

# Sarcasm as Impoliteness Device in Indonesian and American Context

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the differences between the Indonesian version of sarcasm and the American version based on the definitions provided by the dictionaries. The next part of this paper describes the point where the colloquial use of sarcasm in Indonesian and American English also differs. The Indonesian version of sarcasm loses the satirical, ironic, and humorous elements of American sarcasm. The last part of this paper presents a theoretical comparison of the two versions of sarcasm. Indonesian sarcasm falls into the categories of positive impoliteness and negative impoliteness. On the other hand, American sarcasm is a mock politeness or off-record impoliteness according to Culpeper. Bilingual speakers of English and Indonesian should be cautious of this phenomenon to avoid potential communication disasters. The main limitation of this paper is that the data presented in this paper are far from comprehensive.

Keywords: impoliteness, sarcasm, irony, satire, politeness

## Introduction: Sarcasm in Indonesian and English Dictionary

I just found out, by accident, that the definitions of sarcasm in Indonesian and English American dictionaries are quite different. According to KBBI, the official Indonesian dictionary issued by the Ministry of Education, sarcasm is defined as *penggunaan kata-kata pedas untuk menyakiti hati orang lain: cemoohan atau ejekan kasar*. A loose translation to this definition is the use of rude words to hurt others' feelings in the form of mockery or insult (Taylor, 2015). On the other hand, sarcasm in Merriam Webster's dictionary reads as "a sharp and often satirical or ironic utterance designed to cut or give pain". I have to admit that both versions are almost identical. Both Indonesian dictionary and American English dictionary imply that sarcasm utilizes rude and sharp utterances. Another similarity is that the function of sarcasm is to hurt others' feelings or give psychological pain to the hearer or other parties intended (Attardo et al, 2003).

At a glance, both definitions are similar but there is a starking difference in the conceptual level. In the Indonesian context, the dictionary does not mention anything about the satirical or ironic nature of sarcasm (Ravi & Ravi, 2017). The ironic nature of sarcasm is a prominent feature in American English. This difference looks infinitesimal, but it creates confusion in daily life usage (Bowes & Katz, 2011). No matter how cruel it looks, the usage of sarcasm in the American context is mostly to trigger laughter or to provide funny remarks (Dadlez, 2011). In the Indonesian context, sarcasm is limited to create pain and there is no funny implication included in the dictionary (Nugrahani et al, 2018). This may cause cross-cultural complexities if one does not realize that such a gap exists (Kienpointner, 2018).

## Sample Utterances from the Internet

The first part of this paper has mentioned that there is a different ambiance of sarcasm in Indonesian and American English based on the dictionary definition. To get to the real sense of usages in real-life situation, let

us look at the sample utterances provided on the internet provided by some “language experts”. My first excerpt comes from *dosenbahasa.com*. On the “about” page, dosenbahasa.com claims as a website run by dedicated language experts. On the topic of sarcasm, the administrator of *dosenbahasa.com* gives some sample utterances of sarcasm. I take two utterances to illustrate my point.

(1) *Dasar otak udang, disuruh melakukan pekerjaan yang sangat mudah seperti ini saja kau tidak bisa. Lalu apa yang kau bisa?*

You have the brain of a shrimp. I told you to do such an easy job but you failed to do so. Is there anything you can do?

(2) *Sudahlah, tak usah bermimpi kau bisa bergaul dengan kami. Bahkan minuman paling murah yang biasa kami minum saja kau tak akan mampu membelinya.*

Come on. Stop dreaming. You can't make friends with us. You cannot even buy the cheapest drinks we usually have.

Utterance (1) is a brute attack on the hearer's personality. By saying that his brain is compared with the brain of a shrimp, the speaker tries to dehumanize the hearer to the level of crustacean. The speaker continues with a rude comment “*Is there anything you can do?*” implying that the hearer is an incompetent person. Utterance (2) is an insult to the socioeconomic condition of the hearer. The speaker closes any possibility for the hearer to become part of his social circle. The reason behind his action is that the speaker thinks that the hearer could not afford the financial prerequisite to join his elite circle. As a heads-up, there is nothing funny or witty about utterances (1) and (2).

Let us compare those previous utterances in the Indonesian context with the sample given by *literarydevices.net*. This website

provides some examples of literary devices used in American literature. The followings are sample sarcasm items provided by the website.

(3) Zombies eat brains. You're safe.

(4) The nicest thing I can say about her is all her tattoos are spelled correctly.

The speaker uses utterance (3) to imply that the hearer is not that smart. The speaker implies that if a zombie apocalypse is coming, the hearer will be safe because he does not have any brain to eat. The pop-culture reference dictates that zombies eat humans' brains and turn those humans into zombies. This kind of remark will normally trigger laughter, giggle or smile to the parties who hear it. The hearer might not enjoy the remark but the bystanders, in a normal situation, will be entertained. Utterance (4) involves a more complex setting. The speaker despises a person using a third-person pronoun. We cannot be so sure about what qualities upset the speaker but we can be sure that there are a number of them. The unique thing about this utterance is that the speaker managed to find the “positive side” of the third party. He “admires” her tattoos because they are spelled correctly. This utterance can be considered a witty remark.

The samples from those websites are consistent with the definitions provided by Indonesian and American English dictionaries. The Indonesian context has skipped the witty, ironic, and satirical ambiance of American sarcasm. The Indonesian word for sarcasm is “sarkasme” and it is a borrowed word from English. I have established a case that the borrowed word has missed a semantic feature. In fact, the Indonesian sarcasm has undergone a pejoration from its original meaning in English sarcasm (Joshi et al, 2017; Cheang & Pell, 2008). How this happened and why, need to be investigated in future studies. For the time being, I will focus on the use

of sarcasm as an impoliteness device in Indonesian and American contexts. The main question of this paper is “Does sarcasm in Indonesian and American context serve the same pragmatic function as impoliteness device?”.

### **Sarcasm as Impoliteness Device**

It is hard to discuss impoliteness without mentioning Culpeper. Culpeper has been dubbed as the father of the study in language impoliteness. This is interesting because the study of politeness has no “actual father” but Culpeper has been very consistent in discussing impoliteness. Hence, he can create traction on this particular topic. In his article called “Towards an anatomy of impoliteness”, Culpeper (1996) mentions that there are four impoliteness super-strategies.

- (1) Bald-on record impoliteness (direct attack to the addressee)
- (2) Positive politeness (attacking the addressee’s possession, quality or wishes)
- (3) Negative politeness (attacking the addressee’s freedom)
- (4) Sarcasm or Mock Politeness (trying to be ambiguous in the face attack)

Scholars who are familiar with the work of Brown and Levinson (1987) may predict easily that Culpeper’s classification of impoliteness is a derivative of that work. Culpeper himself admitted the fact and until now, this classification is still valuable to discuss. To refresh our memory, the followings are the politeness super strategies formulated by Brown and Levinson.

- (1) Bald on record (offering direct and non-ambiguous utterances)
- (2) Positive politeness (praising the addressee’s possession, quality or wishes)
- (3) Negative politeness (optimizing addressee’s freedom)
- (4) Off record (trying to be ambiguous)
- (5) Cancel FTA (cancel interaction)

If we compare the lists of super strategies created by Culpeper (1996) and Brown and Levinson (1987) we can see that each number is the direct opposite of its counterpart. The pattern cannot be applied to super strategy number (5) because canceling an interaction cannot be converted into aggression (Haugh, 2015).

Let us go back to the discussion of sarcasm, the American version of sarcasm is considered as mock politeness by Culpeper. It means that Culpeper considers sarcasm as the counterpart of the Off-record politeness super-strategy. According to him, sarcasm is an impolite act masked as politeness. Hence, he calls it mock politeness. As a counterpart of the “off record” strategy, sarcasm according to this theory is an effort to make the utterances as ambiguous as possible so that the face attack can be clouded. It shows that the American version of sarcasm is an indirect approach to inflict psychological pain.

However, the Indonesian version of sarcasm does not fit into this category. Let us visit utterance (1) in the previous section. “*You have the brain of a shrimp. I told you to do such an easy job but you failed to do so. Is there anything you can do?*” We can see that there is nothing indirect and ambiguous about this utterance. It is hard to classify this utterance as mock politeness. The speaker attacks the hearer’s intellectual capacity directly and painfully. I find it difficult to include the Indonesian version of sarcasm into the mock politeness criterion. I suggest that this utterance will fit better into the positive impoliteness category.

Utterance (2) “*Come on. Stop dreaming. You can’t make friends with us. You cannot even buy the cheapest drinks we usually have.*” is a little bit “softer” than utterance (1). There is no direct *ad-hominem* in this case. Compared to the phrase “the brain of a shrimp”, the clause “you cannot buy our kind of drink” can be considered as a much

softer insult. However, the clause “you can’t make friends with us” is not mock politeness. It is an attack on the freedom of making a friend. Hence, utterance (2) fits better into negative impoliteness.

### Conclusions

This paper starts with the discussion of a difference between the Indonesian version of sarcasm and the American English version of sarcasm based on the definitions provided by respective dictionaries. The second part of the paper illustrates the point where daily usages of sarcasm in Indonesian and American English are also different. The Indonesian version of sarcasm is missing the satirical, ironic, and witty component of American sarcasm. The third part of this paper has displayed the theoretical comparison of both versions of sarcasm. The Indonesian sarcasm fits into the category of positive politeness and negative politeness. On the other hand, the American sarcasm is mock politeness or off-record impoliteness according to Culpeper. Bilingual speakers of English and Indonesian should be made aware of this phenomenon to avoid potential communication breakdown. The main limitation of this paper is the data presented in this paper is anecdotal and far from extensive. Future studies are needed to refine my statements in this paper.

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