

THE LINGUISTICS OF POLITE MOCKERY AND SWEET INSULTS: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF 50 ENGLISH IDIOMS

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Abstract

In our daily lives, we interact with a variety of people in different settings—family members, friends, colleagues, students, or customers. There are occasions when we wish to express disagreement or frustration but cannot do so directly, and instead resort to indirect, sugar-coated expressions, idioms, and witty sarcasm. While some may argue that sarcasm signals weakness, others consider it a sign of intellect; as Oscar Wilde famously wrote, “Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit but the highest form of intelligence.” This study investigates fifty commonly used sarcastic idioms and expressions in English to examine their pragmatic functions, face-management strategies, and reliance on conversational implicature. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the analysis is grounded in Grice’s Cooperative Principle and Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory, showing how speakers strategically flout conversational maxims and perform off-record face-threatening acts. Findings reveal that sarcasm is a cognitively and socially sophisticated discourse strategy, enabling speakers to express criticism, maintain social harmony, and demonstrate linguistic creativity. The study contributes to the understanding of sarcasm as a pragmatic, context-dependent, and socially regulated phenomenon, with implications for sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and applied linguistics.

Keywords: sarcasm, idioms, pragmatics, conversational implicature, politeness theory, indirect communication, face-threatening acts

1. Introduction

Language in everyday interaction is not merely a tool for conveying information but also a means of managing social relationships, emotions, and power dynamics. Speakers frequently encounter situations in which direct expression of disagreement, criticism, or frustration may threaten social harmony or interpersonal relationships. In such contexts, indirect language becomes a strategic resource. One prominent form of indirect communication is sarcasm, which allows speakers to convey negative evaluation through humor, irony, and figurative language rather than explicit confrontation. Despite its often humorous surface, sarcasm performs serious interpersonal functions, particularly in face-sensitive interactions.

Sarcasm occupies a paradoxical position in social discourse, as it is often perceived as either a sign of rudeness or an indicator of wit and intelligence. While some view sarcasm as communicative weakness or passive aggression, others regard it as a marker of linguistic creativity and cognitive sophistication. This dual perception has made sarcasm a topic of sustained interest across pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and cognitive linguistics. Researchers argue that sarcastic utterances rely on shared knowledge, contextual awareness, and inferential reasoning, making them a complex form of meaning-making rather than a simple stylistic choice.

In everyday communication, sarcasm frequently manifests through idioms and conventionalized expressions that disguise criticism as humor or politeness. These “sweet insults” allow speakers to perform indirect verbal aggression while maintaining social decorum. Such expressions are particularly common in professional, educational, and interpersonal settings where direct insults are socially unacceptable. However, despite their

prevalence, sarcastic idioms remain underexplored as a systematic linguistic phenomenon, especially in terms of their pragmatic functions, face-management strategies, and reliance on implicature.

The present study addresses this gap by conducting a qualitative pragmatic analysis of fifty sarcastic idioms and expressions commonly used in English. Drawing on Grice's Cooperative Principle and Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, the study examines how sarcasm operates as an indirect communicative strategy to express criticism, mockery, and social positioning. By analyzing the implied meanings and pragmatic functions of these expressions, the study aims to demonstrate that sarcasm is not a sign of communicative weakness but rather a sophisticated linguistic resource that reflects pragmatic competence and cognitive agility.

2. Literature Review

Sarcasm has been widely examined within the field of pragmatics as a meaning-making phenomenon that operates beyond literal semantics. Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle laid the foundation for understanding sarcasm as a product of conversational implicature, arising when speakers deliberately flout maxims—particularly those of Quality and Manner—to convey implied meanings. Building on this framework, scholars such as Attardo (2000) and Gibbs (2000) argue that sarcasm is not a violation of cooperative communication but a sophisticated pragmatic strategy that presupposes shared contextual knowledge between interlocutors. Previous research consistently emphasizes that sarcastic utterances require listeners to recognize semantic incongruity and infer speaker intent, highlighting the central role of context, inference, and pragmatic competence in sarcastic interpretation.

Within politeness theory, sarcasm has been conceptualized as a complex form of verbal behavior that simultaneously threatens and manages face. Brown and Levinson's (1987) model identifies sarcasm as an off-record politeness strategy, allowing speakers to perform face-threatening acts indirectly. Subsequent studies (Culpeper, 2011; Dynel, 2016) further explore this paradox, suggesting that sarcasm can function as both impoliteness and strategic politeness depending on context, relationship, and power dynamics. Research in this area highlights that sarcasm enables speakers to criticize, mock, or express disapproval while maintaining deniability and social decorum. This body of literature positions sarcasm as a key resource for managing interpersonal relationships rather than merely an expression of hostility.

From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, sarcasm has been associated with higher-order cognitive processing and linguistic sophistication. Scholars such as Kreuz (1996) and Gibbs and Colston (2012) argue that both the production and comprehension of sarcasm require advanced inferencing abilities, theory of mind, and sensitivity to contextual cues. Empirical studies in psycholinguistics demonstrate that understanding sarcasm involves recognizing a mismatch between literal meaning and intended meaning, which activates complex mental representations. This literature challenges the perception of sarcasm as communicative weakness and instead frames it as evidence of cognitive flexibility, creativity, and pragmatic awareness, reinforcing the notion that sarcasm is a marker of advanced language use.

Sociolinguistic research has examined how sarcasm operates differently across social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Studies by Holmes (2006) and Schnurr (2009) show that sarcasm is frequently employed in workplaces as a mitigated form of criticism, allowing speakers to navigate hierarchical relationships and professional norms. Similarly, discourse-analytic research indicates that sarcasm functions as a socially regulated practice, with its acceptability determined by factors such as power relations, familiarity, and shared norms. This strand of literature emphasizes that sarcasm is not inherently rude or humorous but

contextually situated, serving distinct communicative purposes in informal conversations, professional environments, and public discourse.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to examine sarcasm as an indirect pragmatic strategy in everyday English discourse. The analysis focuses on the implied meanings, communicative functions, and politeness strategies embedded in sarcastic idioms and expressions. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate as it allows for an in-depth interpretation of figurative language, implicature, and context-dependent meaning, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone.

3.1 Tools for Data Collection

The data were collected through manual compilation of naturally occurring sarcastic idioms and expressions commonly used in informal and semi-formal English communication. Sources included everyday spoken interactions, popular discourse, and culturally conventionalized idiomatic usage familiar to proficient English users. The selected expressions were documented, categorized, and analyzed using pragmatic and discourse-analytic tools, with particular attention to metaphor, irony, exaggeration, and indirectness. No elicitation instruments or participant responses were involved, as the focus of the study is on the linguistic structures and pragmatic meanings of the expressions themselves rather than speaker perception.

3.2 Sample

The sample consists of fifty (N = 50) sarcastic idioms and expressions, purposefully selected to represent a wide range of indirect evaluative functions, including intellectual mockery, behavioral criticism, passive-aggressive professionalism, mock praise, and expressions of social superiority. Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure diversity in semantic structure, pragmatic function, and contextual applicability across interpersonal, institutional, and social domains. The sample size was deemed sufficient to identify recurring pragmatic patterns while maintaining analytical depth and theoretical relevance.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversational Maxims (1975) and Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987). Grice's framework is used to explain how sarcasm arises through the deliberate flouting of conversational maxims, particularly those of Quality, Quantity, and Manner, resulting in implicature-based meaning. Brown and Levinson's politeness model provides insight into how sarcasm functions as an off-record face-threatening act, enabling speakers to express criticism while preserving social harmony. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive pragmatic lens through which sarcastic discourse is analyzed as a cognitively and socially strategic form of communication.

4. Analysis

The following idioms and expressions exemplify **indirect verbal aggression**, where criticism, frustration, or mockery is conveyed through **figurative language, irony, and pragmatic implicature** rather than explicit insult. Such expressions function as **off-record politeness strategies** (Brown & Levinson, 1987), allowing speakers to preserve social harmony while still expressing negative evaluation.

1. *“He is worth as much as an aspirin for the dead.”*

Literal meaning: Aspirin cannot help a dead person.

Sarcastic meaning: The person is completely useless.

Pragmatic function: Harsh criticism disguised as metaphor.

Face strategy: Off-record insult through exaggeration.

2. *“Wisdom is chasing him, but he is faster.”*

Literal meaning: Wisdom cannot catch him.

Sarcastic meaning: He lacks intelligence or awareness.

Pragmatic function: Mocking intellectual incompetence.

Tone: Witty sarcasm through personification.

3. "He is older than the earth."

Literal meaning: Impossible age.

Sarcastic meaning: Extremely old-fashioned or outdated.

Pragmatic function: Age-related criticism softened by hyperbole.

4. "As sharp as a marble you are, I see."

Literal meaning: A marble is not sharp.

Sarcastic meaning: The person is dull or unintelligent.

Pragmatic function: Indirect insult via ironic comparison.

5. "Our clients will be less than impressed."

Literal meaning: Mild dissatisfaction.

Sarcastic meaning: Strong disapproval or failure.

Pragmatic function: Professional sarcasm used to soften criticism in workplace discourse.

6. "An olive short of a pizza."

Literal meaning: Missing an ingredient.

Sarcastic meaning: Mentally deficient or eccentric.

Pragmatic function: Humorous mockery through idiomatic variation.

7. "The light is on but no one is home."

Literal meaning: Empty house with lights on.

Sarcastic meaning: The person is mentally absent.

Pragmatic function: Criticism of attentiveness or intelligence.

8. "Not playing with a full deck."

Literal meaning: Incomplete cards.

Sarcastic meaning: Lacking mental capacity.

Pragmatic function: Euphemistic insult minimizing direct offense.

9. "His brain is not at home."

Literal meaning: Brain is absent.

Sarcastic meaning: Inattentive or foolish behavior.

Pragmatic function: Informal indirect criticism.

10. "Beautiful as the midnight sun."

Literal meaning: The sun cannot appear at midnight.

Sarcastic meaning: The subject is not beautiful at all.

Pragmatic function: Irony through impossible imagery.

11. "An empty can makes the loudest voice."

Literal meaning: Empty containers are noisy.

Sarcastic meaning: People who know least talk the most.

Pragmatic function: Social criticism masked as proverb-like wisdom.

12. "Blown between the ears."

Literal meaning: Something missing in the head.

Sarcastic meaning: Lack of intelligence or sense.

Pragmatic function: Colloquial insult softened by metaphor.

13. "Chasing one's tail."

Literal meaning: Circular movement.

Sarcastic meaning: Engaging in pointless activity.

Pragmatic function: Indirect criticism of inefficiency.

14. "He is shaking the pear tree."

Literal meaning: Shaking a tree unnecessarily.

Sarcastic meaning: Wasting effort or acting foolishly.

Pragmatic function: Cultural metaphor implying futility.

15. "He is out as a balcony."

Literal meaning: A balcony is outside.

Sarcastic meaning: Completely out of one's mind.

Pragmatic function: Humorous exaggeration of mental absence.

16. Passive aggressive

Meaning: Indirect expression of hostility through politeness or sarcasm.

Pragmatic function: Allows speakers to criticize while maintaining surface politeness.

17. "He has two left feet."

Literal meaning: Both feet are left.

Sarcastic meaning: Extremely clumsy.

Pragmatic function: Mild mockery without direct insult.

18. "His mind has gone to the dogs."

Literal meaning: Mind deteriorated.

Sarcastic meaning: Intellectual decay.

Pragmatic function: Negative evaluation softened by idiomatic phrasing.

19. "He is a dinosaur."

Literal meaning: An extinct animal.

Sarcastic meaning: Obsolete or resistant to change.

Pragmatic function: Age-based sarcasm in professional or social contexts.

20. "Daft as a brick."

Literal meaning: A brick is inanimate.

Sarcastic meaning: Extremely stupid.

Pragmatic function: Blunt sarcasm via simile.

21. "Dimmer than a 22-watt bulb."

Literal meaning: Low brightness.

Sarcastic meaning: Low intelligence.

Pragmatic function: Technological metaphor used for ridicule.

22. "He is five minutes to midnight."

Literal meaning: Near the end of the day.

Sarcastic meaning: Near collapse or failure.

Pragmatic function: Temporal metaphor for decline.

23. "I'm not saying I hate you... you are literally the Monday of my life."

Sarcastic meaning: Strong personal dislike.

Pragmatic function: Humor masks emotional aggression.

24. "It's okay if you don't like me. Not everyone has good taste."

Sarcastic meaning: The other person lacks judgment.

Pragmatic function: Self-praise combined with indirect insult.

25. "Sarcasm is the body's natural defense against stupidity."

Sarcastic meaning: Others provoke sarcasm due to their ignorance.

Pragmatic function: Justification of sarcasm as intellectual superiority.

26. "I love sarcasm. It's like punching people in the face but with words."

Sarcastic meaning: Sarcasm replaces physical aggression.

Pragmatic function: Metacommentary on linguistic aggression.

27. "Life's good, you should get one."

Sarcastic meaning: The listener lacks fulfillment.

Pragmatic function: Condescending mockery.

28. "I clapped because it's finished, not because I like it."

Sarcastic meaning: Strong dissatisfaction.

Pragmatic function: Irony as indirect evaluation.

29. "If I had a dollar for every smart thing you say, I'd be poor."

Sarcastic meaning: The person says nothing intelligent.

Pragmatic function: Financial metaphor for intellectual absence.

31. "He couldn't pour water out of a boot with the instructions on the heel."

Literal meaning: Failure to perform a simple task despite guidance.

Sarcastic meaning: Extreme lack of intelligence or competence.

Pragmatic function: Intellectual mockery through hyperbolic imagery.

Face strategy: Off-record insult via exaggerated metaphor.

32. "If brains were dynamite, he wouldn't have enough to blow his hat off."

Literal meaning: Insufficient quantity of dynamite.

Sarcastic meaning: Severe intellectual deficiency.

Pragmatic function: Ridicule through metaphorical scarcity.

Tone: Biting sarcasm softened by humor.

33. "Not the sharpest tool in the shed."

Literal meaning: A dull tool.

Sarcastic meaning: Below-average intelligence.

Pragmatic function: Mild intellectual criticism.

Face strategy: Euphemistic sarcasm reducing direct offense.

34. "A few fries short of a Happy Meal."

Literal meaning: Incomplete meal.

Sarcastic meaning: Mentally incomplete or eccentric.

Pragmatic function: Informal mockery using pop-cultural metaphor.

35. "His elevator doesn't go all the way to the top."

Literal meaning: Elevator malfunction.

Sarcastic meaning: Cognitive limitation.

Pragmatic function: Indirect insult via mechanical metaphor.

36. "About as useful as a screen door on a submarine."

Literal meaning: Completely ineffective object.

Sarcastic meaning: Total uselessness.

Pragmatic function: Criticism of functionality via absurd comparison.

37. "All bark and no bite."

Literal meaning: Loud but harmless.

Sarcastic meaning: Lacks substance or action.

Pragmatic function: Behavioral criticism masked as idiom.

38. "A lot of smoke but no fire."

Literal meaning: Illusion of activity.

Sarcastic meaning: Claims without results.

Pragmatic function: Indirect evaluation of credibility.

39. "Running around like a headless chicken."

Literal meaning: Chaotic movement.

Sarcastic meaning: Disorganized and inefficient behavior.

Pragmatic function: Criticism of competence through vivid imagery.

40. "He brings nothing to the table."

Literal meaning: No contribution.

Sarcastic meaning: Lack of value in collaboration.

Pragmatic function: Professional criticism softened by metaphor.

41. "Stuck in the Stone Age."

Literal meaning: Living in prehistoric times.

Sarcastic meaning: Resistant to progress or modernization.

Pragmatic function: Temporal metaphor for intellectual rigidity.

42. "He's using yesterday's map to navigate today's world."

Literal meaning: Outdated navigation.

Sarcastic meaning: Inability to adapt to current realities.

Pragmatic function: Sophisticated metaphor implying obsolescence.

43. "Technologically challenged."

Literal meaning: Difficulty with technology.

Sarcastic meaning: Incompetence disguised as politeness.

Pragmatic function: Institutional euphemism for inadequacy.

44. "Bless your heart."

Literal meaning: Expression of sympathy.

Sarcastic meaning: Condescending dismissal or pity.

Pragmatic function: Culturally coded sarcasm.

Face strategy: Positive politeness masking insult.

45. "Well, that was... something."

Literal meaning: Vague evaluation.

Sarcastic meaning: Strong disapproval without explicit negativity.

Pragmatic function: Strategic ambiguity.

46. "You tried."

Literal meaning: Acknowledgment of effort.

Sarcastic meaning: Failure despite effort.

Pragmatic function: Minimalist sarcasm via understatement.

47. "Let's just agree to disagree."

Literal meaning: Mutual respect for differing views.

Sarcastic meaning: Conversation termination due to frustration.

Pragmatic function: Face-saving exit strategy.

48. "Bold of you to assume that was a good idea."

Literal meaning: Praise for confidence.

Sarcastic meaning: The idea was clearly bad.

Pragmatic function: Ironic compliment.

49. "I admire your confidence."

Literal meaning: Praise.

Sarcastic meaning: Confidence exceeds competence.

Pragmatic function: Mock praise as evaluative sarcasm.

50. "Well, aren't you a ray of sunshine."

Literal meaning: Cheerful compliment.

Sarcastic meaning: The person is unpleasant or negative.

Pragmatic function: Irony through affective contrast.

4. 1. Comprehensive Coding Tables for All 50 Idioms

Table 1

Functional Pragmatic Categories of Sarcastic Idioms (N = 50)

Category	Description	Idiom Numbers
Intellectual Mockery	Indirect criticism of intelligence or cognition	2, 4, 6–9, 12, 18, 20–21, 29, 31–35
Uselessness / Ineffectiveness	Highlighting lack of value or	1, 13–14, 36, 38, 40

Category	Description	Idiom Numbers
Behavioral / Performance Criticism	contribution	
Age / Obsolescence	Inefficiency, chaos, incompetence	11, 17, 22, 37, 39
Mock Praise / Ironic Compliment	Resistance to change, outdatedness	3, 19, 41–43
Passive-Aggressive Professionalism	Praise implying criticism	10, 24, 48–50
Social Superiority Assertion	Workplace-safe sarcasm	5, 16, 28, 45–47
Emotional / Personal Dislike	Speaker elevates self over target	25–27
	Expressing dislike indirectly	23–24

Key Insight:

The dominance of *intellectual mockery* confirms that sarcasm primarily functions as a **tool of cognitive and social positioning** rather than mere humor.

Table 2

Pragmatic Strategy and Face-Threat Type

Strategy	Description	Examples
Off-record strategy	Implicit insult via metaphor/irony	Majority (≈70%)
Negative politeness	Minimizing imposition (workplace)	5, 40, 43
Positive politeness (mock solidarity)	Humor masking insult	11, 17, 44
Bald-on-record sarcasm	Minimal mitigation	20, 21, 29

Interpretation:

Sarcasm allows speakers to perform **Face Threatening Acts (FTAs)** while maintaining **plausible deniability**, a crucial pragmatic advantage.

2. Alignment with Grice's Maxims (All 50 Idioms)

Table 3

Gricean Maxim Violations and Resulting Implicature

Maxim Violated	How It Is Violated	Resulting Implicature
Quality	Saying something obviously false ("sharp as a marble")	Meaning is opposite
Quantity	Understatement ("less than impressed")	Strong criticism
Manner	Deliberate ambiguity ("that was... something")	Negative evaluation
Relevance	Apparently unrelated praise ("ray of sunshine")	Sarcastic insult

Global Observation:

All 50 idioms rely on **intentional maxim flouting**, requiring the listener's **inferential competence** to decode sarcasm. This supports Grice's claim that meaning is often *implied rather than stated*.

3. Alignment with Brown & Levinson's Politeness Theory

Sarcasm in the dataset consistently functions as an **off-record politeness strategy**, enabling speakers to:

- Threaten **positive face** (competence, intelligence)
- Preserve **interactional harmony**
- Retreat to humor if confronted

Face Targets Identified:

- **Positive face threat:** intelligence, competence, likability (most idioms)
- **Negative face threat:** autonomy in workplace settings (5, 47)

This confirms that sarcasm is a **strategic compromise between honesty and politeness**, not communicative weakness.

4.3 Theoretical Link

The analysis of fifty sarcastic idioms demonstrates that sarcasm operates as a highly strategic pragmatic device rather than a spontaneous expression of rudeness. By deliberately flouting Grice's conversational maxims—particularly those of Quality and Manner—speakers generate implicatures that rely on shared cultural knowledge and inferential reasoning. Within Brown and Levinson's politeness framework, sarcasm functions as an off-record face-threatening act that allows speakers to express criticism while maintaining social decorum. The consistent reliance on metaphor, exaggeration, and irony across the dataset suggests that sarcasm reflects advanced pragmatic competence and cognitive sophistication, supporting the view that indirect verbal aggression is a marker of linguistic intelligence rather than communicative deficiency.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of fifty sarcastic idioms and expressions highlights the complex role sarcasm plays in everyday communication, demonstrating that it is a **strategic, context-dependent, and cognitively sophisticated** form of discourse. Consistent with Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature, the study confirms that sarcasm relies on the deliberate flouting of maxims—particularly those of Quality, Quantity, and Manner—to generate meanings that are indirectly understood by the listener. Expressions such as “as sharp as a marble” or “less than impressed” illustrate how speakers communicate criticism through literal statements that, on the surface, may appear innocuous, yet imply the opposite meaning. This reinforces the notion that sarcasm is a **high-level inferential phenomenon**, requiring both speaker intention and listener interpretive competence.

From the perspective of politeness theory, the findings demonstrate that sarcasm functions primarily as an **off-record face-threatening act** (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Many expressions in the dataset, such as “he brings nothing to the table” or “you tried,” allow speakers to convey negative evaluations while preserving plausible deniability. This mechanism is particularly evident in professional and institutional contexts, where indirectness protects hierarchical relationships and mitigates potential interpersonal conflict. The study supports the view that sarcasm operates as a **politeness-management strategy**, balancing social harmony with the need for critical evaluation, and that the perceived rudeness of sarcasm is contingent upon context and audience expectations.

The cognitive and linguistic implications of the analysis suggest that sarcasm is a marker of **pragmatic competence and intellectual agility**. The production and comprehension of sarcastic idioms require recognition of semantic incongruities, cultural knowledge, and context-specific cues. As such, sarcasm is not a sign of communicative weakness, as commonly believed, but rather an indicator of sophisticated language use and reasoning ability. This finding corroborates previous psycholinguistic and cognitive-linguistic research (Gibbs & Colston, 2012; Kreuz, 1996), emphasizing that both speakers and listeners engage in higher-order inferential processing when navigating sarcastic discourse.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that sarcasm, particularly in the form of idiomatic expressions, serves multiple pragmatic functions: it allows indirect criticism, preserves face, establishes social hierarchy, and reflects cognitive and linguistic sophistication. The analysis confirms that sarcastic language is **contextually flexible**, socially regulated, and dependent on shared inferential competence between interlocutors. The implications of this research

extend to the fields of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics, suggesting that understanding sarcasm can enhance communicative competence in both social and professional interactions. Future research may explore cross-cultural variations in sarcastic expression or the role of digital communication platforms in shaping contemporary sarcastic discourse.

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