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Navigating Sarcasm as one Key to American Belonging:
A Study of the Value of Sarcasm in America

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Abstract

Sarcasm is a conversational instrument often used as a means to create ironic messages between colleagues, friends, and strangers. This study aims to discover whether or not sarcasm also plays a significant role in conveying and negotiating interpersonally one's identity as "American," and if navigating sarcasm is seen as essential to skilled communication among American peers. Participants were shown one of two video scenarios which displayed a scenario where sarcasm either was understood, or was not understood. Following the video the participants completed a survey responding to the video they had seen. Of five hypotheses proposed based on existing research and theory, only one was supported by results of the analysis. Results are justified in light of existing research, and implications are discussed.

Navigating Sarcasm as one Key to American Belonging:

A Study of the Value of Sarcasm in America

Language plays a large role in cultural identity. It helps shape and establish a connectedness between individuals and the culture they belong to. In American culture, sarcasm has a significant role in everyday conversation. This study is intended to determine if there is a recognizable association between the interpretation of sarcasm, and being part of American culture. It also seeks to explore whether or not interpreting sarcasm is a significant factor in determining a person's degree of communication skill. Examining these relationships offers a deeper insight into sarcasm's role in Americans' cultural identities.

Language in Cultural Identity

What makes someone belong to a specific culture? Certain factors play into whether or not someone can identify as culturally fluent. A major source of cultural identity stems from specific language tools that may be unique to a particular culture.

Language is a powerful cultural bonding code that employs aspects of cultural symbolism, shared identity, and belonging (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). . . "Language is an arbitrary, symbolic system that labels and categorizes objects, events, groups, people, ideas, feelings, experiences, and many other phenomena. Language is also governed by the multilayered rules developed by members of a particular sociocultural community," (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). With this in mind, it can be said that members of a community use language to establish their places within a culture. Those who appear to be able to produce effective communication, or at least act like they understand it, will be perceived as legitimate members of that culture. Those who cannot follow the multilayered rules, or understand specific language functions will be identified as less culturally sound (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

Features of Sarcasm

Language codes allow members of a society or culture to express their belonging, but only when used appropriately. Cultures generally fall into communication systems that are either low-context or high-context (Hall, 1976). Low-context communication refers to direct, transparent communication, in which relies on the speakers ability to construct a clear easily decoded message (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). High-context communication is indirect, tactful speech, which the listener is expected t decode and create meaning out of (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

Sarcasm presents a challenge in understanding because it straddles the line between low and high contextual communication. In one sense, it is a speaker-driven function in which the message creator must follow the rules of creating the message. Sarcasm is not created simply by what is said. There are specific steps that the messenger must take in creating sarcasm.

Contrary to popular belief, sarcastic language is not identified by pitch or frequency change by the speaker (Rockwell, 2000). Instead, sarcastic messages are established when speakers emphasize words or highlight an emotional expression (Bryant & Fox Tree, 2002). The construct of a sarcastic message develops through the stressing of syllables followed by an abrupt descent. When cued correctly by the speaker, the receiver is expected to catch these highlighted syllables and emotional expressions allowing them to identify that the message means the opposite of what is explicitly stated (Bryant & Fox Tree 2002).

Sarcasm blurs the lines between low and high context communication because the responsibility of coding and decoding is equal between the messenger and the receiver. The messenger is expected to use direct, transparent language that sends a clear message to the receiver. Conversely, the receiver must identify verbal and emotional cues which transform the

message into the complete opposite of what is said. Sarcasm can be misunderstood because it relies so much on the speaker and the listener to be on the same page. This is why sarcasm relies heavily on the relationship between the messenger and the receiver (Ducharme 1994).

Social Uses of Sarcasm

Sarcasm is a communication tool that has a language within itself. It is a code in which people say the opposite of what they mean, usually with an inflection or tonal change that is meant to indicate they are not being serious (Ducharme, 1994). While generally intended to be playful, this social code is not always clearly understood which causes misinterpretations, or is deemed unprofessional or as an ineffective way of communicating (Ducharme, 1994). Sarcasm has the potential to both reinforce group solidarity and to alienate those who do not appreciate or understand it (Ducharme, 1994).

This dichotomy makes sarcasm difficult to classify between being an effective communication technique, an immature style of humor, or both. The definition of sarcasm begs the questions, when is sarcasm acceptable? Who should and who should not use sarcasm? Is sarcasm an effective form of communication?

Sarcasm is most effectively used in groups that share a similar sense of humor and have a balanced power level such as a team, class, or a group of friends who grew up together (Ducharme, 1994). It can also be effective in reinforcing social norms within a group. For instance, when a group member is violating certain norms, another member may use sarcasm as a way of calling them out playfully (Ducharme, 1994).

In situations where there is a power gap, sarcasm tends to be seen as condescending and unsympathetic (Briggs, 1928). For example, if a teacher corrects a student by using sarcasm, the student is likely to interpret it as an insult meant to widen the superiority gap. Students are likely

to feel like the teacher intends to embarrass the student by insisting they are incompetent, socially inept or simply by insulting them (Briggs, 1928). The exception to this is if the person in power has already established a working environment that encourages a playful and respectful relationship.

Relationship level plays a big role in determining with whom it is appropriate to use sarcasm. Common ground is a key factor in sensing sarcasm in conversation. It is risky to use sarcasm in communications with a stranger or acquaintance because it creates a stronger likelihood of being misinterpreted (Briggs, 1928). When two people are unfamiliar with one another's communication style, more is left open for misinterpretation. This is magnified in statements that are intended to be positive towards the other. When making a criticism sarcasm is easier for a stranger to sense because stating something positive to a negative scenario is an obvious use of irony (Ivanko, 2004). However, in a neutral or positive conversation, a positive statement such as a compliment that is stated sarcastically is seen as ambiguous and leaves room for negative interpretation (Ivanko, 2004).

Who uses Sarcasm?

The use and understanding of sarcasm has many variables that affect the way it is interpreted and who is more likely to use it. Given that it is a linguistic tool, the culture that is using it may indicate a different set of values when using sarcasm (Dress, 2008). In the United States the divide between ideals surrounding sarcasm is geographical. The northern U.S. tends to be more direct and finds the use of irony and sarcasm to be humorous (Dress, 2008). In most of the southern U.S., there is an assumed politeness when speaking and the use of sarcasm is seen as a violation of politeness when addressing someone (Dress, 2008). Contextually these differences greatly affect what is interpreted when sarcasm is used. When asked to list the verbal

goals of sarcasm, 94% of southern U.S. participants identified it as a means of “showing negative emotion” (Roberts, 1994). Since U.S. northerners tend to use direct language, they are much more likely to be found using sarcasm in casual conversation than those from the southern U.S., (Roberts, 1994).

Gender Differences

Gender differences are also a significant factor in the use of sarcasm. Men tend to care less than women about being misinterpreted in conversation and therefore are more likely to use irony and sarcasm especially among peers (Colston, 2004). One study gave men and women sets of scenarios and a choice of four responses. Men were found to be more likely to choose a sarcastic response. However, in the self-report data where participants identified how likely they are to use sarcasm, men and women showed no significant difference in how likely they would be to use sarcasm (Dress, 2008). Since men used sarcasm more when given a choice, but identified as using it equally as much as women, it could suggest that women are more perceptive of sarcasm (Dress, 2008). The data seems to imply that while men use sarcasm more often than women, women generally may be more aware of when it is used (Dress, 2008).

Distinct differences in women and men’s communication styles, senses of humor, and emotional expressions are also key determinants in how they view sarcasm (Malz & Borker, 1982). Women generally use a more indirect style than men do and are more adaptive in conversation than their male counterparts (Malz & Borker, 1982). They use communication as a means to build a relationship while men typically aim to demonstrate their identity (Malz & Borker, 1982). Women also differ from men in how they use humor. Women prefer context in jokes rather than a simple one liner (Tannen, 1990). For instance a woman is more likely to use a personal anecdote than a “guy walks into a bar” type joke. Also women use more self-

deprecating humor and are less likely to use humor as a means to insult another than men (Tannen, 1990). A final key difference in women's conversation techniques versus men's is the emotional expression (Wagner, Buck, & Winterbotham, 1993). In the American culture, women are socially permitted to be much more emotionally expressive. This is likely why women are found to be better at encoding and decoding messages of emotions than men are (Wagner, Buck, & Winterbotham 1993).

The preceding research leads to posing these five hypotheses about American respondents' responses to communicators' interaction with each other:

H1: As perceived ability to interpret sarcasm increases, the perceived skill level of the communicator also increases.

H2: As perceived ability to interpret sarcasm increases, the sense of that person being "American" also increases.

H3: The woman on the left's communication competence will be rated higher when she correctly engages the other woman's sarcasm than when she does not correctly engage it.

H4: The woman on the left's perceived American-ness will be rated higher when she correctly engages the other woman's sarcasm than when she does not correctly engage it.

H5: When sarcasm is understood, the conversation will be considered more competent than when sarcasm is not understood.

Method

Participants

The study of perception of sarcasm competency in American culture consists of a questionnaire filled out by respondents watching one of two video scenarios. Participants were 54 college-aged men and women (18-24) who were solicited via social media and email.

Though each respondent viewed video before filling out the questionnaire, 27 of the participants watched scenario one and 27 viewed the scenario two.

Video Manipulations

The first video shows two young women engaging in a dialogue in which there is use of sarcasm in a natural conversational setting. In the first scenario, the woman on the left mentions that she heard school might be cancelled tomorrow because it might snow. The woman on the right sarcastically responds, “Oh yeah, it snows a ton in Portland in November. You might as well hold off on homework, I am sure class will be cancelled.” The woman on the left takes the response at face value and says she will hold off on homework. The woman on the right then informs her that she was being sarcastic and she should do her homework as planned.

The second video is nearly identical however, this time the woman on the left acknowledges the sarcasm and appropriately responds by agreeing that it probably will not snow.

Procedure

Following the video the participants completed a survey in response to what they watched. The survey asked questions based on a Likert-type scale varying from 1-5 (1 being to strongly disagree: 5 being to strongly agree). The survey consists of seven questions about the video and followed by three personal identifiers (age, sex, and ethnicity), (see Appendix 1).

Measures

Based off of the ratings in the Likert scale answers the study generates quantitative data about perceived personal and conversational competencies, and about perceived American cultural identity differences between the video scenario with sarcasm understood versus the video scenario with sarcasm misunderstood.

Conversation competence. Answers that analyze how the audience perceives the conversation are in questions one, three, and seven. Question number three is reverse coded because the answer demonstrates a negative connotation while all the other questions imply a positive correlation. These questions demonstrate how the audience understands and values the conversation at a basic level. It focuses on the conversation as a whole and how it makes the audience feel about the interaction, but does not focus on individual analyses of the women in the video.

“American” identity. Questions two and six provide information on whether the use and understanding of sarcasm is identified as “American.” The results compare if one woman is considered more “American” in each video as well as comparing the women against themselves between the two videos. This is an analysis that will compare the women against each other in the video where sarcasm is not understood. When sarcasm is not understood, the woman on the right is expected to be considered more “American” than the women on the left. These questions will also be used to compare each woman to themselves between the two videos. The woman on the right is expected to receive about the same rating in both videos while the woman on the left is predicted to show significant differences based on her understanding of sarcasm.

Individual communication skills. Perceived conversation skill between the women is measured in questions four and five. The answers to these questions demonstrate who the audience identifies as more skilled in communicating between the two women rather than how the viewers feel about the conversation itself. The woman on the right’s sarcastic dialogue remains the same in both videos so her perceived skill is expected to remain close to the same between videos. She is expected to be perceived as more skilled than her counterpart in the video where sarcasm is misunderstood. Due to the fact that the woman on the left does not grasp

the concept of sarcasm in this video, she is expected to be perceived as the lesser skilled communicator. This will also compare the woman on the left to herself in both videos. Just like in the “American” evaluation, when the woman understands sarcasm, she is expected to be deemed as more skilled than when she does not understand.

Results

The first hypothesis expected the woman on the right to be rated as a more skilled communicator than the woman on the left when sarcasm is not understood. The results for this did not show enough of a difference to be considered significant support for the hypothesis. In fact, the results while not significant, suggested the opposite of the hypothesis. In the results from the video where sarcasm is misunderstood, the woman on the left had a mean score of 3.19, while the woman on the right received a mean score of 2.67. This violated the expectation of the hypothesis because the woman who does not understand sarcasm was expected to show less conversational skill. However, the data suggests that it may be more likely that the person in a conversation who uses sarcasm, but fails to do it in a way that is effective for the message receiver, is actually the less skilled communicator.

Hypothesis two expected the woman on the right to be perceived as more “American” than the woman on the left when sarcasm was not understood. Again there was no significant data to support the hypothesis. The mean score for the woman on the right was 4.11 and for the woman on the left it was 3.78. This result is in the direction predicted by the hypothesis, but the numbers are too similar to support suggesting that skilled interpretation of sarcasm makes either person be seen as any more or less “American.”

The third hypothesis was an evaluation of the woman on the left between when she did understand sarcasm versus when she did not understand sarcasm. The hypothesis expected the

woman to be perceived as less skilled when she did not correctly engage the sarcasm. The data showed no significant support for the hypothesis, $t = .71$, $p = .48$. The results varied very little at all between the two videos. When sarcasm was understood the mean communication skill score was 2.96; when sarcasm was not understood the mean score was 3.19.

Hypothesis four anticipated that the woman on the left would be seen as more “American” in the video where she comprehends sarcasm than in the video where she does not process sarcasm correctly. There was no significant support for the hypothesis, by the data given $t = -1.26$, $p = .214$. The mean score for American-ness was 4.11 when sarcasm was understood and 3.78 when not understood, but the difference was not statistically significant.

The final hypothesis predicted that when sarcasm is understood, the conversation would be considered competent. This hypothesis was supported. When sarcasm was seen to be understood the perceived competence of the conversation $t = -2.06$ $p < .05$. When sarcasm was understood, the mean for competence was 3.11. When sarcasm was not understood the mean was 2.37. This result suggests that while sarcasm does not necessarily indicate an individual’s communication skill, the proper use and understanding of sarcasm does demonstrate shared conversational competence in the eyes of American observers.

Discussion

This study was intended to explore whether or not skilled negotiation of sarcasm plays a significant role in what it means to be American, and if sarcasm was a determinant of who is a skilled communicator. The study was measured by finding and the responses a of college-aged student sample. The results found were intended to reflect how the participants felt about the competence of a conversation based on the understanding of sarcasm, whether or not sarcasm

suggested “American” cultural values, and whether or not sarcasm demonstrates skilled communication efforts.

Many of the results moved in the predicted direction, but little statistical significance was found only in one comparison, related to perceived conversational competence. None of the other hypothesized relationships achieved statistically significant differences between the two conditions being compared in each case.

The results of the survey suggested that understanding sarcasm does not play a significant role in how “American” an individual is perceived to be by college-aged respondents. The understanding of sarcasm also does not determine how skilled a communicator an individual is seen to be. The woman on the right, who used sarcasm, was not identified as any more American or skilled at communicating than the woman who did not understand the sarcasm in one of the two scenarios. The only significant correlation found was between the proper use and understanding of sarcasm and the perceived competence of the overall conversation. Despite the fact that understanding sarcasm did not display any significant signs of solo communication skills, it did determine whether or not the conversation was deemed competent by the participants.

For the first hypothesis, the woman on the left’s inability to understand a basic use of sarcasm was predicted to render her as a less skilled communicator than the woman on the right. The woman on the right should be seen as more skilled because she uses sarcasm correctly and clearly. Her ability to emphasize specific syllables while leaving the rest of the message the same as a literal statement should imply that she is being sarcastic (Bryant & Fox Tree, 2002). Since she does her job of coding the message, and the woman on the left fails to do her job as the

receiver in decoding the message, the woman on the right should be identified as more skilled (Bryant & Fox Tree, 2002).

This could be because Americans are considered low-context communicators, which means that conversations are messenger driven and messages are expected to be direct (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). When sarcasm is used, there is an element of high-context communication which calls for the receiver to decode an unstated message rather than taking what is said at face value. Sarcasm may be seen as a less skilled communication technique by Americans because it violates conversational expectations of a low-context communication style.

In the video where sarcasm is understood, both women were thought to be likely considered equally skilled communicators. This is because both participants in the conversation show an adequate understanding of how sarcasm is employed in casual communication. The woman on the right codes a sarcastic message, and the woman on the left is able to pick up on the emphasized cues and decode the message as sarcastic (Bryant & Fox Tree, 2002). The results contradicted this hypothesis. While this result was not anticipated and does not have enough evidence to suggest that the data is significant, it does point in the direction of the responsibility of the conversation being also on the messenger rather than only on the receiver in this case (Ting-Toomey & Chung 2012).

For the second hypothesis, based on the research that has been conducted regarding sarcasm and cultural belonging, some expectations can be drawn for the current study. The prediction was that there would likely be some significant factors between the relationship of the interpretation of sarcasm and being “American,” the perceived communication skills in the variable understanding of sarcasm.

The woman on the right demonstrates the ability to apply culturally American conversation tools by coding a sarcastic direct message. She uses low-context communication, which is typically an American system, because it is a cultural language value. She uses conventional American conversational tactics to show that she belongs in the culture (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). The woman on the left does not understand sarcasm which should demonstrate that she identifies less with American cultural norms (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). Based on the research by Ting-Toomey and Chung, this would suggest that the woman on the left would be identified as less of a cultural group member to those who witnessed the interaction.

Due to the fact that there is no significant support for the hypothesis, the data suggest that what it means to be “American” is not affected by the use of sarcasm. Participants of the surveys answered with nearly the same results which shows that they determined neither woman to be more or less “American” simply by how well they understood sarcasm. This means that in this data collection, sarcasm as a form of communication is not factored into what makes someone more or less of an “American.”

For hypothesis three, when woman on the left understands the communication tactic, she should show adequate skill in basic conversational sarcasm. She was predicted to score a similar mean number to the woman on the right in the video where sarcasm is understood. That number was expected to be higher than the video where sarcasm is not understood. Since she is unable to grasp very basic sarcasm in casual conversation, her skills are expected to be perceived as lower compared to her scores in the second video. Surprisingly, sarcasm not understood received a slightly higher mean, but this is likely just by chance because the numbers are so similar that the statistical difference carries very little weight anyway.

The significance of the data is that the understanding of sarcasm, or lack thereof, did not suggest anything about a person's perceived communication skills. Other things may factor into why a person does not interpret sarcasm correctly. The results from hypothesis one even aims more to the blame falling on the messenger when sarcasm is not understood (Ducharme, 1994).

Hypothesis four suggested that the woman on the left would receive a higher mean score in the "American" question when she understands sarcasm because this survey assumes that the audience will view sarcasm as an "American" conversational tool. When she understands, this demonstrates a sufficient knowledge of sarcasm and how it works which makes her "American." When she does not comprehend the concept of sarcasm, she does not exhibit an "American" conversational style and is projected to be identified as less "American" (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

These data are very similar to how close the results were to how skilled the woman on the left was perceived to be between the two scenarios. In both hypotheses where which person is more "American" is evaluated, there is not much difference between the mean scores. Instead of supporting the hypothesis, these results suggest that the use and understanding of sarcasm has very little to do with how "American" a person is perceived.

The fifth hypothesis proposed that an understanding of sarcasm demonstrates a more competent conversation because both participants communicate effectively and understand the conversation clearly. In the conversation where sarcasm is not understood, it causes confusion rather than being an effective dialogue and therefore will be reasoned as less competent (Ducharme 1994). This turned out to be significantly supported. When sarcasm is not understood or used correctly, the conversation is evaluated as significantly less competent just as the hypothesis predicted. This means that the negotiation of sarcasm is a valuable representation

of effective communication, because when understanding is missed, the conversation being engaged in is identified as incompetent.

Challenges

Many factors may come into play when determining the effectiveness of sarcasm in relation to how American, or how skilled a communicator someone is. When sarcasm is not understood, some may place the blame on the messenger, while others blame the receiver. There also may be conflicting ideals about whether or not sarcasm is an appropriate communication tool. It is difficult to measure how an audience views sarcasm when there was very little background to the scenario. Audience members could only guess what the relationship level was between the two women in the video. Perhaps if the women were very clearly friends, the study would have yielded different results. Or maybe if the women were presented in a scenario as strangers the participants would have answered differently. The study could be carried out in countless different scenarios that could influence how the audience evaluates sarcasm in context.

This research was limited by several other factors that could be altered in future studies. For instance, all of the survey takers were college students and most of the students were Caucasian Americans. This certainly presents a narrowed lens in the evaluation of the scenarios. In future research, it would be interesting to conduct a similar experiment, but instead with a more eclectic body of participants evaluating the scenarios. It would be intriguing to identify how people of international backgrounds answer this survey. Americans are known to use sarcasm quite frequently, so that raises some questions about how American results would compare to the results of others from other countries. Perhaps the sarcastic person in the scenario would receive a higher rating for being an “American,” or they would be considered

less skilled at communicating because the person viewing the video may not be familiar with sarcasm. There are many variables that could be considered in future research of this topic.

Something that can be taken away from this study is realizing how sarcasm is used and understood in casual American dialogue. It is important when using sarcasm that the messenger attempts to make the sarcasm clear by emphasizing it so the receiver can recognize the sarcasm. If the messenger does not send a clear signal, or uses sarcasm with someone who does not catch on, it creates ambiguity and misunderstanding. This study also says that if someone is not a sarcastic person, they do not appear as any less American or skilled than someone who is sarcastic. Americans are generally considered to use a low-context communication style. Sarcasm is a blend between low and high-context, so it blurs the lines of the responsibility to send a clear message, and the expectation of a receiver to decode what the messenger intends to say even though they explicitly state the opposite. Sarcasm is a tricky tool that can easily lead to misunderstanding, so it is important that when people use sarcasm that they know their audience, understand appropriate context, and make it clear that they do not mean exactly what they say.

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Appendix 1

Survey

1) I believe this would be an easy conversation to join:

1) Disagree 2) Slightly Disagree 3) Neutral 4) Slightly Agree 5) Agree

2) The woman on the left seems “American”:

1) Disagree 2) Slightly Disagree 3) Neutral 4) Slightly Agree 5) Agree

3) This was a frustrating conversation to witness:

1) Disagree 2) Slightly Disagree 3) Neutral 4) Slightly Agree 5) Agree

4) The woman on the left seems to be a skilled communicator:

1) Disagree 2) Slightly Disagree 3) Neutral 4) Slightly Agree 5) Agree

5) The woman on the right seems to be a skilled communicator:

1) Disagree 2) Slightly Disagree 3) Neutral 4) Slightly Agree 5) Agree

6) The woman on the right seems “American”:

1) Disagree 2) Slightly Disagree 3) Neutral 4) Slightly Agree 5) Agree

7) This seems like a competent conversation:

1) Disagree 2) Slightly Disagree 3) Neutral 4) Slightly Agree 5) Agree

Age:

Sex: 1) Male 2) Female

Ethnicity: 1) African American/Black 2) Asian/Pacific Islander 3) Hispanic/Latino 4)

Caucasian/White 5) Other: