarcasm itself is a form of verbal irony that is not so pleasant and typically intended to hurt and to mock the interlocutor. Haiman (1998) emphasizes that one way between the other ways to distinguish irony and sarcasm is that irony can occur without the speakers involved in the conversation having the intention to. For instance, it can be seen in Jonathan Demme’s film *Married to the Mob*, the heroine says to an FBI agent “You’re no different from the mob!” Then he responds

“Oh, there’s a big difference. The mob is run by murdering, thieving, lying, cheating psychopaths. We work for the President of the United States of America.” Here, the FBI agent character uttered it sincerely, without any sarcastic intention (Haiman, 1998). On the other hand, if somebody wants to be sarcastic, though, he should intentionally assert his sarcastic utterances. Sarcastic utterances cannot be produced without the existence of any intention (Haiman, 1998).

By taking this phenomenon into a study, the researcher believes studying sarcasm is essential for both English language learners and lecturers. Rillof et al. (2013) stressed that a failure to understand the implied meaning can mislead people into misinterpreting the utterance. By understanding how sarcasm works, people can use it when expressing negative sentiments to minimize nasty effects. Therefore, it leads the English language learners to build a successful verbal exchange and interact well with each other in the classroom. Furthermore, they will be more encouraged to conduct research on sarcasm by using a variety of appropriate approaches. Indeed, this may also indicates one of the successes of their lecturers in teaching sarcasm in the classroom.

Sarcasm usually occurs in everyday conversation (Dews & Winner, 1995). For instance, Tepperman et al. (2006) note that certain words, such as the phrase “yeah right” in conversations can also be cues to sarcasm. Moreover, sarcasm can also be found in the tweets, reviews, and TV series dialogues (Tepperman et al., 2006). There are a lot of sarcasms that occurring in conversation among the characters in the TV series and other types of TV shows. The researcher finally decided to choose one of the famous American TV series of its era, *How I Met Your Mother* because sarcasm is widely used in conversation among the characters. *How I Met Your Mother* is an American TV series that carries comedy as its genre, so it is also known as an American situation comedy (sitcom hereafter). This sitcom centred on Ted Mosby’s life as the main character and his group of four friends (Marshall Erikssen, Barney Stinson, Robin Scherbatsky, and Lily Aldrin) living in Manhattan. The plot was built by Ted telling his children how he met the children’s mother using a continuous flashback for most of the episodes.

Based on the explanation above, the aims of this current study are to investigate the maxims flouted by the major characters, the realization of sarcasm based on the scene, and the reasons for sarcastic utterances found in “How I Met Your Mother Season 2” using a pragmatics study.

Pragmatics

Yule (1996) emphasizes that the main focus of pragmatics is anything that relates to the study of speaker meaning as the listener’s communication and interpretation. There are some points of view of pragmatics; pragmatics is the study of the utterances as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a hearer, pragmatics is the study of contextual meaning since a

consideration of how a speaker organizes what he wants to say is required, pragmatics is the study of the expression of a relative distance, which means as a relationship between linguistics forms and the users of those forms, and pragmatics is also the study of how the hearer gets the implicit meaning of the speaker's utterances (Yule, 1996). Since sarcasm is one of the figurative languages, sarcasm itself cannot be understood as easily as literal language because it has the implicit meaning. Hence in this research, the use of pragmatics is required.

In his paper *Logic and Conversation*, Grice (1975) introduces a term that is widely used in pragmatic studies called implicature. He mentions that implicature is component of speaker meaning that constitutes an aspect of what is meant in a speaker's utterance without being part of what is said. Characteristically the message delivered by the speaker goes beyond what is stated. The hearer must infer the underlying meaning conveyed by the speaker in order to interpret what the speaker means in his utterance. In addition, Grice (1975) also emphasizes "there is a general assumption underpinning all utterance interpretations". It means that those interpretations are influenced by a cooperative principle in which a speaker and hearer are connected into the same goals.

1. The Cooperative Principle

1.1 Flouting the Maxims

The cooperative principles put forward by Grice (1975) cover four conversational maxims which should be followed to create successful and efficient verbal exchanges, namely the maxim of; quantity, quality, relation, manner. These maxims can be flouted or violated if the speakers appear not to follow the maxims but expect the hearers to appreciate the implied meaning (Cutting, 2002). A speaker who flouts a maxim is therefore being cooperative and observing the Cooperative Principle at the point of what is implied. Hence, there are four kinds of flouted maxims, namely flouting the maxim of; quantity, quality, relation, manner (Grice, 1975).

a. Flouting the Maxim of Quantity

The maxim of quantity is flouted when a speaker intentionally offers too little or too much information than it is needed (Grice, 1975). If the speaker does not intentionally provide adequate information, he will hide particular parts of the information he offers. Therefore, from the limited information he provides, he wants his hearer to infer the full meaning. Nonetheless, if the speaker intentionally offers too much information, the speaker could risk getting his hearer bored.

b. Flouting the Maxim of Quality

If a speaker says something that lacks sufficient evidence, he flouts the maxim of quality (Grice, 1975). If he is not sure what he is saying, he should send a signal in his utterance

that he has no reasonable basis. It will give hearers a feeling of ease when they want to draw a meaning behind his utterance. Grice (1975) says that by using irony, metaphor, meiosis, and hyperbole are some ways to flout the maxim of quality. Cutting (2002) also adds that euphemism, banter, and sarcasm can be used to flout the maxim of quality. Furthermore, there is a figurative device, namely the rhetorical question which flouts the maxim of quality apart from those previously mentioned (Pop, 2010). These figurative languages flout the maxim of quality since their meanings cannot be taken at face value. The hearers are supposed to regain the conversation implicatures by discovering the truth in the utterances.

c. Flouting the Maxim of Relation

When a speaker makes his utterance irrelevant to the preceding co-text, then the maxim of relation is flouted (Grice, 1975). The speaker tends to be indirectly cooperative in getting involved in communication. He wants his hearers to be able to connect what he is saying and the preceding text.

d. Flouting the Maxim of Manner

Four standards will flout the maxim of manner: obscurity, ambiguity, failure to be brief or succinct, and failure to be orderly (Grice, 1975). A speaker must convey his message briefly, clearly, and orderly.

By flouting these conversational maxims proposed by Grice (1975), the speaker will produce sarcastic utterances. Therefore, Grice's (1975) theory on the Cooperative Principle is suitable to answer the first and the second research question in this study.

2. Sarcasm

Sarcasm is an overtly aggressive type of irony, with more apparent markers and a clear target (Attardo, 1999). In Attardo's (2002) article entitled *Humor and Irony in Interaction: From Mode Adoption to Failure of Detection*, he emphasizes that each of sarcastic utterances has its purpose. Therefore, Attardo formulates sarcastic utterances into specific purposes when they are used in conversation. The six purposes of sarcasm are as follows:

a. Group Affiliation

A group can be affiliated by sarcasm. In such case, sarcasm works in two ways. Firstly, it spotlights a group's boundary by stating the group's standards or values. Second, it expresses an understatement about the group's outsider, which does not reach the group's standards.

b. Sophistication

Sarcasm is a sophisticated and indirect speech act since implicit meanings in sarcastic utterances should be understood by a hearer. Sarcasm is a form of verbal irony functions as a sophistication used to represent the ability of someone to "play" with language to create humour. A speaker utters one thing, but he means saying another thing. Also, Dews et al. (1995)

add that distinction in utterances between explicit and implicit meanings may create humour. It makes a clear link between sarcasm and humour. In fact, sarcastic utterances are considered more often to be funny than non-sarcastic utterances (Kreuz et al., 1991).

c. Persuasive Aspect

To persuade someone to do something, the speaker can use sarcasm as a persuasive aspect. There are three aspects of sarcasm that can be persuasively used. First of all, sarcasm is an influential rhetorical tool because it makes the truth of an implied meaning clear enough (Carston, 1981). Nonetheless, in order to understand the intention of the speaker, a common ground must be shared between a speaker and an addressee. Second, sarcasm itself is memorable (Kreuz et al., 1991). Thus, the speaker has successful communication. Third, sarcasm functions as an informative utterance and a strategy of politeness (Giora, 1995). Therefore, to achieve successful communication, a speaker and a hearer need to have shared knowledge.

d. Evaluation

Sarcasm may hide the negative effects of the criticism that may come from it. Simultaneously, sarcasm may mute the positive effects of the praise it may convey. How sarcasm mutes those two aspects becomes the point of using sarcasm (Attardo, 2002). When the speaker uses sarcasm as an evaluation, he generally does not want to show the negative thing in judging someone, or he does not want to show the positive way in complimenting.

e. Tool for Politeness

Sarcasm can be used to be polite as a tool for politeness. Indirect speech acts, it is considered less detrimental than straight-out aggression. Dews and Winner (1995) note that using sarcasm mitigates the bad effects of meanings intended. Barbe (1995) also emphasizes that a speaker can turn disagreements or conflicts aside by using sarcasm for not presenting his utterances in an overtly offensive manner. The harmful effects of negative sentiments in the speaker's utterance are mitigated by politeness. Therefore, the use of sarcasm presents as a face-saving strategy.

f. Retractability

Sarcasm as retractability can be used to say something in such a way that someone can avoid the responsibility of being wrong. It means that a speaker will avoid any sanctions that may follow from stating directly what he thinks. In this case, this aspect helps the speaker to have an uncompromising stance about his utterances.

Since Attardo (2002) lists the purposes of sarcasm in his paper, this theory is the most suitable for answering the third research question in this current study.

3. Situation Comedy (Sitcom)

Sitcoms have a series of weekly shows which are based on an initial idea of a situation and characters with comedy potential. Such characters basically remain the same, rather than changing as they would in the comedy-drama. The plots are most often found at home or work in modest surroundings, but that is not a precondition. It is called situational comedy, and that is because in every sitcom episode the characters continue to treat the same question. The humour in a sitcom comes from playing around in this situation with the comedic possibilities of those particular character types who communicate with each other and may not include lines or gags that are humorous in isolation (Ross, 1998).

Compared to previous studies which were used by the researcher as references in conducting this current study, it could be seen that none of those previous studies used Attardo's (2002) theory on sarcasm, which was used by the researcher in answering the second research question of the study in order to describe the reasons for sarcastic utterances which occur among the characters in the twenty-two episodes of season 2. Those previous studies only used Grice's (1975) theory on Cooperative Principle, which was also used by the researcher in this current study to analyze the flouted maxims and to explain the realization of sarcasm based on the scene in the sitcom. For instance, one of the previous studies by Ernest Jakaza (2013) entitled *Gricean Implicature and election predictions: A case of the Zimbabwean 2008 election campaign* only found that two of the four maxims were mostly flouted, namely maxim of quality and maxim of quantity. Here, the researcher did not use Attardo's (2002) theory on sarcasm.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher followed the method of textual research used by Yin and Miike (2008). The data of this research were the sarcastic utterances as spoken data which occurred among the characters in the twenty-two episodes of *How I Met Your Mother Season 2*. The researcher watched the sitcom from a laptop and downloaded the transcripts of *How I Met Your Mother Season 2* from www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk as the source of data in this study. Every utterance was checked by the researcher to assure that the transcripts were the same as what the characters said in those episodes. Furthermore, the researcher used thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2006) in analyzing the data. There were two stages in this section, namely data coding and theme developing. Firstly, the researcher selected the sarcastic utterances as spoken data from the transcripts. Then, the researcher created codes of each sarcastic utterance to make it more conceptual. The sarcastic utterances that had been coded were categorized according to which maxims the characters flouted and its purposes as the theme of the data in this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the findings of the first research question, there were 47 utterances in which maxim floutings occurred. There were several utterances in which only one maxim were flouted, but there were also some other utterances in which more than one maxim were flouted. The findings of this research on the flouted maxims are provided in the table below.

Table 4.1 The Sample of the Sarcastic Utterances as Spoken Data

Sarcastic Utterance	Code	Theme
Oh, so was my grandfather, but that doesn't make him interesting. (E15/Sc4)	Conveyed too much information more than the interlocutor needed.	Maxim of Quantity (MQn)
That's very gallant. (E12/Sc6)	Imparted a positive message but implied a negative sentiment in order to mock the interlocutor.	Maxim of Quality (MQl)
Oh, and you biting your lower lip, shyly looking away and thrusting your chest out is natural? (E7/Sc2)	Provided an irrelevant response to the interlocutor's question.	Maxim of Relation (MR)
Yeah, glad we dodged that bullet. (E8/Sc7)	Presented an ambiguous response to express the dislike towards the interlocutor's statement.	Maxim of Manner (MM)

Table 4.2 The Percentage of Maxims Flouted by the Major Characters in Their Sarcastic Utterances in "How I Met Your Mother Season 2"

Flouted Maxim	Quantity	Percentage (%)
Maxim of Quantity (MQn)	11	23.40%
Maxim of Quality (MQl)	24	51.06%
Maxim of Relation (MR)	3	6.38%
Maxim of Manner (MM)	4	8.51%
Maxim of Quality and Relation	1	2.13%
Maxim of Quantity and Quality	3	6.38%
Maxim of Quantity, Quality, and Manner	1	2.13%
Total	47	100%

The table above shows that the most flouted maxim in this sitcom is the maxim of quality. Based on the data, it could be concluded that most speakers were not sincere in

delivering their sarcastic utterances. The characters mostly used rhetorical questions and irony when they flouted the maxim of quality. They conveyed sarcastic implied meanings in the form of questions to hide their hurtful messages. Then, they were being ironic in order to hide their harmful implicit meanings in an insincere way. Therefore the interlocutors were expected to be able to imply the underlying meanings. Even though the maxim of quality was the most flouted maxim, the results showed that every maxim was also flouted in the sarcastic utterances by the characters in the sitcom. The maxims which were flouted at the same time were the maxims of quality & relation; quantity & quality; and quantity, quality, & manner. Juez (1995) states that this phenomenon appears in sarcastic utterances, for sarcasm is an indirect speech act which does not only flout one maxim but also more than one maxim at the same time. Hence, the hearers in the sitcom were also supposed not to take the utterances at their face values.

Furthermore, the researcher found that the situations in which sarcasm appeared in the sitcom mostly occurred at night which also answered the second research question of this study on the realization of sarcasm. This was because most of the time, the characters in the sitcom met at night since they had to work during the day. The trigger for the sarcasm in this sitcom was also the condition of the characters that were tired enough from all day long activity, which made it easier for them to be sarcastic in responding to one another.

As the findings of the third research question, the researcher found that there were 47 sarcastic utterances in the sitcom containing all of the six purposes. The detailed results are provided in the table below.

Table 4.3 The Sample of the Sarcastic Utterances as Spoken Data

Sarcastic Utterance	Code	Theme
You even made Tom's dad cry. Might have been doing that because he's a Republican. (E10/Sc8)	Expressed an understatement about the group's outsider, which did not reach the group's standards.	Group Affiliation (GA)
It's true, my building is infested with dragons. (E18/Sc2)	Conveyed the sophisticated words to create a humorous effect in mocking the interlocutor's statement.	Sophistication (S)
Why don't we just bet air?! (E14/Sc4)	Conveyed persuasion towards the interlocutor to do something.	Persuasive Aspect (PA)
You're able to cross the threshold of a church? (E3/Sc7)	Expressed a rhetorical question to mute the negative effect of sarcastic criticism.	Evaluation (E)

Oh. For his date. Good for him. Hope he has a good time tonight. (E7/Sc9)	Implied a positive sentiment to save the speaker and hearer's face by using politeness.	Tool for Politeness (TP)
I'm about to graduate and take some sellout corporate law job, and without that Fiero, I'm just another guy in a suit. (E17/Sc4)	Delivered a mockery vaguely to avoid any sanction from the speaker's utterance.	Retractability (R)

Table 4.4 The Percentage of the Purposes of Sarcastic Utterances Found in “How I Met Your Mother Season 2”

Purposes of Sarcasm	Quantity	Percentage (%)
Group Affiliation (GA)	3	6.38%
Sophistication (S)	6	12.76%
Persuasive Aspect (PA)	9	19.15%
Evaluation (E)	17	36.17%
Tool for Politeness (TP)	1	2.13%
Retractability (R)	1	2.13%
Sophistication and Persuasive Aspect	1	2.13%
Sophistication and Evaluation	2	4.25%
Evaluation and Tool for Politeness	6	12.76%
Evaluation, Tool for Politeness, and Group Affiliation	1	2.13%
Total	47	100%

The table above concludes that sarcasm as an evaluation appears the most frequently in the sitcom as the purposes of sarcastic utterances. Then, the second one is sarcasm as a persuasive aspect. Firstly, the characters used sarcasm as an evaluation in order to reduce the negative effects of criticism. They did not criticize each other straightforwardly; they just implied it through their sarcastic utterances. Moreover, the speakers mostly hid the surface meaning when saying something in order to hide the negative effects of the criticism that may come from it. Simultaneously, sarcasm may mute the positive effects of the praise it may convey. When the speaker uses sarcasm as an evaluation, he generally does not want to show the negative thing in judging someone (Attardo, 2002). Secondly, the characters used sarcasm to make their interlocutors do something. Since sarcasm itself was an influential rhetorical tool, memorable, informative, and more polite, they used it to influence each other. Aside from the

presence of sarcasm which only served one purpose, there were also sarcastic utterances which served more than one purpose by the characters in the sitcom.

CONCLUSION

The researcher found that one of the most frequently flouted maxims of the four conversational maxims appeared in *How I Met Your Mother Season 2* was the maxim of quality. Here, the characters expressed their negative or harmful sentiments through positive or less detrimental utterances to create sarcastic utterances in a talk exchange. Therefore, their interlocutors' mental agility is required to reveal the covert meanings of their utterances.

Furthermore, the researcher also obtained that there were six purposes of sarcasm found in this current study. Sarcasm which served as an evaluation was most frequently used by the characters in the sitcom in order to hide the negative effects of their criticism and also to create the positive effects of their sarcastic praise towards their interlocutors. It showed that the speakers generally do not want to show the negative thing in judging someone and criticizing each other directly. In consequence, to achieve successful communication, a speaker and a hearer need to have shared knowledge.

In conclusion, it could be seen that the situations in which sarcasm appeared in the sitcom mostly occurred at night. This was because most of the time, the characters in the sitcom met at night since they had to work during the day. The trigger for the sarcasm in this sitcom was also the condition of the characters that were tired enough from all day long activity, which made it easier for them to be sarcastic in responding to one another. However, this also indicated that the characters in the TV series, especially in the sitcom genre, mostly delivered their utterances in a very creative way towards their interlocutors. In fact, they were able to deliver sarcastic utterances which involved their verbal dexterity in order to build a successful verbal exchange.

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