

The Use of Sarcasm as a Satirical Tool in *The Dictator*: A Pragmatic Analysis (2012)

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Abstract

This study analyzes the use of sarcasm as a satirical tool in the film "The Dictator" (2012) starring Sacha Baron Cohen. This study aims to identify the types of sarcasm used in the film and how the audience responds to the sarcasm. The research method used is qualitative analysis using pragmatic and semantic theories to understand how sarcasm is used as an effective satirical tool. The results of the study indicate that there are four types of sarcasm used in the film, namely lexical sarcasm, "like"-prefixed sarcasm, illocutionary sarcasm, and propositional sarcasm. The audience's response to the sarcasm varies, including off-record politeness responses, confrontational responses, and ignoring sarcasm. This study shows that sarcasm can be used as an effective satirical tool to criticize power and dominant ideologies in society in a humorous and ironic way. Thus, this study can contribute to the understanding of the role of sarcasm in communication and social criticism.

Keywords: Sarcasm; Satirical Tool; Pragmatic Analysis

Introduction

Sarcasm and satire are powerful tools in both linguistic and literary contexts, often used to convey criticism through indirect, ironic, or humorous means. Sarcasm, in particular, operates through the intentional violation of conversational norms, creating a sharp contrast between what is said and what is actually meant. It is a form of verbal irony that aims to mock, criticize, or expose the absurdities in human behavior, societal norms, or political institutions. Because of its indirect nature, sarcasm requires shared contextual knowledge and interpretive effort from both speaker and listener, making it a rich subject for pragmatic analysis.

Satire, on the other hand, is a broader genre that incorporates various rhetorical strategies—including sarcasm, irony, parody, and exaggeration—to expose and criticize the vices, follies, and injustices in society. In media, especially film and television, satire has become a vital mode of social and political commentary. Through satire, creators can challenge power structures,

question dominant ideologies, and provoke critical thought in a way that is often more engaging and accessible to the public than direct criticism.

The film *The Dictator* (2012), directed by Larry Charles and starring Sacha Baron Cohen, is a prime example of how sarcasm can be embedded within satire to produce a powerful critique of authoritarianism, Western intervention, and global political hypocrisy. The protagonist, General Aladeen, is a caricature of despotic rulers, embodying the extremes of dictatorial behavior in a fictional country called Wadiya. His exaggerated actions and sarcastic remarks offer a comedic yet biting commentary on real-world political systems. The film blends absurdity with dark humor to underscore the seriousness of its critique, making it an ideal text for examining how sarcasm functions as a satirical tool.

From a linguistic standpoint, the study of sarcasm involves examining how language is used beyond its literal meaning to achieve pragmatic effects. The Cooperative Principle proposed by Grice (1975) is instrumental in analyzing how sarcastic utterances flout conversational maxims—such as quantity, quality, relevance, and manner—to create implicatures that reveal the speaker's true intent. Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 2006) further supports the idea that listeners infer meaning based on contextual clues and cognitive effort. Sarcasm also aligns with humor theories such as Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humor (2017) and Simpson's (2011) discourse model of satire, which categorize satire as either Horatian or Juvenalian.

In the academic context, the study of sarcasm as a satirical tool bridges literary and linguistic disciplines. From the literary perspective, satire is a time-honored tradition, seen in the works of Swift, Orwell, and Vonnegut, among others. From a linguistic perspective, understanding how sarcasm works pragmatically and semantically helps uncover the communicative intent and cognitive processes of both speaker and hearer. In film, these elements are magnified, as sarcasm is delivered not only through words but also through tone, facial expression, and visual context—though this study focuses exclusively on verbal forms.

From a linguistic point of view, sarcasm is fascinating because it often involves violating Grice's Cooperative Principles, particularly the Maxim of

Quality, as the speaker intentionally says something untrue or exaggerated to imply the opposite. Understanding sarcasm thus requires pragmatic competence—the ability to interpret implied meaning based on context and shared knowledge.

In film discourse, sarcasm becomes more layered and complex due to its interplay with visual cues, intonation, and character dynamics. Therefore, a pragmatic and semantic analysis of sarcastic utterances can provide a deeper understanding of how language functions not only to communicate but to criticize, challenge, and provoke. Analyzing sarcasm as a satirical tool contributes not only to the field of linguistics but also to broader discussions about power, ideology, and representation in media.

This research focuses on exploring sarcastic expressions in *The Dictator* (2012), identifying how sarcasm operates pragmatically and semantically to reinforce satire. Through this analysis, the study aims to uncover the linguistic mechanisms that allow sarcasm to become an effective vehicle for satirical critique.

Literary Review

Politeness

The politeness theory formulated by Brown and Levinson (2016) is a comprehensive and applicable theory in the pragmatic approach. Brown and Levinson tried to analyze the underlying motivations behind the choices made by speakers and listeners in communication. The point of their framework relied on the concepts of ‘face’ and ‘rationality’, which they posited as universally applicable. They argued that one of the most common reasons for flouting one or more is to be polite (Alabdali, 2019).

The concept of ‘face’ refers to a person's public self-image that they wish to show. This concept includes two key aspects, that is negative face and positive face. Simply, the negative face is a want of every person that his actions be unimpeded by others. The positive face is a want of every person that his wants be desirable to at least some others. Meanwhile, ‘rationality’ is defined as the use of a specific reasoning method that ensures logical steps from goals to the actions required to achieve them. Similar to formal logic, where we progress from one

statement to another while maintaining truth, practical reasoning must guide us from goals to appropriate actions, sustaining this chain while ensuring the chosen actions are suitable for achieving objective. According to Brown and Levinson's theory, addressee's response strategies can be done in various ways (Jaworski, 2010):

- Off-record politeness. The addressee may respond with counter-sarcasm or humor to deflect the threat while maintaining social cohesion.
- Confrontative response. The addressee might address sarcasm directly with positive politeness (e.g., laughing it off as a shared joke) or negative politeness (e.g., apologizing or downplaying the issue).
- Ignoring the sarcasm. If the sarcasm is ambiguous, the addressee may pretend not to notice to avoid escalation, preserving mutual face.

Sarcasm

Sarcasm is a form of figurative language that involves saying something but meaning the opposite usually with the intention to mock, criticize, or express disapproval. It is often found in both spoken and written communication and is commonly used in daily conversation, literature, films, and media. According to Haiman (2023), sarcasm is a particularly transparent form of expression, where the speaker openly says the opposite of what they actually mean. He refers to sarcasm as a type of "cheap talk" or "hot air," in which the real meaning lies not in the words themselves, but in the context and delivery.

Type of Sarcasm

Illocutionary Sarcasm

Sarcasm Illocutionary sarcasm refers to sarcastic expressions that function as acts of communication rather than isolated statements. In this type, the sarcasm is not only embedded in the literal meaning of the words but is part of the entire speech act, including the speaker's intention, tone, and contextual cues.

Lexical Sarcasm

Sarcasm Lexical sarcasm is a form of sarcasm that operates through individual word choices that are intentionally ironic or contradictory to the speaker's actual intent. In this type, the sarcasm is embedded within specific vocabulary items, rather than being conveyed through entire sentences or discourse patterns.

According to Camp (2012), this kind of sarcasm emerges when certain words are used in a context that clearly contradicts their usual meaning. For example, positive-sounding words like “brilliant,” “charming,” or “genius” may be used to describe someone who has clearly done something foolish or irritating.

Propositional Sarcasm

Propositional sarcasm refers to the kind of sarcasm where the entire proposition or sentence expresses something that is directly opposite to the speaker’s actual meaning. In this case, the sarcasm lies in the full idea conveyed, rather than just in individual words or subtle insinuations.

‘Like’ Prefixed Sarcasm

‘Like’-prefixed sarcasm is a distinctive form of sarcasm marked by the use of the word “like” at the beginning of an utterance, often followed by a clearly exaggerated or implausible statement. This type of sarcasm is common in informal speech and is usually employed to express disbelief, dismissal, or mockery.

Research Method

In this chapter, the researcher discusses several aspects of the research to analyze the movie. Those aspects are: (1) research method, (2) object of the research, (3) source of data, (4) method of collecting data, and (5) method of analyzing data. This research adopts a qualitative approach as its primary method of analysis. Qualitative research is commonly used when the aim is to explore meanings, interpretations, and context-driven phenomena in a detailed and descriptive manner. Unlike quantitative research, which relies on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research focuses on textual, verbal, or behavioral data to understand the deeper significance behind communication.

Finding and Discussion

Type of Sarcasm

This section identifies and classifies the five sarcastic utterances found in the film *The Dictator* (2012), based on the framework proposed by Camp (2012), which

includes lexical sarcasm, ‘like’ prefixed sarcasm, illocutionary sarcasm, and propositional sarcasm. These types reflect the complexity and variation of sarcastic speech in satirical communication.

Lexical Sarcasm

Example:

Aladeen : “Do you know what a dictionary is used for?”

Nadal : “Of course, Supreme Leader.”

Aladeen: “Good. **I,m ordering ten thousand copies of the dictionary to be burned**”

(The Dictator, 2012. 00:14:30–00:14:38)

This utterance is a form of lexical sarcasm, where the speaker used a regular word in an exaggerated and contradictory context to deliver mockery. Aladeen, the speaker, asked a basic question about the use of a dictionary, and after getting a confirming response from his assistant Nadal, he said something contradictory and illogical — ordering “**ten thousand copies of dictionaries to be burned**”.

In this sarcastic utterance, the lexical term “**dictionary**” was the focus. A dictionary represents knowledge, literacy, and information. By stating that he would “**burn**” all of them, Aladeen showed his disregard toward knowledge and intellect. This ironic contradiction between the function of a dictionary and his intended action highlighted his authoritarian and anti-intellectual character. The sarcasm lies in how the speaker **pretends** to value the dictionary, only to follow it with a command that negates its value completely.

Example:

Aladeen : “Where is the nuclear scientists?”

Nadal : “He’s here. We just need to shave off his beard.”

Aladeen: “What?! **A man without a beard is like a lion without a mane!**”

(The Dictator, 2012. 00:41:12–00:41:18)

This utterance is an example of lexical sarcasm, where the speaker exaggerated the meaning of the word “**beard**” to an absurd and humorous level. Aladeen responded dramatically to the idea of shaving the scientist’s beard by comparing it to a lion losing its mane — an analogy that is clearly overblown and meant to mock.

The word “**beard**” here becomes the central lexical item used sarcastically. In most contexts, a beard is a simple physical trait or style choice. However, Aladeen used it as if it were a defining, almost sacred feature of a man’s identity — equating it with a lion’s mane, which is symbolic of power, pride, and status in the animal kingdom. By comparing something trivial to something grand, Aladeen mocks the situation and uses lexical sarcasm to convey that, in his worldview, a man without a beard is laughably incomplete. The absurdity of the comparison reveals the sarcastic tone.

‘Like’- Prefixed Sarcasm

Example:

Zoey : “I’ve never met someone more selfish and self-absorbed than you.”

Aladeen : “**Well, you know, I aim to disappoint.**”

(The Dictator, 2012. 00:42:18–00:42:23)

The utterance above is categorized as **like-prefixed sarcasm**, marked by the phrase “**well, you know**”, which functions to set up the sarcastic intent of the statement. Instead of denying Zoey’s harsh accusation, Aladeen responded by pretending to agree with it, using the word “**disappoint**” as if it were his actual goal. The phrase “**I aim to disappoint**” is a sarcastic twist on the more common expression “I aim to please”, making the utterance intentionally ironic. This deliberate reversal of meaning, combined with the sarcastic marker “**well, you know**”, makes the statement a clear example of **like-prefixed sarcasm**.

Example:

Zoey : “You kidnapped a tourist and shaved his beard. That’s horrifying!”

Aladeen : “**Yeah, well... It’s a cultural exchange program.**”

(The Dictator, 2012. 00:52:09–00:52:14)

This second data also presents like-prefixed sarcasm. The speaker used “**yeah, well**” as a sarcastic preamble before saying something clearly illogical and humorous. Aladeen’s response trivializes a serious accusation by comparing it to a harmless “cultural exchange program”.

Here, the sarcastic intent is obvious. The term “cultural exchange program” typically refers to mutual learning between two countries or societies, but in this

context, it was used to justify something outrageous and immoral. The use of “yeah, well” makes it evident that the speaker was not sincere and instead was mocking the entire situation, making this utterance a textbook example of like-prefixed sarcasm.

Illocutionary Sarcasm

Example:

Aladeen : “You are fired... for not being able to read my mind!”

Nadal : “But I installed the device exactly how you said.”

Aladeen : “**Oh, I’m so sorry. You must be a genius.**”

(The Dictator, 2012. 00:22:11–00:22:19)

This utterance is an example of **illocutionary sarcasm**, where the speaker’s intended meaning is the opposite of the literal words spoken. Aladeen uses the phrase “**you must be a genius**” not to praise Nadal, but to criticize him for failing to meet an unreasonable expectation — reading his mind.

Unlike propositional or lexical sarcasm, illocutionary sarcasm relies heavily on tone, context, and the contrast between the utterance and the speaker’s attitude. In this scene, Aladeen’s tone is flat and mocking. There is no genuine admiration in the phrase, and the sarcastic intent is reinforced by the absurd accusation. The utterance expresses contempt in a form that, on the surface, resembles a compliment — the core characteristic of illocutionary sarcasm.

Example:

Zoey : “You’re threatening a child!”

Aladeen : “**Wow, thank you for your insight. Truly helpful.**”

(The Dictator, 2012. 01:03:07–01:03:12)

This second data is also an illocutionary sarcasm, conveyed through a phrase that appears polite but is clearly insincere. Aladeen responds to Zoey’s criticism with a statement that, taken literally, would indicate appreciation. However, in the given context, his flat tone and dismissive attitude show that he meant the opposite.

The sarcastic intent lies in the contradiction between the utterance and the context. The speaker is clearly annoyed, not grateful. Saying “**thank you for your insight**” was a way to shut down the criticism, not to engage with it. This

insincerity, wrapped in a socially acceptable form, is what makes the utterance an example of illocutionary sarcasm.

Propositional Sarcasm

Example:

Aladeen : “I have signed the new constitution of Wadiya.”

News Reporter : “That’s amazing! So the country is now a democracy?”

Aladeen : “**Yes, of course. I also personally chose the winner of the first democratic election.**”

(The Dictator, 2012. 00:25:03–00:25:10)

This utterance is categorized as **propositional sarcasm**, where the sarcasm is contained in the **propositional content** of the statement. On the surface, Aladeen’s words seem to affirm the existence of democracy in Wadiya, but the proposition that he “**personally chose the winner**” contradicts the very idea of a fair election.

In propositional sarcasm, the speaker delivers a statement that is grammatically and syntactically correct, but the **implicature** strongly opposes what is said. Here, the sarcastic intent is obvious: if the leader personally selects the election winner, it is not a democracy at all. The sarcasm is embedded in the contradiction between the literal claim and its real-world implications.

Example:

Zoey : “You tortured that man on live television.”

Aladeen : “**Correction. I interviewed him with electricity.**”

(The Dictator, 2012. 00:39:41–00:39:47)

This second utterance also shows propositional sarcasm, where the statement maintains a formal structure but contains an absurd and ironic contradiction. Aladeen reframes an act of torture as an “**interview,**” making the proposition both illogical and sarcastic. The sarcastic intent lies in the redefinition of the word “interview.” A normal interview involves asking questions voluntarily; using electricity as a tool implies coercion and violence. The speaker deliberately disguises a serious action under an innocuous term, making the proposition itself sarcastic.

Addressee Response

This section analyzes how the addressees respond to the sarcastic utterances delivered by General Aladeen. The reactions vary depending on the context, the nature of the sarcasm, and the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Based on the politeness theory (Jaworski, 2010), the addressee's response can occur in three forms: off-record politeness; confrontative response; and ignoring the sarcasm.

Off-Record Politeness

Example:

Aladeen: “Mad? No! I loved that missile... especially the part where it pointed in the wrong direction and nearly killed me.”

(The Dictator, 2012. 01:05:33)

Response of the Addressee: Nadal, who is being sarcastically **“thanked,”** forces a smile and responds with a dry, **“Glad you enjoyed it.”** His tone is flat, and he avoids eye contact, indicating discomfort and a clear awareness of the underlying criticism in Aladeen’s words.

This kind of response shows how sarcasm can function as a form of off-record politeness. Aladeen disguises his anger in a mocking compliment. And Nadal, instead of defending himself or apologizing, tries to play along — but his body language betrays his unease. The sarcastic exchange satirizes authoritarian leadership, where even genuine concerns must be disguised through irony, and open disagreement is suppressed through passive-aggressive humor.

Confrontative Response

Example:

Aladeen: “You are HIV Aladeen?”

(The Dictator, 2012. 00:22:04)

Response of the Addressee: The nurse responds awkwardly and quietly says, **“Sir, I don’t think that’s appropriate...”** This hesitant response reflects her direct confrontation. Her body language shows tension, while the family of the baby looks visibly disturbed. The reaction confirms that the utterance is not meant to be taken literally. The sarcastic nature of the line becomes clearer through this response; the addressee does not laugh or acknowledge it as a joke, but rather

expresses concern. This highlights how sarcasm often creates unease or miscommunication, especially when delivered in a socially sensitive context.

Example:

Aladeen: “Absolutely. Women should have equal rights... to clean, cook, and raise children!”

(The Dictator, 2012. 00:50:10)

Response of the Addressee: Zoey immediately frowns and stares at Aladeen with visible disapproval. Her facial expression changes from hopeful to irritated, and her body posture becomes closed off. Though she doesn’t respond verbally, her nonverbal cues clearly communicate that she is offended and disappointed.

This type of response is typical when sarcasm undermines sensitive social topics like gender equality. Aladeen begins with what seems like a progressive statement, but the sarcastic follow-up turns it into a sexist joke. Zoey’s reaction affirms that the sarcasm was inappropriate and not taken lightly.

The contrast between Aladeen’s smug tone and Zoey’s critical reaction reinforces the sarcastic intent of the line. It also reflects the social risk of sarcasm — how it can provoke offense when the speaker underestimates the sensitivity of the topic or the values of the listener.

Zoey’s silent disapproval adds weight to the critique embedded in the film: satirizing how powerful men may use faux-progressive language while still holding oppressive views.

Ignoring the Sarcasm

Example:

Aladeen: “Oh sure, let me just grow one out of my ass.”

(The Dictator, 2012. 00:44:50)

Response of the Addressee: The customer responds with a blank expression and simply says, “...Okay,” before awkwardly backing away. This minimal verbal reaction, combined with visible discomfort, indicates that the sarcastic remark was not received as humorous or polite.

The addressee’s ignore response reinforces the sarcastic tone of the utterance. The sarcastic phrase though said with a smile was actually hostile and mocking. The customer’s lack of confrontation suggests they either didn’t want to

argue or didn't fully grasp the sarcasm, making the scene both awkward and comical.

This type of reaction is common when sarcasm is used in public service contexts: people often do not know how to respond, especially when the speaker uses sarcasm as a form of frustration. The unease here strengthens the ironic gap between what is said and what is meant.

Example:

Aladeen: "Of course! I love democracy. I also love herpes."

(*The Dictator*, 2012. 00:31:19)

Response of the Addressee: The audience at the press conference responds with awkward silence. No one laughs or claps; instead, many shift uncomfortably in their seats and glance at each other. The lack of verbal response is powerful — it signals confusion and discomfort in receiving what sounds like a contradiction. This confusion is what makes the addressee ignore the sarcasm.

This silent reaction supports the interpretation that the utterance was sarcastic. Aladeen's comparison between democracy and herpes is clearly not sincere, and the audience's muted response reflects the tension created by his ironic tone. In sarcasm, especially propositional sarcasm, the meaning is often revealed by how others fail or struggle to respond. The absence of laughter or agreement here confirms that the audience understood the insult behind his supposedly positive words. The scene not only highlights the social awkwardness sarcasm can provoke, but also strengthens the film's satirical tone — mocking both the dictator's absurdity and the diplomatic politeness of the media.

Conclusion

The study analyzed the use of sarcasm as a satirical tool in *The Dictator* (2012) through a pragmatic perspective, focusing on its types and addressee responses. First, the classification type of sarcasm in *The Dictator* (2012) based on Camp's theory can be classified into four types: lexical sarcasm, 'like' prefixed sarcasm, illocutionary sarcasm, and propositional sarcasm. Each type can be found in the film, especially through the dialogue that Aladeen utters. Second, address responses in *The Dictator* (2012) based on politeness theory by Brown and

Levinson can be shown through three responses: off-record politeness (addressee acknowledged sarcasm indirectly); confrontative responses (addressees challenged or expressed discomfort); and ignoring sarcasm (silence or awkwardness revealed the sarcasm's social tension). Semantically, sarcasm in the film also demonstrates how literal meanings can be manipulated to serve satirical goals. The sarcastic statements often begin with seemingly neutral or positive language, but are then immediately twisted by context or contradiction. This semantic inversion serves to undermine the surface meaning, allowing the utterance to function both as a joke and as a critique. In conclusion, sarcasm in *The Dictator* functions not merely as a comedic device, but as a deliberate linguistic strategy used to expose and criticize social and political issues. By analyzing these utterances through semantic and pragmatic frameworks, the study has shown how sarcasm can be used effectively in film discourse to deliver satire in a way that is both entertaining and meaningful.

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