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Effects of Balanced Use of Sarcasm in a Relationship

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Abstract

        We often think of sarcasm as a way to be mean—and it usually is. For instance, sarcasm has

been shown to be victimizing, offensive, and anger-provoking to its targets (Toplak & Katz 2000, Bowes

& Katz 2011). However, the reported valence (or emotional value) of sarcasm improves dramatically

when two members of a conversation share some common ground (knowledge, perceptions &

experiences), becoming more appropriate (Kreuz, Kassler, Coppenrath, & Allen 1999), understandable

(Pexman & Zvaigzne 2004), and memorable (Gibbs 1986). To test the hypothesis that the balanced use

of sarcasm can similarly improve its valence, we examined differences in pragmatic uses and

impressions of sarcastic dialogues, with either a balanced (two sarcastic speakers) or unbalanced (one

sarcastic speaker) use of sarcasm. We conclude that a history of sarcasm in a relationship does not

reduce its negative valence.

If a friend sarcastically compliments your looks ('you look *great*!'), are you offended? Or is it

funny? And would your friend feel the same way? While irony is simply language meant to be

understood differently than what is literally said, sarcasm is a specific form of irony meant to be sharp,

biting and pain-inflicting. For example, subjects rate passages as more sarcastic (vs. ironic) when the

amount of ridicule is increased (Lee & Katz 1998). The findings of research on sarcasm are therefore not

surprising: sarcasm is seen as offensive, victimizing, and even anger-provoking (Bowes & Katz 2011).

Interestingly though, not everyone reacts to sarcasm in the same way. Toplak & Katz (2000)

manipulated the conversational role in scenarios where a speaker used a sarcastic remark against a

listener, asking participants to rate a variety of functions from the listener, speaker, or incidental

overhearer's point-of-view. They found that while listeners (or victims) of sarcastic barbs were likely to

see them as critical, the speaker was more likely to see them as positive and humorous. In a similar

study, Leggitt & Gibbs (2000) found that participants sympathizing with the speaker's role were

unaffected by the negative emotions inflicted on listeners with sarcastic comments, and were less

empathetic of the listener's emotions when sarcasm was used as opposed to other forms of irony (e.g.,

rhetorical questions and understatement). Sarcasm is also understood differently depending on

regional culture. Participants in Northern states (upstate New York) are more likely to complete

scenarios with sarcastic lines than those from Southern states (Tennessee), with Northern participants

interpreting sarcasm more in terms of humor than those from the South (Dress, Kreuz, Link & Caucci

2008).

Given the differences in understanding sarcasm, it seems reasonable that it can be used

positively in some contexts. As just mentioned, sarcasm can be viewed as humorous in certain regions

(Dress et al. 2008). After the induction of angry moods, hostile humor—of which sarcasm is an

example— has been found to induce better moods (ratings of forgiving-kindly and refreshed-pleased)

(Berkowitz 1970) and a cathartic purge of hostility and anxiety (Dworkin & Efran 1967) in participants as compared to nonhostile humor. Furthermore, sarcasm has also been found to stimulate creative thinking and the solving of complex problems in real-life situations (Miron-Spektor, Efrat-Treister, Rafaeli & Schwarz-Cohen 2011).

Yet despite its possible positive implications, the counterfactual nature of sarcasm introduces a problem with decoding such that it is often misunderstood. For instance, when someone sarcastically says 'you look *great*', you might decode it in one of two ways: either literally—that is, the speaker thinks you look good—or ironically—that is, the speaker thinks you look bad. In light of this problem of interpretation, there are a number of ways that a speaker can assure that sarcasm is properly understood: through verbal cues, nonverbal cues, contextual cues, and, most relevant to this study, through sharing common ground with the listener.

Without any previous knowledge, sarcasm can often be differentiated from literal language simply through verbal and nonverbal communication. For instance, analysis of sarcastic utterances by naïve speakers indicate that they reliably use acoustic cues or voice inflections to distinguish sarcasm from neutrality and sincerity, such as increased vocal range and pitch, and lengthening of syllables (e.g., Cheang & Pell 2008 and Anolli, Ciceri, & Infantino 2000). Nonverbal cues such as winking and nodding can also assist in the communication of sarcasm. An analysis of sarcastic expressions on TV programs found that speakers altered their facial expressions by rolling or widening their eyes, smirking, and especially by flattening their facial expression to communicate sarcasm (Attardo, Eisterhold, Hay & Poggi 2003). Physical co-presence, in which the speaker refers to perceptual knowledge shared with the listener, is also assumed to play a large role in understanding of sarcasm (Clark & Marshall 1981). For example, 'you look *great*!' might be clearly understood as sarcastic if you arrived to a formal dinner in muddy sweatpants: both you and the speaker know that you *don't* look great.

Sarcasm appears to be *especially* accepted and understood when the speaker and listener have some rapport—that is, shared experiences, perceptions and knowledge—referred to as 'common ground' (Clark & Marshall 1981) Common ground, in turn, has been suggested as a vital component of understanding sarcasm: imagine a stranger who, in casual conversation, adamantly voices their opinions on the potential horrors of marijuana legalization. With no background knowledge, you might reasonably expect their stance to be literal. However, if a friend who ran of popular pro-legalization campaign voiced the same opinion, the incongruence between his statement and your knowledge of his beliefs might be enough for you to recognize his sarcasm. Research has supported this conclusion. Pexman & Zvaigzne (2004) presented participants with situations involving two characters with a target statement (ironic or literal) by one character at the end of each. They manipulated familiarity of the relationship such that there was either solidarity or no solidarity, and found that sarcastic comments made in solidarity relationships, or those with common ground, were more humorous, more understandable, and more polite. Similarly, Gibbs (1986) presented subjects with stories ending with a sarcastic remark which either echoed (that is, reference) or didn't echo previous shared information. They found that sarcastic comments which echoed shared information—that is, common ground between participants—were more memorable. Finally, a study with a similar setup in which participants read scenarios ending in a single ironic or nonironic phrase found that common ground makes sarcasm more appropriate (Kreuz, Kassler, Coppenrath, & Allen, 1999).

However, no study to date has investigated these known effects of common ground between listener and speaker in the context of a dyadic relationship with a balanced use of sarcasm. It could be that sarcasm is more appropriate and polite (for example) in a relationship with common ground simply because of previous uses of sarcasm.

Thus, the current study seeks to discover whether the valence of the sarcastic speaker's mood and intentions improves within a balanced sarcastic relationship. To answer this question, the study builds on previous work in three ways.   First, it investigates a possible situation in which common ground can reduce sarcasm's negative impressions (i.e, aggressiveness & criticalness) in participant observers while improving the perceived affect of sarcastic speakers (i.e, anger & annoyance). Secondly, it uses realistic multi-actor exchanges as opposed to single-actor statements focused on in previous research. While most studies have presented participants with a situational vignette ending with a single sarcastic line, Bowes & Katz (2011) recently created a more realistic vignette with a two-actor dialogue, where questions were asked about specific actors in the dialogue. We use this schema to improve on ecological validity. Lastly, this study is the first to feature a *balanced* use of sarcasm within a relationship, rather than a single aggressive actor. That is, both actors in the dialogues use sarcastic language towards each other at different times.

To this end, vignettes were created based on the material of Bowes & Katz (2011) in which both actors use sarcastic language in aggressive dialogues. In the first part of each dialogue—taken directly from Bowes' & Katz's material— the first actor brings a complaint to the second, and the second responds with sarcastic language. In a control condition, the second actor responds with aggressive but literal language. In the second part, created specifically for this study, the first actor continues the argument using sarcastic language, while the second actor responds without sarcastic language. This second actor, in the second part of the dialogue, is the actor of interest. He is the actor who is speaking sarcastically with a relational history of sarcasm behind him—or, in the control condition, no such relational history (see Appendix A for an example experimental dialogue). In response to the vignettes, participants were instructed to answer questions about the critical actor's intentions (to be humorous and hurtful), pragmatics (verbal aggressiveness and criticalness), and feelings (annoyance, anger and offense) in the second part of each dialogue (see Appendix B for example questions). It was

hypothesized that participants in the experimental condition (where a history of sarcasm was present)

would rate this key 2nd actor as less aggressive and critical, and less annoyed, angry and offended than

those participants in the control condition.

Each dialogue had twenty lines total, with ten in the first part and ten in the second. Each actor

therefore had ten lines, five in the first and five in the second part. The dialogues had comparable

numbers of words, with dialogues in the experimental condition averaging 161.25 words apiece, and

dialogues in the control condition averaging 159.5 words apiece.

We hope that this work will contribute to an improved perception of the use of sarcasm by

illustrating a case where its use is more appropriate less negative than conventional studies show. By

painting sarcasm in a universally negative light, popular perceptions may at times rule out its beneficial

use.

Method

Participants.

Participants were 50 undergraduate students from introductory psychology classes (31 F, 19 M)

whose average age was 20 years old (*SD*= 1.71). Most were freshmen (n=36), followed by sophomores

(n=8) and upperclassmen (n=6). Participants were given class credit for their participation.

Materials.

Vignettes consisted of conversational dialogues between two actors, adapted from the material of

Bowes & Katz (2011). As in their material, dialogues were limited to male actors to control for the

presence of known gender effects, such that sarcasm amongst males is more acceptable and expected

(Colston & Lee 2004). Each dialogue was split into two parts, featuring the same actors in both (for

reference, actors A and B). In part 1, actor A either uses sarcastic language (experimental condition; i.e.,

'Listen Sherlock, I didn't take your precious Mp3 Player') or literal language (control condition, i.e.,

'Listen idiot, I didn't take your stupid Mp3 Player') towards actor B. In part 2, actor B uses sarcastic

language towards actor A (i.e., 'I found my MP3 player in your bag; thanks so much for lying to me').

Thus, these vignettes portray a realistic conversation between two people, with the roles of sarcastic

speaker switching between part 1 and 2. A total of 16 vignettes, 8 in each condition, will be used. The

topics of the dialogues are varied to account for a wide range of possible scenarios, with actor A initially

aggressive toward actor B due to the theft of an mp3 player, cheating on a test, spreading a rumor

about him, failing to invite him to a party, driving home drunk, participation in a group project, joking

derisively about what he's wearing, and picking on his brother. See Appendix A for an example of an

experimental dialogue. In order to heighten the impression of a longitudinal relationship, the words

'some time later…' were put between parts 1 and 2 of the dialogues. Participants were also told, both

verbally and in the written instructions, that part 1 occurred some time after part 2.

Reactions to these sarcastic dialogues were assessed through questions developed by

other researchers of irony and sarcasm. These questions were presented on the page opposite the

vignettes, and asked participants to assess sarcasm of specific actors, appropriateness (Kreuz, Kassler,

Coppenrath, Allen & McLain, 1999), speaker intentions (intention to be humorous and to hurt) and state

of mind (aggressiveness, criticalness, anger, etc.) (Topak & Katz, 2000). Each question was presented on

a 7-point likert scale for ease of comparisons, and were customized to specific dialogues to ensure

consistency (i.e., 'How appropriate was <u>MARK</u> in part 2 of the dialogue?'). In order to heighten the

perception of a close relationship, these questions did not ask participants to sympathize with a specific

conversational role. Toplak & Katz (2000) found that 'overhearers', or those not directly participating in

a dialogue, are likely to see negative ironic comments as indicating a close relationship. See Appendix B

for an example of the questionnaire.

Procedure.

The experiment took place in a single-session visit in which participants completed the study at

their own pace (mean completion time: 21.6 minutes). Participants were tested as a group, with

anywhere from 4 to 14 participants participating in any given session. Participants read and signed a

consent form which detailed risks, benefits, and confidentiality, and presented the purpose of the study

as one relating to argumentative language. After signing the consent form, participants were given

packets containing 1) a cover sheet with instructions and prompts for demographic information (gender,

class standing, and age), 2) a random condition of all 8 vignettes, and 3) a facing question page

containing dependent variable measures. After the participants are finished they were given a written

debriefing form which addressed the consent form's deceit and detailed the nature of the study.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Mean survey scores across the eight dialogues were compared using an independent samples t-

test . Participants in the experimental condition (balanced use of sarcasm) rated the sarcastic speaker of

the dialogues as less offended (i.e., 'Was Andy offended?') (M=4.53, SD=1.92) than participants in the

control condition (no history of sarcasm) (M=4.94, SD=1.94), t(398)=-2.10, p<.05. However, no

significant differences were found between the two groups on ratings of the aggressive speaker's

appropriateness, humorous intention, verbal aggressiveness, criticalness, annoyance, or anger. Overall,

participants in the experimental condition rated the aggressive speaker in Part 1 of the dialogues as

much more sarcastic (M=6.30, SD=1.10) than participants in the control condition (M=3.57, SD=2.12),

t(300)=16.15, p<.001, indicating that participants appropriately picked up on the experimental

manipulation.

Discussion

Subjects were presented with one of two different sets of dialogues: one in which the actor of interest used aggressively sarcastic language toward another who had used it earlier (experimental), and one in which the actor used aggressively sarcastic language toward someone who had used aggressive but literal language before (control).

We expected that participants in the experimental condition would perceive the sarcastic actor as less offended than participants in the control condition, and this is what we found. The decreased level of perceived offense could have been due to the fact that the sarcastic actor in the control condition—where sarcasm hadn't been used before in the relationship— displayed a novel form of aggressive language compared with the first part of the dialogue. While the aggressive actor's exchanges allowed for negative emotions and intentions to be perceived in the experimental condition, the previous use of sarcasm may have normalized its use as an aggressive linguistic tool. However, in light of the lack of other findings, we hesitate to interpret this effect in support of our hypothesis.

We further expected a decreased level of perceived anger, annoyance, criticalness and verbal aggressiveness, and an increased level of appropriateness and humorous intention in ratings of the aggressive actor in the experimental condition. However, our findings show that participants didn't differentiate between most of these factors in rating the aggressively sarcastic actor. This leads us to conclude that a history of sarcasm in a relationship doesn't mute its negative effects—despite its occurrence in a relationship, sarcasm is consistently seen as aggressive and critical, with speakers seeming to display negative affect like annoyance and anger. This finding could suggest several things. The improved ecological validity of this study, in comparison to previous studies on common-ground effects of sarcasm, could have resulted in a more realistic impression of sarcasm as consistently negative despite its balanced use. Therefore, we suggest that future studies investigate the effects of common ground across a number of measures, including realistic conversational dialogues and the more

conventional scenarios ending with a single sarcastic line. This could provide valuable information on how to compare our results to classical studies of sarcasm.

Alternately, our assumption that the balanced use of sarcasm constitutes common ground, so that sarcasm in normalized after being used by one actor, may be incorrect. This is suggested by the fact that no differences were found in ratings of appropriateness between the two conditions. However, this provides an interesting finding in light of our results: sarcasm doesn't seem to become more appropriate after a single occurrence in a relationship. It might be interesting for future studies to employ longitudinal methods to try to discover any point in a relationship at which sarcasm *does* become more appropriate to use.

Our results experimentally rule out an important factor in an established literature on irony and sarcasm. While actors' common ground makes sarcasm more appropriate and understandable, it doesn't take the edge off of sarcasm used aggressively toward another actor in a dialogue.

Appendix A: Sample Dialogue

PART 1

TOM: You cheated off of my test.

> ADAM: Yea, I would risk getting caught by cheating off of you because you are such a genius.

TOM: Just admit that you did it. I saw you

> ADAM: You're right, I love cheating off of idiots.

TOM: I don't want to get in trouble.

> ADAM: I am so sorry.

TOM: I can't fail this class and I don't want you to do it again.

> ADAM: You're right, I'm always cheating.

TOM: If I get in trouble, you're going down with me.

> ADAM: What a scary threat.

PART 2 (Some time later…)

TOM: Hey, I heard you got a D- on the test. Great job, Einstein.

> ADAM: I thought I'd do better.

TOM: Oh, really?

> ADAM: Yeah, I studied pretty hard.

TOM: Yea right.

> ADAM: Look, it was a fluke. I'm a smart guy.

TOM: I probably should have copied *your* answers.

> ADAM: I'm going to leave if you keep it up.

TOM: Oh no! I wanted to talk to you all day.

> ADAM: Alright, I'm leaving.

Appendix B: Sample Questions

<u>Questions: Dialogue 2</u>

How ironic or sarcastic was <u>ADAM</u> in **PART 1** the dialogue?

Not sarcastic ← 1   2   3   4   5   6   7 → Very sarcastic

How ironic or sarcastic was <u>TOM</u> in **PART 2** of the dialogue?

Not sarcastic ← 1   2   3   4   5   6   7 → Very sarcastic

How appropriate was <u>TOM</u> in **PART 2** of the dialogue?

Not appropriate ← 1   2   3   4   5   6   7 → Very appropriate

In **PART 2**, was <u>TOM's</u> intention to be humorous?

No humorous intention ← 1   2   3   4   5   6   7 → Humorous intention

In **PART 2**, was <u>TOM's</u> intention to hurt?

No hurtful intention ← 1   2   3   4   5   6   7 → Hurtful intention

In **PART 2**, was <u>TOM</u> verbally aggressive?

Not verbally aggressive ← 1   2   3   4   5   6   7 → Verbally aggressive

In **PART 2**, was <u>TOM</u> being critical?

Not critical ← 1   2   3   4   5   6   7 → Critical

In **PART 2**, was <u>TOM</u> annoyed?

Not annoyed ← 1   2   3   4   5   6   7 → Annoyed

In **PART 2**, was <u>TOM</u> angry?

Not angry ← 1   2   3   4   5   6   7 → Angry

In **PART 2**, was <u>TOM</u> offended?

Not offended ← 1   2   3   4   5   6   7 → Offended

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