



Analysis of Sarcasm in Social Media Tweets Semantic Perspective

Leony Sitorus,*¹ Bernieke Anggita Ristia Damanik²

¹²Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar

Email: leonysitorus9@gmail.com, bernieke.damanik@uhn.ac.id

Abstract

This study investigates the phenomenon of sarcasm in social media, particularly on Twitter, through a semantic and ethnographic lens. The aim is to explore how semantic cues—such as lexical choices, tone, and context—help users recognize sarcastic intent in written digital communication. Employing an ethnographic research design, this study observes linguistic behavior in natural online settings by collecting primary data from selected sarcastic tweets and secondary data from related linguistic and communication studies. Data were gathered using purposive sampling of tweets that explicitly exhibit sarcastic language, followed by contextual observation and discourse analysis. The findings indicate that sarcasm on Twitter commonly relies on exaggerated positivity used in negative or frustrating contexts, lexical contrast, ironic tone, and punctuation cues such as exclamation marks or quotation marks. These patterns are often used to signal meaning that contradicts the surface expression. The study highlights that understanding sarcasm requires more than decoding words—it demands cultural, contextual, and pragmatic awareness. The ethnographic approach provides insight into how online communities use shared knowledge and social cues to interpret sarcastic content. This research emphasizes the need for language sensitivity in digital communication to reduce misinterpretation and foster more effective online interaction.

Keywords: *Semantics; Social Media; Sarcasm*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis fenomena sarkasme dalam media sosial, khususnya pada platform Twitter, melalui pendekatan semantik dan etnografi. Sarkasme seringkali menyebabkan kebingungan karena makna literal dari ujaran bertentangan dengan maksud sebenarnya dari penutur. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode etnografi untuk mengamati penggunaan bahasa secara alami dalam konteks digital. Data primer diperoleh dari kumpulan tweet yang mengandung unsur sarkastik, sementara data sekunder berasal dari studi terdahulu terkait linguistik dan komunikasi daring. Teknik pengumpulan data meliputi observasi partisipatif dan dokumentasi tweet secara purposif, sedangkan teknik analisis dilakukan melalui analisis wacana dan konteks semantik. Hasil temuan menunjukkan bahwa sarkasme pada Twitter umumnya ditandai dengan pemilihan kata yang berlebihan secara positif dalam situasi negatif, penggunaan tanda baca tertentu, dan nada ironi. Pemahaman terhadap sarkasme tidak cukup hanya dengan

membaca kata-kata, tetapi membutuhkan kepekaan terhadap konteks, budaya, dan pragmatik. Penelitian ini menunjukkan pentingnya kesadaran berbahasa dalam komunikasi digital untuk meminimalisasi kesalahpahaman dan meningkatkan efektivitas interaksi daring.

Kata Kunci: *Semantik; Media Sosial; Sarkasme*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary digital discourse, sarcasm constitutes a distinctive yet often misunderstood mode of expression. Unlike literal language, sarcasm involves a disjunction between the expressed and intended meaning, typically communicated through subtle linguistic and contextual signals (Camp, 2012). While sarcasm is easily identifiable in spoken interactions—where intonation, facial expressions, and body language serve as interpretive aids—it becomes significantly more elusive in text-based environments, such as social media platforms. Twitter, for instance, with its brevity and rapid conversational flow, provides limited cues, making sarcastic intent difficult to detect and frequently prone to misinterpretation (Joshi et al., 2017; Ghosh et al., 2015).

Understanding how sarcasm operates in digital spaces is increasingly critical, given the growing dominance of social media as a primary site for public discourse. Misinterpreting sarcasm can have tangible consequences, from personal misunderstandings to public controversies and algorithmic misjudgment in sentiment analysis systems. Sarcastic expressions are particularly problematic in contexts where accuracy, trust, and emotional tone are essential—such as political commentary, customer service interactions, and digital journalism (Maynard & Greenwood, 2014). As such, uncovering the semantic and pragmatic features that mark sarcasm in online communication is not merely a linguistic pursuit but one with broader implications for digital literacy and artificial intelligence (AI) development.

Sarcasm on social media is characteristically encoded through semantic incongruity, exaggeration, hyperbole, or polarity reversal. Tweets often contain overly positive lexical items within negative contexts, creating implicit cues that the speaker's true intent is the opposite of the literal expression (Bamman & Smith, 2015). However, due to the absence of prosodic and visual indicators, readers must rely heavily on contextual knowledge, prior discourse, and their sensitivity to semantic deviation to recognize such irony. This presents a challenge not only for human interpretation but also for computational systems tasked with natural language understanding.

Previous research has provided valuable insights into sarcasm detection through computational models (Tsur et al., 2010; Joshi et al., 2017), semantic patterning (Riloff et al., 2013), and pragmatic theory (Giora, 2003).

While these studies underscore the importance of contrastive semantics and discourse context, most focus primarily on algorithmic identification or formal linguistics, leaving a gap in understanding how ordinary users intuitively recognize sarcasm in natural, everyday interaction on social media. Moreover, studies have rarely adopted an ethnographic lens to explore sarcasm as a culturally situated communicative act shaped by platform norms, user behavior, and interpretive communities.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how semantic clues within tweets signal sarcastic intent, focusing on word choice, polarity contrast, contextual framing, and the reader's interpretive strategies. By employing an ethnographic qualitative method, this research seeks to bridge theoretical semantic analysis with practical insights into digital communication. The findings are expected to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of sarcastic expression in online environments and support the development of more context-aware sentiment analysis tools and digital communication frameworks.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine how sarcasm is communicated and interpreted in social media discourse, specifically on the Twitter platform. The ethnographic method is chosen due to its strength in capturing natural language use within its real-world social context, allowing researchers to observe communicative behavior as it occurs organically. Rather than relying solely on pre-structured linguistic categories, this approach enables the identification of subtle semantic and pragmatic cues as experienced and interpreted by actual users. The focus on lived experiences and situated meanings aligns well with the complex, culturally embedded nature of sarcasm in digital communication.

Primary data were collected from publicly available tweets containing overtly sarcastic expressions, identified through specific hashtags (e.g., #sarcasm, #irony) and contextual indicators. Approximately 100 tweets were purposively selected over a one-month period to ensure variation in topic, tone, and user demographics. These data were supplemented with secondary sources, including existing academic literature on sarcasm, digital discourse analysis, and semantic theory. Field observations were conducted by closely monitoring real-time interactions, reply threads, and user engagements to understand how sarcasm was interpreted and responded to by online communities. Ethical considerations were upheld by anonymizing all usernames and ensuring that data used were from publicly accessible content.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic and discourse analysis techniques, focusing on the identification of semantic markers such as exaggerated positive or negative adjectives, polarity shifts, contextual

incongruity, and contrastive framing. Each tweet was examined in light of its surrounding context, including prior tweets, user profile, and audience interaction. The analysis also involved mapping out patterns of linguistic deviation from expected norms and how readers responded to these cues. Triangulation was applied by comparing findings from tweet analysis with theoretical models from existing studies and user commentary. To ensure the validity of interpretation, peer debriefing and member checking were employed with language and communication scholars, ensuring that the semantic features of sarcasm identified in this study reflect shared interpretive practices among diverse users.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Use of Overly Positive Words in Negative Situations

This pattern occurs when the speaker uses overly cheerful or optimistic words to describe a situation that is clearly undesirable. The sarcasm becomes evident through the reader's awareness of the real context, where the positive words do not match the speaker's actual emotional response.

Example 1: "Just spilled coffee on my shirt five minutes before my presentation. What a perfect start to the day!". The expression "perfect start" is an exaggerated positive evaluation used in a clearly negative context. No speaker would sincerely regard an accident like spilling coffee as a perfect beginning. The sarcasm is conveyed through the contrast between the literal meaning and the real-world undesirability of the situation. The semantic clue is the mismatch in sentiment.

Example 2. "Yay, another email from my boss at midnight. I'm so lucky to have such a thoughtful leader!" In this case, words like "yay" and "lucky" express positivity, but they are paired with an event that most would find irritating or intrusive—receiving a work-related message late at night. The praise becomes ironic, and the sarcastic tone is created by the deliberate use of emotionally incongruent words.

Example 3. "I just adore when my internet goes out right in the middle of a Zoom interview. Such a blessing!" The term "adore" and the phrase "such a blessing" are extreme in their positivity. These expressions, when applied to a situation that evokes stress or disappointment, indicate sarcasm. The speaker doesn't literally adore the moment—they're expressing dissatisfaction through exaggerated praise.

Example 4. "Traffic jam at 7 AM? Yes! Exactly what I needed to boost my mood today." Here, "exactly what I needed" and "boost my mood" are sarcastic because they are clearly untrue. Nobody finds pleasure in being delayed in traffic. These positive phrases ironically highlight the speaker's frustration. The sarcasm emerges from semantic contradiction.

Example 5. “Being left on read is my favorite thing ever. Makes me feel so appreciated.” The tweet uses enthusiastic language such as “favorite thing ever” and “so appreciated” to describe an experience commonly associated with rejection or emotional neglect. The speaker doesn’t feel appreciated—on the contrary, they feel ignored. The sarcasm lies in the false positivity.

Use of Contrast and Irony

Sarcasm in this category is formed through clear contradictions between statements or the juxtaposition of expectations and outcomes. These tweets present ironic pairings that alert the reader to the sarcastic intent, even if no explicit emotion is stated.

Example 1. “I’m so proud of myself for waking up early... just to scroll on my phone for an hour.” The tweet starts with what appears to be self-praise, only to reveal a wasteful activity. The irony of celebrating early rising followed by unproductive behavior signals sarcasm. The reader identifies the contrast and understands that the speaker is mocking themselves.

Example 2. “I joined a gym and have been paying every month. Haven’t gone once. Totally worth it.” “Totally worth it” is clearly untrue in this context, since the speaker is wasting money. The contrast between the literal praise and the actual behavior creates irony. The sarcasm is driven by the recognition that the speaker doesn’t genuinely believe it was worth it.

Example 3. “I told myself I’d study all weekend, and now it’s Sunday night and I know nothing. Great plan!”

Here, “great plan” directly contradicts the failure to follow through with studying. The speaker uses irony to express regret or self-mockery. This contradiction between intention and reality forms the sarcastic undertone.

Example 4. “I set five alarms and still woke up late. Clearly, I’ve mastered time management.” The word “clearly” amplifies the sarcastic tone. Mastering time management would imply punctuality, but the speaker is using the phrase to ironically highlight their failure. The reader detects sarcasm from the clear incongruity between the claim and the behavior.

Example 5. “Didn’t check the weather and now I’m soaked. Smart move, me.” This sarcastic self-commentary uses irony to expose the speaker’s poor decision-making. Calling their mistake a “smart move” is intentionally false and serves to emphasize their regret. The contradiction between word choice and outcome is the semantic clue.

Use of Hyperbolic Language

Hyperbole refers to deliberate exaggeration for emphasis. When used sarcastically, it makes a statement sound obviously insincere. In tweets, this often appears as excessive positivity, over-the-top praise, or dramatic emphasis that no reader would take at face value.

Example 1. “Absolutely honored to be ignored by customer service for the third day in a row.” No one would feel “honored” in this situation. The word “absolutely” and the formality of “honored” exaggerate the speaker’s tone to such a degree that it becomes clear they are frustrated. The sarcasm is unmistakable due to the unrealistic nature of the emotion.

Example 2. “It only took 6 hours, 3 breakdowns, and one lost wallet to get here. What a flawless trip!”. This tweet layers multiple misfortunes and then uses the term “flawless,” which is incompatible with the list of negative events. The exaggeration is used to ironically frame the trip as something enjoyable, when it is clearly the opposite.

Example 3. “I love when my favorite show ends on a cliffhanger and the next season comes out in two years. Pure joy.”

“Pure joy” is hyperbolic and false in this context. The speaker is expressing impatience or frustration, not happiness. The exaggerated positivity of the phrase signals sarcasm through semantic imbalance.

Example 4. “Got rejected again today. That’s the fifth time this month. Feeling truly blessed.” The phrase “truly blessed” is an intentional overstatement. The speaker uses religious or spiritual language in a sarcastic manner to emphasize repeated rejection. The sarcasm relies on the reader recognizing the emotional dissonance.

Example 5. “Only 127 unread emails waiting for me this morning. Life is good.” This tweet uses numerical hyperbole to indicate being overwhelmed, then pairs it with the phrase “Life is good,” which creates a sharp contrast. The sarcasm lies in the ridiculousness of the statement when placed next to the overwhelming reality.

Semantic Construction and Interpretation of Sarcasm in Digital Contexts

The results of this study support the theoretical claims made by several scholars regarding sarcasm and meaning construction. According to Camp (2012), sarcasm is a type of verbal irony that requires contextual interpretation beyond surface-level language, which is evident in nearly all the tweets analyzed in this study. Readers are often required to reconcile the contradiction between literal wording and situational context in order to grasp the speaker’s actual emotional intent. This aligns with the observation of Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989), who argued that sarcasm recognition largely depends on the reader’s ability to detect incongruity between what is said and the surrounding reality. In text-based environments like Twitter where non-verbal cues such as intonation, facial expression, and gestures are absent this incongruity becomes more pronounced. Nevertheless, the findings of this study show that semantic elements within the tweets themselves, including word exaggeration, ironic phrases, and positivity in clearly negative contexts, can effectively replace these missing cues and guide readers toward accurate interpretation.

Furthermore, the structural consistency found in sarcastic tweets echoes the analysis of Tsur et al. (2010), who identified recurring linguistic features in sarcastic expressions such as sentiment polarity reversal and the pairing of unexpected lexical items. These elements were observed repeatedly in the collected tweets, suggesting that sarcasm on Twitter is not accidental or purely humorous, but is constructed through systematic linguistic strategies. In addition, this study demonstrates that readers are not passive recipients of language they actively interpret, infer, and negotiate meaning by drawing on their understanding of emotional cues, social norms, and contextual knowledge. This process supports the relevance theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1981), which states that meaning is derived from the interaction between utterance and inference.

Sarcasm, as a communicative act, requires readers to resolve intentional ambiguity through reasoning and contextual awareness. As a practical implication, this research emphasizes the importance of language sensitivity in digital interactions. Misunderstandings, especially in intercultural or formal settings, can arise when sarcasm is not detected or is misinterpreted. Thus, developing an understanding of how sarcasm operates semantically can enhance not only digital literacy but also the clarity and effectiveness of online communication.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that sarcasm in social media, particularly on platforms like Twitter, functions as a complex semantic phenomenon that relies on the interplay between literal language and contextual meaning. Despite the absence of non-verbal cues in text-based digital communication, users frequently employ specific semantic markers such as exaggerated positivity, lexical incongruity, and polarity shifts to express sarcastic intent. These semantic features help signal to readers that the surface meaning of a message diverges from its intended communicative function.

The research findings affirm previous theories that emphasize the role of contextual knowledge and inferential reasoning in understanding sarcasm. Sarcastic tweets often follow recognizable patterns that require readers to detect contradiction between the literal wording and the situational context. This reinforces the idea that meaning in digital communication is actively constructed by both the writer and the reader. As a result, the study highlights the importance of semantic awareness in online interaction and the need to develop linguistic sensitivity to reduce misinterpretation—particularly in multicultural and high-stakes digital environments. Future applications include improving sentiment analysis systems and fostering more effective human-computer interaction in natural language processing.

REFERENCES

- Alaramma, S. K., Habu, A. A., Ya'u, B. I., & Madaki, A. G. (2023). Sentiment analysis of sarcasm detection in social media. *Gadau Journal of Pure and Allied Sciences*, 2(1), 76–82. <https://doi.org/10.54117/gjpas.v2i1.72gadaufos.com>
- Chaudhary, S., & Kakkar, M. (2021). Sarcasm detection technique on Twitter data with natural language processing. In S. Tiwari et al. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Big Data, Machine Learning and Their Applications* (pp. 223–234). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-8377-3_24SpringerLink+1gadaufos.com+1
- Hernández Farías, D. I., Sulis, E., Patti, V., Ruffo, G., & Bosco, C. (2015). ValenTo: Sentiment analysis of figurative language tweets with irony and sarcasm. In *Proceedings of SemEval 2015* (pp. 694–698). ACL. <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/S15-2117aclanthology.org+1SpringerLink+1>
- Joshi, A., Sharma, V., & Bhattacharyya, P. (2017). Harnessing context incongruity for sarcasm detection. In *Proceedings of ACL-IJCNLP* (pp. 757–762). <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/P17-1134> (available in *ACL Anthology*)
- Kader, F. B., Nujat, N. H., Sogir, T. B., Kabir, M., & Hasan, H. (2022). Computational sarcasm analysis on social media: A systematic review. *arXiv Preprint*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2209.06170arXiv>
- Pant, K., & Dadu, T. (2020). Sarcasm detection using context separators in online discourse. *arXiv Preprint*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2006.00850arXiv>
- Tungthamthiti, P., Shirai, K., & Mohd, M. (2016). Recognition of sarcasm in microblogging based on sentiment analysis and coherence identification. *Journal of Natural Language Processing*, 23(5), 383–405. <https://doi.org/10.5715/jnlp.23.383J-STAGE+1J-STAGE+1>
- Tungthamthiti, P., Shirai, K., & Mohd, M. (2017). Recognition of sarcasm in microblogging based on sentiment analysis and coherence identification. *Information and Media Technologies*, 12, 80–102. <https://doi.org/10.11185/imt.12.80J-STAGE+1J-STAGE+1>
- Wiguna, B. S., Hudiayanti, C. V., Rausanfita, A. A., & Arifin, A. Z. (2021). Sarcasm detection engine for Twitter sentiment analysis using textual and emoji feature. *Jurnal Ilmu Komputer dan Informasi*, 14(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.21609/jiki.v14i1.812jiki.cs.ui.ac.id>
- Yunitasari, Y., Musdholifah, A., & Sari, A. K. (2019). Sarcasm detection for sentiment analysis in Indonesian tweets. *Indonesian Journal of Computing and Cybernetics Systems*, 13(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.22146/ijccs.41136Jurnal Universitas Gadjah Mada>