

MOCKING THE THRONES: A QUALITATIVE PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF SARCASM AS DIGITAL POLITICAL RESISTANCE IN PAKISTANI TWITTER DISCOURSE (2023-2025)

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore the pragmatic value of the use of sarcasm as one type of resistance on Pakistani Twitter (X) discourses from 2023 to 2025. This study adopts Herring's (2007) Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CDMA) framework, Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) and Grice's Theory of Conversational Implicature (1974) to analyze selected sarcastic tweets (from the corpus of 200 tweets) aimed against political individuals, government institutions, and economic policies in Pakistan. This qualitative research will help us understand the use of irony, praise, exaggeration, and rhetorical questions as acts of criticism and dissent. As a result of the analysis, it is possible to say that there are three interconnected planes on which sarcasm operates within Pakistani Twitter discourse: as an ideational tool that challenges mainstream narrative; as an interpersonal technique that creates collective unity between protesters; and as a discursive practice that enables resonance due to features of the social media platform including the use of hashtags, threads, and retweets. This study sheds light on the relatively new research area of digital pragmatics and political discourse in the postcolonial context of South Asia.

Keywords: sarcasm, digital resistance, Twitter discourse, Pakistani politics, pragmatics, relevance theory, digital discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

There has never been politically non-charged language. At all times and in all cultures, disadvantaged and minority groups and non-conforming individuals have used innovative language to defy authority – if it is not safe to do so head-on. This impulse is manifested in today's digital world in what may seem like a simple tool – Sarcasm. Sarcasm as a form of dissent, frustration and political opposition has become a dominant means of communicating on social media, especially on Twitter (now called X since 2023) where any criticism of the regime could be met with a response that may result in repercussions due to limits on press freedom (Al-Saqaf & Seidler, 2021; Bouvier, 2020).

The study of digital sarcasm as political resistance is a good fit for Pakistan, which has been the site of rather strange political movements, including the independent development of a secular (mis)nationalist movement. In the years 2023 – 2025, the country faced some serious political and economic crisis, the forced removal and subsequent criminal prosecution of Imran Khan, who was once the Prime Minister of the country, and a sovereign debt crisis as well as the record

high inflations, rising tensions between the military and judiciary, and a general election in February 2024, which were widely disputed on social media. In this context, the Pakistani Twitter community created a vernacular of sarcasm, using a mix of Urdu and Roman Urdu, and English, to poke fun, re-invert and subvert official narratives that were disseminated in the mainstream media (Roozenbeek et al., 2023; Hussain & Fatima, 2024).

Pragmatically, sarcasm poses a very complex phenomenon to analyse. But while simple assertion is understanding what the words in the sentence convey, sarcasm is understanding that it is the opposite of or different from what words conventionally convey – “The speaker did not mean exactly what he wrote.” (Wilson & Sperber, 2012). This results in a layered communicative act, whose successful appreciation involves acts of community membership – without having access to the socio-political context, the appreciation of the ironic act is not possible (Gibbs, 2000; Attardo, 2000). The public, networked nature of Twitter enables this to happen even more so through the sharing, quoting and hashtagging of sarcastic statements, that can gain political leverage and momentum. (Zappavigna, 2012; Herring, 2007)

While there is a growing literature on the discourse and communication within digital media in South Asian context, little research has focussed on the pragmatic strategies used by the Pakistani Twitter users to express sarcasm as a structured form of dissent. While some studies have used computational tools for sentiment analysis (Rizwan et al., 2020; Amjad et al., 2022), others have explored Pakistani political discourse using Critical Discourse Analysis which fails to consider the use of irony and sarcasm in it as a pragmatic strategy (Shahzad et al., 2021; Iqbal & Ali, 2023). Hence, the present study will try to bridge this gap by providing an in-depth, qualitative pragmatics analysis of the sarcastic discourses from the Twitter sphere in Pakistan from 2023-2025.

1.1 Problem Statement

Although there has been an increase in computational methods for sarcasm detection on social media over the last few years (e.g. Bouazizi & Ohtsuki, 2016; Sarsam & Al-Samarraie, 2020), qualitative pragmatic studies about sarcasm as a socio-politically motivated communicative practice are still underrepresented particularly for non-Western, postcolonial digital contexts (e.g. Danet & Herring, 2007; Meijer & Kormelink, 2021). The challenges in analysing Pakistani Twitter discourse are further complicated by it being multilingual, a mixture of formal and informal writing, and infused with the genre of satirical resistance which is prevalent in Urdu poetry and popular culture and by its subject to intermittent internet censorship and platform-level shadowbanning (Freedom House, 2024; Hussain & Fatima, 2024). The variables are not fully discussed in the existing pragmatics models designed for the pragmatic context of the West in English language. This research aims to fill this gap by analysing the sarcastic nature of the tweets in the discourse of Pakistan with qualitative pragmatic approach in 2023–2025 when there was a lot of contestation in Pakistan politically.

1.2 Objectives

The aim and purpose of this study is:

- a) To identify and classify pragmatic form of sarcasm used in the discourse of Pakistani

twitter between 2023-2025.

b) To analyse the role that the sarcasm plays in foregrounding and in digital resistance, related to particular political events and institutional actors.

c) To examine the impact of sarcastic discourse and the community identity and rhetorical solidarity that is produced between the Pakistani Twitter users as a result of this discourse.

1.3 Research Questions

In this research the following questions will be aimed:

- a) What pragmatic forms of sarcasm are most occur in Pakistani Twitter discourse in 2023-2025 and how they are associated with events of the political discourse they are pointing at?
- b) What is the effectiveness of using sarcastic Twitter to achieve oppositional solidarity?
- c) What are the foregrounding and ideological inverting role of sarcasm in the political discourse online in Pakistan?

The current research aims at exploring the idea of sarcasm not just as a stylistic device but as a sophisticated and culturally embedded pragmatic practice which allows Pakistani citizens to have a say in power, define their own identity as a community and engage in a politically subversive and public performance practice. It aims to do so in order to document the field of digital pragmatics (Herring, 2007; Yus, 2011), the nature of social media-language in political discourse in postcolonial contexts (Pennycook, 2007; Canagarajah, 2013) and also in the field of resistance discourse in social media (Bouvier, 2020; Al-Saqaf & Seidler, 2021).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sarcasm: Theoretical Background

Classical and modern theories about the use of language form the bases for the pragmatic approach to the study of sarcasm. According to Grice (1975), sarcasm may be considered to be an example of flouting of the maxim of quality which means that the speaker knowingly uttered a statement that he/she did not believe to be true in order to suggest, according to the cooperative principle, something different (usually the opposite) by the maxim of quality. This was a basic analysis, although significantly developed by the Relevance Theory of Sperber and Wilson (1986) who took the view that sarcasm is best explained as an echoic use: the speaker repeats a proposition (this can be attributed to another speaker, a social expectation or an institutional norm) and takes an attitude of dissociation or mockery towards it (Wilson & Sperber, 2012). The hearer can only get the implication of sarcasm by making inference on speaker's communicative intention in the context.

Attardo's (2000) work on sarcasm continued in his General Theory of Verbal Humor, which focused on the fact that while there may be both gentle or neutral ironic statements, there must be

a target of sarcasm, and it must ridicule or put it down. Psycholinguistic evidence, provided by Gibbs (2000), suggested that the hearer(s) process the literal and context incongruity and make inferences on the speaker's attitude in order to understand the sarcastic speech. In addition, Colston (2017) showed that a sarcastic statement is more effective than its non-sarcastic counterpart in terms of both effectiveness and memory—due to the extra thinking needed to fully comprehend the sarcastic message, this content is more salient to the reader.

Sarcasm has been discussed from two aspects in discourse analysis: firstly as a face threatening act (FTF) (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and secondly as a way of positioning oneself against the other (oppositional positioning). Dynel (2013) claimed that sarcasm in the online discourse is more complicated since the 'public visibility' of the communicative act alters the addressee of the communication: a sarcastic tweet does not only have its intended target but also a community of 'bystanders' who are imagined to be the target of the mockery. This aspect of digital sarcasm that deals with its audience is at the epicentre of the political role of digital sarcasm (Zappavigna, 2012, Androutsopoulos, 2014).

2.2 Sarcasm in Digital and Political Discourse

Since the advent of social media as a new media to communicate with the public, the study of sarcasm in digital discourse has much grown. Herring (2007) suggested the conceptual model of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) which focuses on the aspects of language use in a digital context: structural, interactional and contextual. In this context, the characteristics of the platform (Twitter) such as the brevity of tweets, threading, hashtagging and retweeting impact the form and function of sarcasm in a way that differs from other modes of oral or written communication (Zappavigna, 2012; Meijer & Kormelink, 2021).

Bouazizi and Ohtsuki (2016) have recognized a list of formal indicators of sarcasm in tweets such as punctuation, intensifiers and positive words which are followed by negative sentiment context. Their work was based on a computational model; however, they recognized that sarcasm was a pragmatic phenomenon, one that needs to be explained in its context and that it is difficult to explain correctly using an automated model. Sarsam and Al-Samarraie (2020) also pointed out that the sentiment analysis tools fail to identify sarcasm in non-English tweets, and called for adopting qualitative pragmatic sentiment analysis tools that take in consideration the cultural and political context.

In the realm of political communication, Bouvier (2020) suggested that social media sarcasm may be considered a means of 'digital resistance' (p. 4), which can be a form of political participation for citizens without access to the mainstream media or who are at risk with regards to voicing their dissent. Al-Saqaf and Seidler (2021) investigated the use of Twitter in repressive political climates and discovered that when people turn to Twitter, they are following an ironic and sarcastic communication style to express their opposition while proffering a level of "plausible deniability. Roozenbeek et al. (2023) investigated how sarcastic messages on social media served as a counter narrative to state propaganda, and concluded that the more it was effective in situations where there was less trust in institutions.

Critical Discourse Analysis was used to analyze Pakistani political tweets to identify the use of metaphor and mockery targeting the state actors by Shahzad et al. (2021), who discovered that

metaphor and mockery were used very frequently in the political tweets. Iqbal and Ali (2023) explored how humour has been deployed in the politics of Pakistan's online sphere and what kind of humour it consisted of, finding sarcasm to be the most prevalent form of civic critique in the online sphere. Amjad et al. (2022) and Rizwan et al. (2020) have performed computational analysis of sarcasm in Urdu and Roman Urdu data from social media, which although supported the findings of the prevalence of sarcasm in the social media data, however, highlighted the need for interpretive analysis grounded in qualitative methods.

2.3 Gap in Research

A continuous qualitative pragmatic study of sarcasm in Pakistani Twitter discourse, focusing on the formal aspects of sarcasm with regard to certain political events and their socio-cultural background would be a valuable addition to the existing literature. To date no study has specifically combined Herring's (2007) Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CDMA) framework, Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) and Grice Implicature Theory to analyse the phenomenon of sarcastic resistance in the politically critical period of 2023 – 2025 in the discourse of Pakistan. The platform affordances of Pakistani Twitter, the multilingual code switching and the postcolonial political affect that is encountered in the sarcasm of Pakistani Twitter is unique discursive assemblage that needs to be examined separately as highlighted by Hussain and Fatima (2024). The aim of the present study is to fill this gap, responding to the need for greater attention to context and culture sensitivity in the study of sarcasm expressed by Yus (2011) and Dynel (2013) which called for more pragmatic study of sarcasm.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The overall method of this study is qualitative and uses a corpus assisted approach that is grounded in Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), Grice's (1975) Theory of Conversational implicature and to account for digital nature of the data Herring's (2007) Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CDMA) framework is used to investigate the linguistic, interactional and social characteristics of sarcastic political tweets in Pakistani Twitter Discourse. The main analysis of the results focuses on pragmatics of sarcasm and the rhetorical functions of sarcasm in context. This design seems to fit in the context of the study, which aimed to gain a better understanding of the socio-political implications of sarcastic tweets as situated communicative acts.

3.2 Data and Corpus

The corpus consists of 200 sarcastic tweets (selected) in English, Urdu and Roman Urdu language that were gathered from the twitter of Pakistan from January 2023 to March 2025. The data was gathered through five significant socio-political events, which were sampled using purposive sampling method, through the use of tweets.

A detailed description of the composition of the corpus in terms of the number of tweets, time period of events, language of the tweets and main target institution, is presented in Table 1 below.

Speech / Event	Period	Tweets (n)	Language Mix	Primary Target
Imran Khan Arrest & Prosecution	May–Aug 2023	52	English / Roman Urdu	PTI govt / Judiciary / Army
General Election 2024 & Disputed Results	Feb–Mar 2024	48	English / Urdu	ECP / Caretaker Govt
26th Constitutional Amendment	Oct–Nov 2024	42	English	Parliament / Judiciary
IMF Bailout & Inflation Crisis	2023–2024	38	English / Roman Urdu	Finance Ministry / PM Office
Internet Shutdowns & Censorship	2023–2025	20	English	PTA / Federal Govt
TOTAL	2023–2025	200	—	—

The contextual incongruity, explicit mockery markers, user community recognition (based on the replies the thread of a tweet received) and Relevance Theory criteria (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Wilson & Sperber, 2012) were used for the identification of tweets as sarcastic. Just those tweets that met the following criteria were taken in: those that could be strongly identified as a sarcastic tweet.

3.3 Analytical Framework and Procedure

There are three complementary resources of theory used in the analytical framework. One is the pragmatic perspective which in this case is Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) and the other is the use of echoic and attitudinal dissociation in the communication of meaning from the literal content of the tweet. Secondly, an analysis of sarcastic implicature based on Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and maxim flouting gives an additional description of the inferential processes involved in deriving the sarcastic implicature. Finally, Digital Discourse Analysis (Herring, 2007; Zappavigna, 2012) provides the methodological instruments for considering the platform specific features of hashtag networks, retweet chains and threading that serve as a means to mediate the pragmatic and political use of sarcasm within the twitter space.

The process of data analysis was done in four stages: (a) thematic reading of the corpus was done to determine political events and targets of discursions; (b) the sarcastic tweets were identified and extracted based on the criteria given in Section 3.2; (c) the identified sarcastic tweets were classified according to formal type; and (d) the identified and classified formally sarcastic tweets were then pragmatically analyzed based on the theories mentioned above.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Ironic Inversion as Ideological Reframing

The most formalistically marked and analytically discernible form of sarcasm in the corpus is ironic inversion, which focuses at moments when official messages from the institutional sphere are felt to be belied by lived reality – most systematically in those emanated by institutions like government ministries, courts and media regulatory bodies. It does this by making the statement opposite to the one the speaker would like to make; as a result it is used in context where the incongruity between what is said and what is that incongruity is salient enough for the intended audience to be able to figure out what the speaker's communicative intent is (Wilson & Sperber, 2012; Attardo, 2000).

The pattern of ironic inversion in the corpus that is sustained most often is in response to economic announcements. In 2023, the Ministry of Finance issued a statement about the country's economic situation, which said the economy was on a path of 'stabilising'. Several users commented on the statement, while praising the 'stabilisation' in effusive language, at the same time enumerating the prices of essential commodities.

"Absolutely, the economy is booming. Flour: Rs. 180/kg. Electricity: Rs. 60/unit. Tomatoes: Rs. 400/kg. Masha'Allah, stabilisation is a beautiful thing. #NayaPakistan"
(Tweet 1, Corpus; in response to Finance Ministry Statement, September 2023)

The basic pattern of ironic inversion, which consists in the repetition of the official proposal in an exaggerated way 'the economy is booming' and the dissociative attitude is expressed by the incongruity between the 'mock-laudatory' expression and the damning evidence of the prices mentioned along with it (Wilson & Sperber, 2012). The hashtag NayaPakistan (New Pakistan), which was used as a slogan by the previous government is ironically used as a label, accusing both previous and present governments at the same time (Zappavigna, 2012; Bouvier, 2020).

"Great news everyone. My salary hasn't changed in two years but petrol is at Rs. 330/litre. Truly a golden era. The PM was right, we just needed to tighten our belts — except my belt is now a rope. #EconomicMiracle"
(Tweet 2, Corpus; responding to PM address on austerity measures, November 2023)

Satisfied with this development, the author believes that steps must be taken to ensure the implementation of the mitigation measures outlined in the PM's address, which has nothing to do with austerity measures.

Tweet 2 is an extension of the ironic inversion pattern, where abstract economic information becomes embodied with the use of a personal pronoun, and a story of suffering, which becomes grotesque through the belt/rope metaphor. The move from the abstraction of the institution to the reality of the hardships of the individual are further amplified by the use of sarcasm, highlighting the gap between the official discourse and what has happened in reality (Fairclough, 2003; Colston, 2017).

"Brilliant. IMF gave us \$3 billion and now a kilo of chicken costs Rs. 700. Imagine how expensive things would be without the bailout. Truly saved. #PakistanZindabad"
(Tweet 3, Corpus; responding to IMF tranche approval, July 2023)

The counterfactual inversion, 'imagine how expensive things would be without the bailout', put forth by Tweet 3, is paradoxical, and accuses the bailout as the source of the problem, not the solution. This is a high level pragmatic move; the speaker seems to be accepting the IMF intervention, and reveals what it is that is the cause of the very crisis that it was supposed to cure (Grice, 1975; Wilson & Sperber, 2012).

"Doctor ko dikhana Rs. 2000. Dawai Rs. 3000. Government ka kehna: 'Hum tumhare saath hain.' Zaroor. [Translation: Doctor visit Rs. 2000. Medicine Rs. 3000. Government's message: 'We are with you.' Absolutely.] #HumTumaharaySaath"
(Tweet 4, Corpus; Roman Urdu example, responding to PM welfare speech, February 2024)

In the case of tweet 4 (see example in roman urdu below), the multilingual aspect of the ironic inversion in the corpus is illustrated. Official discourse of welfare ('Hum tumhare saath hain') is directly contrasted with material deprivation and the ironic punch line is provided by the single word 'Zaroor' (Absolutely), which could not be captured in the same way by English alone, and is culturally resonant (Hussain & Fatima, 2024; Canagarajah, 2013). Worth of pointing out is that at the level of Halliday's (1985) ideational metafunction, the ironic inversion is a strategy to present the dominant representation of the economic reality, and then juxtapose it with counter-evidence, in a way that it is impossible to ignore the falseness of the official representation. This type of critical inversion, as Fairclough (2003) notes, looks at the ideology of official economic discourse, which renders inequality as natural and represents it as progress.

4.2 Mock Praise as Adversarial Solidarity

Mock praise is formally a different type of sarcasm that uses the language and grammar of praise to criticize an institutional object to which they address their remarks (Attardo 2000; Colston 2017). In the corpus, mock praise is much more focused on tweets related to the judicial decisions, army statements or electoral commission announcements. This pragmatic force is based on the opposition between the institutionalized register of praise and the satirical function in which it is used; a gap which must be filled by the readers' political knowledge and attitude with the speaker's sarcasm.

"Congratulations to the honourable judges for this landmark decision. Truly a historic day for the rule of law. Pakistan's judiciary remains an inspiration to the world. Bravo. #JusticeServed"

(Tweet 5, Corpus; responding to Supreme Court verdict widely criticised as politically motivated, September 2023)

In Tweet 5, he is going after the courts, since they too base their powers on claims of impartiality. There are formal indications of institutional praise, the syntactic and lexical repetition of the institutional praise markers—'honourable,' 'landmark' and 'historic. The register and the political situation imply each other's contradiction, which triggers the echoic interpretation, the official stance of institutional integrity, is echoed and at the same time ridiculed (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Grice's maxim of quality is blatantly violated and this leads to the implicature that the speaker believes that the event is exactly the opposite of just.

"What an incredible institution the ECP is. 47 million missing votes found! 47 MILLION. That's not incompetence, that's talent. Genuinely in awe. #ElectionResults2024"
(Tweet 6, Corpus; responding to ECP announcement of disputed election results, February 2024)

Tweet 6 is aimed at Electoral Commission (EC) of the Pakistan. The use of typographic emphasis '47 MILLION' is a typical 'mock-astonishment' marker identified as a formal sarcasm marker in the Twitter data by Bouazizi and Ohtsuki (2016). "That's not incompetence, that's talent" is a highly calculated inversion that is self-evidently pointing at the very incompetence it is denying, and makes institutional failure to be a sign of a systematic bad faith.

"Hats off to PEMRA for protecting us from dangerous journalism. Who needs investigative reporting when you can have infomercials 24/7? Truly serving the nation. #FreePressLol"

(Tweet 7, Corpus; following PEMRA ban on critical news channel, June 2023)

During a time of heightened repression on the part of PEMRA for the critical news channel, the social media flow of messages around the country was dominated by this tweet.

Tweet 7 lauds PEMRA (media regulatory body) - only to mock at the same time. The words 'Truly serving the nation' are an ironically perfect expression of the state's public service slogan and thus pose an indictment. The rhetorical question this tweet contains - 'who needs investigative reporting?' - preempts and breaks down in advance the official excuse for the ban (Gibbs, 2000; Dynel, 2013).

"Mashallah, the army spokesperson explained everything so clearly. I feel so informed. All my questions have been answered. Transparency at its finest. #ISPRbriefing"
(Tweet 8, Corpus; following ISPR press conference on political arrests, May 2023)

Tweet 8 shows mock praise of a military institution, indicating a generalisability of the pattern for targets of institutions. One of the most telling examples of mock praise is the expression "all

my questions have been answered," which seems to be the very opposite of praise, suggesting that none of the questions were answered, and that no responsibility was taken on by the praise-giver (Gibbs, 2000; Meijer & Kormelink, 2021). The mock praise in online discourses bonds a reader too: those who can read between the lines are allies, are the "knitters" (Dynel 2013), and in this case they are allies with the institutional target, the area's "other" that is being degraded.

4.3 Hyperbolic Ridicule and Emotive Climax

Hyperbolic ridicule is a comic amplification which is accompanied with a sarcastic attitude towards a political target (Gibbs 2000, Colston 2017). This is seen more in the reply tweets to the official statements that are thought of as ridiculous, out of touch or not telling the truth. Hyperbolic ridicule has a very affective purpose: it makes political frustration and anger 'digestible', means it can be shared and enjoyed and creates what Meijer and Kormelink (2021) call 'affective resonance' in digital communities.

"Fantastic news! The government has reduced electricity bills by Rs. 5. I can now finally afford a second bowl of water per day. Thank you, our benevolent lords. My children will definitely eat tonight. Progress!"

(Tweet 9, Corpus; responding to electricity subsidy announcement, January 2024)

The structure of the hyperbolic ridicule has been built-up one after the other starting from the trivial saving (Rs. The more the clauses accumulate (from 1 to 5) the more the incongruity between the official discourse and the reality grows and finally this incongruity becomes grotesque (feeding the children). The last single word 'Progress!' is a stylized example of what Attardo (2000) terms the 'punch line' of sarcasm, one of the signals that, by being compressed and terminal, has the greatest rhetorical impact and gives the ironic verdict.

"The internet is back after 96 hours. I feel like a prisoner released into a changed world. Did anything happen? Is there still a country? Is flour still Rs. 300? Same? Okay good, right where we left off. #PakistanInternet"

(Tweet 10, Corpus; following end of internet blackout, May 2023)

But tweet 10 is hyperbole, albeit in a different way: the restoration of the internet is depicted as a philosophical awakening ('a prisoner released into a changed world'), as much as a political outrage, and as a testament to the length of the censorship and its consequences. Rhetorical questions sequence - 'Did anything happen? Is there still a country?'-conducts a funny list of the end of the nation, followed by the anti-climatic 'Same?'. 'Okay good' takes the steam out of the situation and proposes that it's the 'normalcy' of such incidents that is really irritating in Pakistan.

"Incredible. Petrol price reduced by Rs. 2.46. I am going to take my family on a road trip to celebrate. Lahore to Karachi. Full tank. Done. #Relief[sic] #EconomiTurnaround[sic]"

(Tweet 11, Corpus; following petrol price revision announcement, October 2023)

Tweet 11 is of note because it willfully misspell words—“Releif” and “EconomiTurnaround”—as noted by Androutsopoulos (2014), which can serve as ironic markers of performance in the tweet, the over-done incompetence of the spelling reflecting the perceived incompetence of the policy. The ridiculous detail in ‘Lahore to Karachi, Full tank’ makes an inconsequential cut in price into a caricature of the aspirations of the nation frustrated by the mismanagement in the economy.

"My electricity bill this month: Rs. 47,000. My monthly salary: Rs. 45,000. Government: 'We've protected the vulnerable.' WHICH vulnerable?? Where are they? I would like to meet them and ask how. #NEPRArates"

(Tweet 12, Corpus; following NEPRA tariff announcement, August 2024)

Tweet 12 is no longer holding back on the mockery; it lets the outraged rhetoric fly and, in fact, is hyperbolic, so the only way to deal with the arithmetic in the salary/bill comparison is to be hyperbolic in the outraged rhetoric. The use of the capitalised rhetorical question, 'WHICH vulnerable??' indicates a shift from the tone of irony and a move towards feeling more distressed, a trend also seen in the digitally mediated political humor of Pakistan (Iqbal & Ali, 2023). The number of retweets for this tweet was more than 12,000, which is in line with Colston's (2017) results that sarcastic tweets are more memorable and cognitively appealing than sincere critique.

4.4 Rhetorical Questioning and Moral Indictment

Rhetorical questioning, in turn, occurs when the sarcastic speaker(s) want to suggest moral reproach on the part of the institutional participants in addition to merely mocking them (Gibbs, 2000; Dynel, 2013). A double role of rhetorical questions in sarcastic communication is that on the surface it is a question, while at the pragmatic level it is a statement and the target of the sarcasm is taken to be morally and/or intellectually unacceptable (Grice, 1975; Wilson & Sperber, 2012). The rhetorical use of questions in the corpus falls into three major groups of events with moral consequences: crackdowns after the elections (2024); shutdown of the internet (2023, 2025); and constitutional manipulation debates (late 2024).

"Oh interesting. So arresting thousands of civilians is 'maintaining public order.' And shutting the internet is 'national security.' And banning protests is 'protecting democracy.' Tell me again how this is different from fascism? We're asking for a friend."

(Tweet 13, Corpus; following post-election crackdowns, March 2024)

Tweet 13 uses the rhetorical question as the sarcastic mocking mode by presenting the official arguments in ironic inversions followed by the direct question 'how is this different from fascism', thus changing the communication from a mocking mode to a moral one. The phrase 'we're asking for a friend' is a widely spread Twitter convention which gives the impression of a knowing community, a collective that performs with ironic status, which the speaker is a part of (Androutsopoulos, 2014).

"A sitting Chief Justice is removed via constitutional amendment. A new one is appointed in 12 hours. Courts endorse the process. And we're calling this 'strengthening institutions'? Who is this for? Genuinely asking. #26thAmendment"
(Tweet 14, Corpus; following passage of 26th Constitutional Amendment, October 2024)

Tweet 14 takes the very obvious 'for whom' out of the question and instead asks 'who is this for?', setting up the obvious answer as a question that is left for the reader to answer, namely the 26th Constitutional Amendment. Here, Grice's maxim of quantity is violated, since the speaker gives less than the usual amount of information (the answer is blank) and at the same time suggests the implicature that the answer would be very harmful for him to put forth. The suggestion of speed of the process ('appointed in 12 hours') is juxtaposed with the formality (courts endorse the process') to reveal the manipulation.

"You arrested a former PM. You put his party workers in military courts. You rigged an election. And now you want us to call you 'democratic'? How? With what face? Seriously. How? #PTI #Pakistan"
(Tweet 15, Corpus; directed at ruling establishment, April 2024)

In Tweet 15, the rhetorical questioning is developed by the creation of a list of charges up to the point of the final repeated 'How?', which is nicely reminiscent of Atkinson's (1984) work on three-part lists, which build up reader interest. By repeating 'How?', the moral pressure is increased, more than a mere sarcastic question, it's a true confrontation. The use of second person address (You arrested...), which is a way of doing away with distancing conventions of ironic discourse, is unusual and makes the moral indictment extremely explicit.

"Twitter blocked. VPN illegal. Journalists arrested. Channels off air. If someone is reading this from outside Pakistan: HELLO. This is fine. Everything is fine. Is it though? Is it?"
(Tweet 16, Corpus; during internet shutdown, February 2025)

Tweet 16 is perhaps the most formally inventive in the Corpus - this changes mid-tweet from documentation (Twitter blocked to) to a statement of their own (Twitter blocked.). To prevent this, change the VPN illegal to performance ('This is fine. But all is well ("is it though?")' is an ironic take on a meme that circulates on the internet) and then to a real question: Is it really all well? Isn't it?', playing down the ironic performance and eschewing the desperation which lies beneath. Such a tonal oscillation is typical of Pakistani digital political jokes, as Iqbal and Ali (2023) point out, as they are meant to convey the pain, but not tongue in cheek.

When considered in totality the four types of sarcasm found in the corpus reveal that sarcasm in discourse of the Pakistani Twitter is a multifunctional pragmatic tool. The results are in line with the literature on political sarcasm and digital resistance in general. Finally, Bouazizi and Ohtsuki (2016) came up with incongruity and adversarial intent as the most prominent characteristics of Twitter sarcasm and this analysis at the level of pragmatic mechanism corroborates them. This is confirmed by the cognitive processes underlying the effect of sarcastic utterances, which are found to be more impactful than the sincere ones (Colston 2017), as well as by the spread of the

corpus data on Twitter, which shows that sarcastic tweets have higher levels of engagement with followers. The most important being the Pakistani context which has not been discussed much in the literature – sarcasm as a survival strategy for political communication in censorship and repression, as in Al-Saqaf and Seidler (2021). The multilingual aspect of the corpus, specifically the Roman Urdu examples, shows that Pakistani sarcasm does not just represent an imported western digital rhetoric, but a culturally specific discursive practice that is an interpretation of the Urdu tradition ‘takhleeqi tankeed’ (creative criticism) in the affordances of the platform (Hussain & Fatima, 2024; Pennycook, 2007).

5. Conclusions

This study has shown that, sarcasm in Pakistani Twitter speech (2023–2025) is a systematic, multifunctional and politically impactful pragmatic strategy and not an ornamental and peripheral phenomenon. By analyzing four forms of sarcasm — ironic inversion, Mock-praise, Hyperbolic Ridicule and Rhetorical Question — it has been demonstrated that the users of this media in Pakistan use sarcasm as a mechanism to question the official stories, create a sense of solidarity with the opposition, and further propel a viral political critique in the context of a heavily censored media space.

The combination of , Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), Gricean pragmatics (Grice 1975) and Digital Discourse Analysis (Herring 2007; Zappavigna 2012) has been a fruitful approach to understand the pragmatic mechanisms of sarcasm and the platform-specific features that affect its political role. This finding of a multi-layering of sarcasm, both ideational, interpersonal and textual (Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), helps to understand digital political discourse as a multi-layered practice of communication, and agrees with similar investigations of politically restricted contexts (Bouvier, 2020; Al-Saqaf & Seidler, 2021).

In addition, the sarcasm in the studied texts is seen in a multilingual and postcolonial context which also makes a specific contribution to the study of Pakistani digital discourse as it highlights the pragmatic complexity of sarcasm in such context. The use of sarcasm in tweets, blending of languages (English, Urdu and Roman Urdu), appropriation of official slogans as well as the intentional use of typographic markers and misspellings all show that sarcasm in Pakistan on Twitter is grounded in a strong tradition of vernacular political satire, while simultaneously making it amenable to the capabilities of digital media. This continuity and adaptation has been under researched in the literature, and should be further researched.

Video-based sarcasm as growing in importance in more contexts such as Instagram Reels and YouTube comment sections where the corpus could be expanded to include, in future studies. Patterns of sarcasm uncovered in this study could be compared with those in other South Asian political discourses (such as South Asian countries India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) to determine if these patterns are unique to Pakistan or to the region (as a whole) (Pennycook, 2007; Canagarajah, 2013). In addition, a multimodal analysis of the framework to include the visual memes and image-text would significantly enhance the analysis, particularly because of the importance of visual sarcasm in the digital political culture of Pakistan (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Roozenbeek et al., 2023).

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