

LINGUISTICS MAJORS, DRINK? NO WAY.

“Sarcasm, Pretense, and the
Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction”
(Camp 2011)



ROADMAP

- Sarcasm and the Gricean model
- Overview of models/theories of sarcasm
 - Semanticism: the semantics perspective
 - Expressivism: the pragmatics perspective
- Challenges to models
- Camp's typology of sarcasm

NOTE: Camp doesn't make a real distinction between sarcasm and verbal irony.



"We understand something which is the opposite of what is actually said" (p. 815)

Speaker A exploits a mutually shared assumption, so A must be trying get across a proposition that is not the one that is being put forward literally.

The Standard View as it Relates to Grice



Conversational Implicatures (H. Paul Grice, *Logic and Conversation 1975*)

Particularized conversational implicatures

- We have to know the backdrop
- “I’d like a glass of wine.”
 - Said to a server at a restaurant
 - Said to a colleague after a really long day in the office
 - Said on the first day of class to Ling 340

**What’s needed
to make the
utterance
sarcastic in
each context?**



Conversational Implicatures

(H. Paul Grice,
Logic and Conversation 1975)

Generalized conversational implicatures

- In everyday conversation, we subconsciously follow rules (or maxims).
- When we don't follow the maxims of conversation, we either send unspoken messages or we really annoy our interlocutor.

- **On this view, sarcasm implicates the opposite of what is said.**
- **Sometimes this holds; sometimes not.**



Maxim of Quality

- **Make your contribution as true as possible. Do not say things that are false or for which you lack adequate evidence.**
- My friend Gary is planning a trip to Papua New Guinea. I have never heard of Papua New Guinea; I have no clue where it is or what it's like. Gary is telling me about his upcoming travels and I say, "Why would you go there? It's dirty and the food is awful."
 - If Gary finds out that I actually know nothing about Papua New Guinea, then he'll deduce that I'm an unreliable source of information and will discard my future comments.

Maxim violated



Maxim of Quality

- **Said sarcastically:**
- Gary tells me that he's going to Iceland and I say:
 - "Why would you go there? It's dirty and the food is awful."

Maxim violated and I mean the opposite of what I've said.



Maxim of Relation

- **Make your contribution relevant to the conversation.**
- Susan is a second-year student thinking of majoring in history. She has taken a class with Professor Michaels. The department's new major advisor asks Professor Michaels how Susan did in her course. Professor Michaels says, "Well, she always said 'hello' to me."
 - Implicates: Susan was polite but not a good student.

Maxim violated



- **Same context but “Well, she always said ‘hello’ to me” is said sarcastically.**
- Can implicate the same meaning as before...or...
- Can be relevant information if the faculty have recently been discussing the general decline in student manners and comportment.
 - Implicates: Prof. Michaels thinks positively of Susan because she said ‘hello’ to him and those other ingrates never even acknowledged his presence.

Maxim not violated and Prof Michaels doesn't mean the opposite of what is said



Maxim of Quantity

- **Do not make your contribution more or less informative than is required.**
- It's Monday morning and I'm chatting with a colleague about the weekend. She asks me what I did on Saturday.
- *Answer:* "Random things."
 - My colleague will assume that I don't want to discuss what I did on Saturday.

Maxim violated



Maxim of Quantity

- On Friday, the department chair sends out a long list of unrelated tasks to be accomplished before the next department meeting.
- It's Monday morning and I'm chatting with a colleague about the weekend. She asks me what I did on Saturday.
 - “Random things” said sarcastically refers to tasks on the list.
 - Even if that particular colleague has no knowledge of the list, she will deduce that I was unhappy about performing those tasks.

Maxim not violated and I don't mean the opposite of what is said



Maxim of Manner

- **Avoid ambiguity. Be brief and orderly.**
- I'm grocery shopping one evening and I run into some friends I haven't seen in a while - James, and his wife Christina. Later that night, I say to my boyfriend. "Oh, guess who I saw at Whole Foods, James and the woman he lives with."
 - I chose to use to describe Christina in a way that did not make it clear that she is James' wife. I am communicating that I don't care for Christina.

Sarcasm is built in to the maxim violation, but I don't mean the opposite of what is said



Camp's Proposal

Camp argues that sarcasm need not involve a maxim violation.

Sarcasm is speech that:

- presupposes a normative scale
- pretends to undertake/evoke a commitment with respect to this scale
- communicates an inversion of the pretended/evoked scale



PREVIOUS LITERATURE

SEMANTICISM

- "all effects of extra-linguistic context on the truth-conditions of an assertion are traceable to elements in the actual syntactic structure of the sentence uttered..." (p.3)

EXPRESSIVISM

- Sarcasm is not about meaning. Sarcasm calls attention to a disparity between how things are and how they should be. (p.7)



The Semanticism Argument:

- **SARC**: LF operator inverts literal meaning.
- SARC combines with a word/phrase/clause and returns the most salient contextually-determined *contrary* item of the same syntactic category.
- SARC is overtly realized through intonational contour.
- This view avoids introducing lexical/phrasal ambiguity.



- Sarcasm can be embedded in more complex constructions, suggesting that sarcasm enters into the compositional process.

- (2) Since you've already made so many scintillating points this evening, I think you should let someone else voice their opinion.
- (3) Because George has turned out to be such a diplomat, we've decided to transfer him to Payroll, where he'll do less damage.
- (4) Because he's been such a fine friend, I've struck him off my list.
- (5) If Jane is as thrilled with our plan as Bill was, then we're really in trouble.
- (6) If Alice is so brilliant, then she'll be the perfect dupe for our little plan.
- (7) If you come to me with one more inspired idea like that, then you're out of here.
- (8) If you manage to generate one more half-baked, inconsequential idea like that, then you'll get tenure for sure.
- (9) [Sun shining] If it continues to rain like this, I'll come to England more often.⁷
- (10) I'm sure that the cat likes having its tail pulled.⁸

- Interpretation doesn't depend on highly specific conversational contexts, suggesting that the interpretation is **conventional** and **systematic**.
 - Indicates a semantic process



The Expressivism Argument:

- Sarcasm is not a matter of meaning.
- Sarcasm expresses a dissociative attitude.
 - Calls attention to disparity between how things are and how they should be.
- **Echo view:** Sarcasm echoes/mentions a proposition in order to present it as the object of ridicule.
- **Pretense View:** Speaker pretends to make an assertion in order to mock the perspective.



Not any sentence can be understood to be sarcastic in any context.

- Speaker has to express an evaluative attitude

A and B are walking down the street, and they both see a car with a shattered window. B says, Look, that car has all its windows intact. A is baffled. B says,

You didn't catch on; I was in an ironical way drawing your attention to the broken window. The absurdity of this exchange is I think to be explained by the fact that irony is intimately connected with the expression of a feeling, attitude, or evaluation. I cannot say something ironically unless what I say is intended to reflect a hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt.



Sarcasm can target something which is the result of “pragmatic” interpretation, so it cannot only be meaning inversion.

- Metaphors can be sarcastic.

(11) She’s the Taj Mahal.

(12) The fountain of youth is plying his charms to the little goslings.

(13) The master tailor has stitched an elegant new suit, which he plans to debut for us at the gala ball.

- Semantic analysis would require that deriving the metaphorical interpretation and SARC operating on a constituent happen simultaneously and then combine.



Speaker can mean what is said, with sarcasm targeting an implicature.

(17) *A*: I'm sorry Aunt Louisa is such a bother.

B: Oh, she never stays for more than a month at a time, and she always confines her three cats to the upper two floors of our house.

- B genuinely asserts the utterance's semantic content.
- The implicature that such visits are no imposition is ironic.

(18) Would you mind very much if I asked you to consider cleaning up your room some time this year?

- Manner of speech is sarcastic.
- The speaker genuinely asserts the semantic content, but request is supererogatory (way beyond what's required).



Questions, Orders, Expressives

- Sarcasm can be directed at a speech act that would hold under a sincere utterance.

(19) Thanks for holding the door.

- Not clear that questions have propositional meaning and if so, if meaning is opposite of what is said.

(20) How old did you say you were?



Against Expressivism

- Sarcasm is a specific form of meaning inversion
- Narrowly-focused sarcasm: Just a word or phrase

(22) Jones, this murderer, this thief, this crook, is indeed an honorable fellow!

(23) As I reached the bank at closing time, the bank clerk helpfully shut the door in my face,

- **Expressivists:** Two utterances – one sincere and one sarcastic – and they're woven together.
- **Camp:** Expressivist view suggests that sarcastic element can be deleted; not so with some embedded contexts

(2) Since you've already made so many scintillating points this evening, I think you should let someone else voice their opinion.

(3) Because George has turned out to be such a diplomat, we've decided to transfer him to Payroll, where he'll do less damage.

(4) Because he's been such a fine friend, I've struck him off my list.

(5) If Jane is as thrilled with our plan as Bill was, then we're really in trouble.

(6) If Alice is so brilliant, then she'll be the perfect dupe for our little plan.



Like Sarcasm

(24) Like that's a good idea.

- Only compatible with declaratives; bad here:

(19) Thanks for holding the door.

(20) How old did you say you were?

(21) Could I entice you to eat another small slice of pizza?

- Syntactically restricted to the beginning and scopes over entire sentence.
- Commits speaker to close-to-the-contrary content.

(27) The man who rescued this city from ruin is now planning to run for mayor.

(27_L) Like the man who rescued this city from ruin is now planning to run for mayor.

(27_L): speaker denies that X is planning to run for mayor, even if (27) is sarcastic



Sarcastic *like* is an NPI licenser

(31) {Like/As if} I was going to give him any money.

(33) # I was going to give him any money.

(33) {Like/As if/It's not true that} anyone cares about her silly problems.

(34) {Like/As if} they're ever going to find the real killer.

(35) {Like/As if} those guys believe a word they say.

(36) {Like/As if} I've talked to George in weeks.

(37) {Like/As if} that relationship is going to last long.

(38) {Like/As if} James has ever lifted a finger to help anyone besides himself.

(39) {Like/As if} I give a damn if I ever hear a single word from you again.

- Infelicitous without *like*



Camp's Perspective

- **For Semanticism:** Possibility Argument
- Various aspects of sarcasm can be handled through this model, so therefore we should adopt it.
- **Against Expressivism:** Impossibility Argument
- Various aspects of sarcasm can't be handled through this model, so therefore we should reject it.



Camp's Typology

Propositional

Lexical

Like-prefixed

Illocutionary

"I will defend the claim that sarcasm involves a unified operation of meaning inversion." (p.2)

Sarcasm involves:

- Presupposition of a normative scale
- Pretense of undertaking one commitment in order to communicate its inverse



PROPOSITIONAL

- Speaker pretends to assert a proposition, P
- P evokes a situation at one end of an evaluative scale
- By pretending to assert P, speaker implicates:
 - Contrary of P: Q
 - Evaluative attitude toward Q

(42) He's a fine friend.

P can be literal

(43) James must be a real hit with the ladies.

(11) She's the Taj Mahal,

P can be metaphorical



- But speakers don't always "pretend" to assert P

(17) *A*: I'm sorry Aunt Louisa is such a bother.

B: Oh, she never stays for more than a month at a time, and she always confines her three cats to the upper two floors of our house.

- B literally means what's said
- Camp's take: Sarcasm implicates the contrary of some proposition *associated* with the utterance
- B evokes a scale at which Aunt Louisa is at the easy end
- B is pretending that Aunt Louisa is easy to be around



Deniability

- Propositional sarcasm doesn't overtly commit speaker A to Q
- Speaker B can call Speaker A's bluff

(1) Your plan sounds fantastic.

(44) Since you're so enthusiastic, let's have you present the plan to the Dean at next week's meeting.

- Speaker A is forced to acquiesce and present the plan or deny that she actually meant the utterance in (1) literally.

"...sarcasm...enables speakers to communicate rhetorically volatile negative attitudes while preserving deniability." (23)



LEXICAL

- Best case for SARC
- Tighter connection to evaluative scale than propositional sarcasm
- Targets expressions which denote the extreme end of a normative scale
 - brilliant, inspired, genius, diplomat, thrilled

(3) Because George has turned out to be such a diplomat, we've decided to transfer him to Payroll, where he'll do less damage.

- Presence of evaluative scale not enough
- Need allusion to some other evaluation of subject

(6) If Alice is so brilliant, then she'll be the perfect dupe for our little plan,

- Only felicitous if Alice's ineptitude is contextually salient



- Difficult to tell propositional and lexical apart, but phonological cues can help
- Lexical intonation emphasizes targeted expression
- Propositional intonation is exaggerated version of normal contour

- (1) Your plan sounds fantastic.
- (42) He's a fine friend.
- (48) That's a brilliant idea.
- (49) That's a good idea.
- (50) I'm sure Jane will be thrilled to hear your good news.



LIKE-PREFIXED

- Targets entire proposition
 - Same as propositional sarcasm
- Actively commits speaker to implicating the opposite of P

(37) Like I've talked to George in weeks.

(51) Oh, I talk with George all the time.

- A denies speaking with George recently;
odd for implicature to be cancelled
 - #Actually, really did talk to him last night
- B's implicature more easily cancelled
 - Actually, we really do speak often.



Like as a function

- *Like* encodes a function from propositions to a force/content complex with denial as its illocutionary act type (p.28)
- Explains:
- Why restricted to declaratives
 - Not good with questions, orders, speech acts
 - #Like, thank you for saving my spot in line.
 - Speech acts aren't just propositions; they have illocutionary force
- Why incompatible with illocutionary adverbs
 - #Like, frankly, she's a genius.
 - #Like, honestly, we should hire her immediately.
 - Conflict with "denial" illocutionary act



- Also explains:
 - Infelicity of reporting speaker's beliefs with demonstratives anaphoric on the *like*-sentence

(52) Like Alan has any money. #She believes that.

- Demonstrative 'that' refers to illocutionary act instead of propositional content
 - Alan has little money and she believes that.



Like as it relates to evaluative scale

(55) Like she's coming to your party.

- Expresses speaker's evaluation of content of proposition
 - At low end of scale of epistemic probability
- Like is an "emphatic expression of minimal epistemic probability" (p.31)
 - (24) better than (48)

(24) Like that's a good idea.

(48_L) Like that's a brilliant idea.

-*Like* denies a maximally wide range of possibilities

-*Brilliant* denies a smaller range than *good*



Illocutionary

- Targets entire illocutionary act

(19) Thanks for holding the door.

(20) How old did you say you were?

(21) Could I entice you to eat another small slice of pizza?

- Suited for **expressivist** analysis:
 - Calls attention to disparity between X (situation in which sincere utterance would be appropriate) and Y (the actual situation)
- **Camp's Take**: Disparity calls attention to opposite extremes of an evoked scale
 - Eg. (20): Speaker pretends to ask a question appropriate if the addressee were behaving maturely
 - Draws attention to disparity between X and Y



POSITIVE ILLOCUTIONARY SARCASM

(57) Poor you, lying on the beach sipping daiquiris, without even any grading to distract you from the endless tumbling of the waves.

- Opposite ends of scale
 - Proposition is high-ranked on scale of enjoyment
 - “Poor you” is at the opposite low end

For Camp, all illocutionary sarcasm is meaning inversion.



SUMMARY

- Though the semanticism and expressivism approaches have shortcomings:
 - Camp argues for semanticism
- Proposes four types of sarcasm unified under the proposal that sarcasm involves:
 - Presupposition of a normative scale
 - Pretense of undertaking one commitment in order to communicate its inverse
- Four types of sarcasm:
 - Propositional
 - Lexical
 - Like-prefixed
 - Illocutionary

