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FROM SARCASM TO SOLIDARITY: A CYBERPRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE USE IN INDONESIAN SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTIONS

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Abstract: *Social media has become an important space for Indonesian society to communicate, express opinions, and build social relationships. In digital interactions, sarcasm does not always function as indirect criticism or attack; rather, it may acquire different meanings depending on the context, the relationship between users, and shared understanding. This study aims to analyze how the use of sarcasm in social media interactions can be interpreted as criticism, humor, affiliation, and solidarity from a cyberpragmatic perspective. The study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data are planned to be obtained through the analysis of naturally occurring interactions on TikTok, Instagram, and X, as well as semi-structured interviews with 10–15 Indonesian social media users aged at least 18 who have experience using or interpreting sarcasm in digital communication. The data are analyzed using thematic analysis combined with pragmatic and cyberpragmatic interpretation. The analysis indicates a pattern in which sarcasm can serve as a means of social evaluation and criticism, shift into humor when supported by shared knowledge and relational closeness, and develop into a form of affiliation and solidarity through reciprocal joking and group identity. However, the boundary between humor and attack remains ambiguous, so differences in interpretation may generate tension. Conceptually, this study contributes by positioning solidarity as an outcome of meaning negotiation rather than as an inherent property of sarcasm. Practically, the findings reinforce the importance of digital literacy that takes context, empathy, and the ability to interpret linguistic meaning in social media interactions into account.*
Keywords: *Sarcasm, Cyberpragmatics, Social Media, Humor, Solidarity, Digital Literacy.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media has developed into one of the most influential communication spaces in the lives of Indonesian people. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X are used not only to share information and entertainment but also as spaces in which users express opinions, provide criticism, construct identities, and maintain social relationships. This development means that communication no longer occurs solely through verbal language, but also through emojis, punctuation, capitalization, memes, GIFs, hashtags, images, videos, and various other forms of digital response. These conditions make the process of interpreting meaning in online communication increasingly complex.

One particularly interesting form of language in social media interactions is sarcasm. In everyday communication, sarcasm is often understood as an expression that conveys a particular intention indirectly and, at times, in opposition to its literal meaning. In digital communication, however, sarcasm is not necessarily intended as an attack. It may be used to express criticism, indicate disagreement, create humor, tease friends, or strengthen interpersonal closeness. Consequently, the meaning of a sarcastic expression depends heavily on the context, social relationship, speaker intention, and the way in which the recipient interprets the message.

This complexity becomes even more apparent because social media communication is multimodal in nature. Users can employ emojis, GIFs, punctuation, capitalization, memes, and reactions to provide cues about the intended meaning of an utterance. Logi and Zappavigna (2024) demonstrate that GIFs can function as paralanguage in social media, while Zappavigna and Logi (2024) explain that emojis can also convey social meanings and assist users in interpreting digital messages. Accordingly, the interpretation of sarcasm on social media cannot be separated from the elements surrounding the utterance.

Several previous studies have examined the use of sarcasm in digital spaces. Pratama and Suastha (2025), for example, demonstrate that sarcasm in social media reactions can function as a form of social criticism, protest, and expression of dissatisfaction. Saputri et al. (2024) likewise found sarcasm in TikTok political campaigns to be used to express disappointment, indirect criticism, and attacks directed at particular parties. Putri et al. (2025) show that sarcasm in political conversations on X functions not only as criticism but may also be associated with identity construction and ideological positioning.

On the other hand, sarcasm can also be associated with humor and interpersonal relationships. Dynel (2021) discusses how insults on social media may be understood either seriously or jocularly depending on the intention and context of the interaction. This demonstrates that a form of language that appears literally aggressive is not necessarily interpreted as an attack by its recipient. In close relationships, teasing or indirect criticism may even constitute a means through which users display familiarity and closeness.

These aspects of social relationships are related to the concepts of affiliation and solidarity in digital communication. Pérez-Sabater (2021) demonstrates that language style and sharing practices on social media can contribute to the construction of solidarity and social engagement. Zappavigna (2022) likewise shows that the use of ironic quotation can create humor while simultaneously establishing affiliative relationships in social media discourse. These findings demonstrate that digital language is used not only to convey information but also to construct social relationships.

Although research on digital sarcasm has developed considerably, there remains room to understand how sarcasm moves from criticism or teasing toward humor, affiliation, and solidarity in users' experiences. The issue concerns not only the functions of sarcasm but also how users interpret sarcasm on the basis of social relationships, shared experiences, and the context of digital communication. A sarcastic expression may be perceived as humorous by one group but as rude or aggressive by another.

The cyberpragmatic perspective is relevant to understanding this phenomenon because cyberpragmatics examines language use in relation to the context of digital communication. From this perspective, meaning is determined not only by the words used but also by the digital environment, relationships among users, communicative purposes, and the various multimodal resources available.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how the use of sarcasm in Indonesian social media interactions is interpreted as criticism, humor, affiliation, and solidarity. The study focuses on users' experiences and interpretations of sarcasm, as well as the process of meaning negotiation that occurs in digital interactions. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich cyberpragmatic research by positioning

solidarity as an outcome of meaning-making processes and social relationships. Practically, it is expected to provide social media users with a greater understanding of the importance of context, empathy, and digital literacy in interpreting ambiguous communication.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of how social media users interpret the use of sarcasm in digital interactions. The qualitative approach was selected because the study focuses on experiences, interpretations, and meaning-making processes that cannot be fully explained through quantitative measurement. The primary perspective employed is cyberpragmatics, an approach that examines linguistic meaning in relation to the context of digital communication, participant relationships, communicative purposes, and the multimodal elements accompanying an utterance.

The study focuses on Indonesian-language interactions across several social media platforms, namely TikTok, Instagram, and X. These platforms were selected because they function as communication spaces that allow users to post comments, reply to comments, and employ emojis, memes, GIFs, hashtags, punctuation, and various other forms of digital expression.

The study is planned to involve 10–15 Indonesian social media users aged at least 18 years. Participants will be selected purposively according to the criteria of being active social media users, having experience using or interpreting sarcasm in digital communication, and being willing to describe their experiences and perspectives regarding the use of sarcasm. If necessary, recruitment may be expanded through snowball sampling to obtain participants whose experiences are relevant to the research focus.

The research data are planned to be obtained from two main sources. First, naturally occurring social media interactions, particularly comments and responses that demonstrate the use of sarcasm, humor, criticism, teasing, or forms of affiliation. These data are planned to comprise approximately 150–200 interaction units as the observation target. Second, data will be obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants. Each interview is designed to last approximately 30–60 minutes and will be conducted in Indonesian. The interview questions focus on participants' experiences of using and understanding sarcasm, the factors that lead sarcasm to be perceived as humorous or aggressive, and experiences in which sarcasm is used to build closeness with others.

Social media interaction and interview data will be analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis will identify patterns of meaning emerging from the data and subsequently organize them into themes related to criticism, humor, affiliation, solidarity, and misunderstanding. Thematic analysis will then be combined with pragmatic and cyberpragmatic interpretation to examine the relationship among utterance forms, digital context, social relationships, and recipient responses.

The analytical process includes familiarization with the data, initial coding, grouping codes into themes, comparison of social media and interview data, review of the themes, and development of conceptual relationships among sarcasm, humor, affiliation, and solidarity. Software such as NVivo may be used to assist with data organization, but it will not replace the researcher's interpretation.

To ensure research trustworthiness, the study addresses credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility can be strengthened through source triangulation, adequate engagement with the data, and discussion with research peers. Transferability is supported by providing rich contextual descriptions. Dependability is maintained through documentation of the research process, while confirmability is addressed by ensuring that interpretations are grounded in the data rather than solely in the researcher's personal assumptions.

Ethical considerations also constitute an important part of the study. Participants' identities will be anonymized, informed consent will be obtained before interviews, participants will have the right to decline to answer particular questions or withdraw from the study, and research data will be stored securely. Although social media interactions may be publicly accessible, their use as research data will nevertheless take privacy and potential impacts on content owners into consideration.

Important note: the number of participants and interactions stated above represent research targets/plans and do not constitute a claim that the data collection has been completed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Note: because the interview data and original comments have not yet been provided, this section is formulated as an analytical statement of findings/patterns and does not use fabricated participant quotations.

Sarcasm as a Form of Social Criticism and Evaluation

The first pattern indicates that sarcasm can be used as a means of expressing social criticism and evaluation. In digital communication, users do not always express disagreement directly. Sarcasm enables individuals to convey criticism through more indirect, ironic, or insinuating forms of language.

In this context, sarcasm functions as a means of expressing dissatisfaction with particular actions, opinions, behaviors, or social conditions. The critical meaning becomes easier to understand when the recipient is familiar with the context being discussed.

When Sarcasm Becomes Humor

The second pattern indicates that sarcasm can shift into humor when used within relationships characterized by closeness and shared knowledge. An utterance that may appear literally to be ridicule is not necessarily received as an attack.

Relational closeness gives users a particular understanding of one another's communication styles. Shared experiences, joking practices, and the use of multimodal elements can help recipients understand that an indirect criticism is intended as a joke.

Nevertheless, such humor still has limits. When the recipient does not share the same contextual understanding, sarcasm may lose its humorous function and be interpreted more seriously.

From Mutual Teasing to Affiliation and Solidarity

The third pattern shows that sarcasm can form part of the process of building affiliation and solidarity. Mutual teasing within close relationships can serve as a way of displaying familiarity and closeness.

The reciprocal use of sarcasm can also indicate a sense of security within the relationship. When both parties understand the unspoken rules governing the joke, sarcasm can become a symbol of closeness and a sense of belonging to the group.

Thus, the social function of sarcasm lies not only in the message conveyed but also in the relationship constructed through the exchange of messages.

The Not-Always-Clear Boundary between Joking and Attacking

The fourth pattern reveals an ambiguous boundary between humor and attack. An utterance considered humorous by the speaker is not necessarily received in the same way by the recipient.

This ambiguity is heightened in social media communication because users cannot always observe facial expressions, vocal intonation, or immediate situations that ordinarily facilitate interpretation. Although emojis, GIFs, punctuation, and visual elements can provide cues, they do not always eliminate the possibility of misinterpretation.

Overall, the pattern of findings can be summarized as follows:

Sarcasm → context + relationships + shared knowledge → interpretation → criticism / humor / affiliation → meaning negotiation → solidarity or misunderstanding.

Discussion

Sarcasm as a Means of Expressing Social Criticism

The findings indicate that sarcasm is one way in which social media users express criticism and evaluate particular conditions. This finding is consistent with Pratama and Suastha (2025), who demonstrate that digital sarcasm can function as social criticism, protest, and an expression of dissatisfaction. Saputri et al. (2024) likewise show the use of sarcasm to express disappointment and criticism in political communication on TikTok.

However, this study pays closer attention to the social processes that occur after sarcasm is expressed. Sarcasm is not merely a tool for conveying criticism; it is also an action that positions the speaker and recipient within a particular relationship. When an individual uses sarcasm, they not only express an evaluation of something but also indicate how they position themselves toward the issue or group under discussion.

Thus, sarcasm can be understood as a form of communication that combines the expression of opinions with the management of social relationships.

When Sarcasm Becomes More Than Mere Indirect Criticism

The second finding indicates that sarcasm can undergo a functional shift when used within close relationships. Sarcasm can become humor when the speaker and recipient share an understanding of the communicative intention.

This is consistent with Dynel (2021), who demonstrates that forms of insult on social media may be understood as serious or jocular depending on context and intention. Research on sarcastic humor also indicates that multimodal elements can help users understand the intended meaning of an utterance.

An important point is that humor does not necessarily imply the absence of the potential to cause offense. A joke may still contain evaluative or teasing elements but be received as humor because of the social relationship between speaker and recipient. Thus, humor and sarcasm do not always constitute two entirely separate categories.

Sarcasm as a Path toward Affiliation and Solidarity

The findings demonstrate that sarcasm can contribute to the formation of affiliation and solidarity. This is consistent with Pérez-Sabater (2021), who shows that language style and communication practices on social media can function as sources of solidarity.

However, this study emphasizes that solidarity does not emerge automatically merely because sarcasm is present. Solidarity emerges through a process of shared understanding. The speaker and recipient need to share particular relationships, experiences, or knowledge that enable sarcasm to be understood as a form of closeness.

In this context, sarcasm can function as a kind of "internal language" within a group. Those who understand the context may feel that they belong to the group, whereas outsiders may not understand the same meaning.

Solidarity That Can Also Create Social Boundaries

Although sarcasm can strengthen social relationships, its use can also create boundaries between groups. A joke understood as a form of closeness by members of a particular group may be perceived as an attack by other users.

This condition demonstrates that solidarity and exclusion can emerge simultaneously. Language that strengthens relationships among members of a group may cause those outside the group to feel uninvolved or even targeted.

The nature of social media further intensifies this issue because a conversation may be visible to an audience far broader than the social relationship that originally underlies it.

Contribution to the Cyberpragmatic Perspective

This study contributes to cyberpragmatic research by focusing not only on the form and function of sarcasm but also on the processes of meaning change and negotiation that occur after sarcasm is received.

Previous research has largely highlighted sarcasm as criticism, teasing, or a particular form of expression. This study extends that understanding by demonstrating a possible relationship among:

criticism → humor → affiliation → solidarity

or, under certain conditions:

sarcasm → misinterpretation → tension.

Thus, the meaning of sarcasm is not fixed. It is continually negotiated through social relationships and responses within digital interactions.

Reflection on Social Context and the Researcher's Position

The interpretation of sarcasm must also take into account users' social and cultural contexts. Knowledge of language practices, humor styles, social relationships, and shared experiences can influence how an utterance is understood.

In qualitative research, researchers must be careful not to impose personal interpretations on participants' experiences. The meanings identified need to remain connected to the context and participants' explanations. Reflexivity is important because researchers themselves have experiential and cultural backgrounds that may influence the interpretive process.

New Insights from the Findings

The central insight is that sarcasm is not inherently negative, aggressive, or humorous. Its functions and meanings emerge through social processes involving context, relationships, shared knowledge, and recipient responses.

This perspective shifts the understanding of sarcasm from a matter of linguistic form alone toward a matter of social relationships. Sarcasm can function as criticism, humor, a form of closeness, or a source of conflict depending on how its meaning is negotiated.

Accordingly, the main contribution of this study is to demonstrate that solidarity is an outcome of meaning negotiation in digital interactions rather than a property inherent in sarcasm itself.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the use of sarcasm in Indonesian social media interactions cannot be understood merely as a form of indirect criticism, teasing, or impoliteness. The meaning of sarcasm is constructed through processes that depend heavily on digital context, relationships among users, shared knowledge, and responses to utterances. The patterns identified indicate that sarcasm can function as a means of social criticism, develop into humor within close relationships, and, under certain conditions, serve as a means of building affiliation and solidarity. Nevertheless, such meaning remains unstable because sarcasm intended as a joke may be received as an attack when the context and social relationship are not understood in the same way.

An important insight from this study is that solidarity is not an inherent property of sarcasm but an outcome of meaning negotiation. Sarcasm can bring individuals closer when they share experiences, knowledge, and an understanding of humor, but it can also create distance when audiences interpret the message differently. Thus, sarcastic interactions on social media demonstrate that language is used not only to convey messages but also to manage social relationships, signal alignment, construct group identities, and determine who is regarded as part of a digital community. These findings reinforce the cyberpragmatic perspective that linguistic meaning in digital spaces cannot be separated from the communicative environment and the multimodal elements accompanying it.

Practically, these findings are relevant to policymakers and digital-space managers in developing approaches to online communication that are not oriented solely toward removing content considered offensive. Understanding context, communicative purposes, and relationships among participants should form part of efforts to create safer and more dialogic digital spaces. In education and curriculum development, these findings can provide a basis for strengthening digital literacy that teaches not only safe social media use but also the ability to understand context, recognize sarcasm, interpret multimodal elements, consider others' perspectives, and respond constructively to differences in interpretation. This is also important for the development of social relationships and psychological well-being, as the ability to understand communicative intentions may help reduce misunderstandings, interpersonal conflict, and distress arising from ambiguous digital communication.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. Its focus on Indonesian-language social media interactions limits the scope for understanding how sarcasm and solidarity operate across different cultural or linguistic contexts. In addition, the relatively limited participant composition and diverse user experiences do not fully represent all characteristics of Indonesian social media users. Limitations in time and depth of exploration also mean that several aspects, such as changes in the meaning of sarcasm in long-term interactions and the influence of platform characteristics on user interpretation, remain insufficiently explored. These limitations indicate that the findings should be understood as contextual insights rather than as a representation applicable to all digital interactions.

Future research can expand this inquiry through mixed-methods approaches, digital ethnography, conversation analysis, or longitudinal studies so that changes in the meaning of sarcasm can be observed more deeply. The research context can also be broadened by involving more diverse age groups, regions, social backgrounds, and digital platforms. In addition, subsequent studies can specifically explore the roles of emojis, memes, GIFs, comment features, platform algorithms, and cultural differences in determining whether sarcasm is understood as criticism, humor, closeness, or attack. In this way, research on sarcasm in social media can move beyond the question of "what does sarcasm mean?" toward a deeper understanding of how meaning is negotiated and how digital language shapes social relationships in an increasingly connected society.

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