

## SARCASM IN SOCIAL AND COMMERCIAL ADVERTISING: A PRAGMALINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Modern social and commercial advertising systems devote a huge significance to the choice of the language used in various campaigns with the purpose to achieve maximum effectiveness of impact on the target audience. The current paper aims to uncover the pragmalinguistic peculiarities of language usage in attaining the above-mentioned goal through sarcasm. Linguistic and extra-linguistic levels of analysis serve as key components for detecting the sarcastic nature of the language used in social and commercial advertisements as well as their impact on conveying the non-literal meaning of the text. In the discussed samples of advertising discourse, sarcasm is demonstrated as a creative and effective form of communication in terms of delivering the intended message of the campaign. This notion greatly contradicts the traditional view toward the usage of ironic language, particularly sarcasm, since it is believed to provoke bitter and caustic effects.

**Keywords:** *sarcasm, pragmalinguistic function, social and commercial advertising, linguistic and extra-linguistic components, campaigns, creative language.*

### Introduction

The study of linguistic and extra-linguistic peculiarities in determining the pragmatic function of sarcasm in social communication is vastly observable in western advertising systems and marketing strategies. The perception of sarcasm in that form of communication is greatly based on the lexical and syntactic levels of analysis which have been of less attention in practical and empirical research of sarcasm by various linguists and scholars (McDonald, 1999; Miron-Spektor, Efrat-Treister, Rafaeli, Schwarz-Cohen, 2011; Kovaz, Kreuz & Riordan, 2013; Peters, 2013; Huang, Gino & Galinsky, 2015; Thomson & Filik, 2016; Ghosh, Fabbri & Muresan, 2018). The current research

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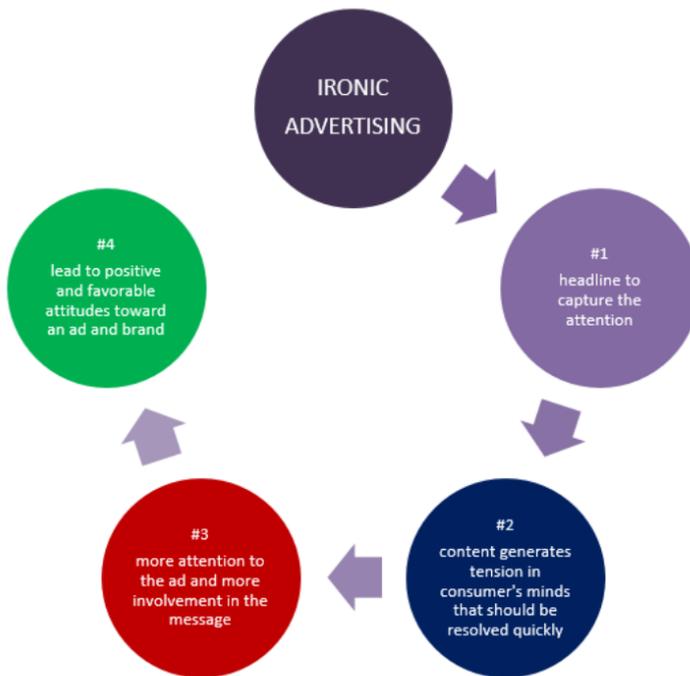
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aims to make a reference to a number of examples of advertisements where linguistic and extra-linguistic components of the text are implemented to reach the desired sarcastic effect in social and commercial advertising campaigns. These components serve as pragmalinguistic properties of the language employed since their functions in the text are determined by co-textual and contextual factors and can be viewed as assisting means of perceiving sarcasm in the social spectrum.

Modern advertising strategies greatly focus on the catchiness of their headlines and body texts so they can make an impact on masses of people and target audiences by capturing their attention and involving them in the thought processing of the advertisement. Consumers are all subjected to new advertising content every day, and sometimes it is incomprehensible how far that information can impact their decisions on a daily basis. In this respect, ironic and sarcastic advertisements play a key part in grabbing consumers' attention for a number of reasons. First of all, it is of great importance to come up with a catchy and attention-grabbing headline that will make the viewer take some time and get to know the body of the advertisement. Then, those advertisements usually make social references that need to be understood by the readers after processing the information of the content. This content generates tension in consumers' minds that should be resolved quickly and helps to grab more attention to the ad and get the readers more involved in the message. Consequently, it leads to positive and favorable attitudes towards the advertisement and the brand itself (How to exploit irony in the advertisement world).

The model of ironic advertising represented in Figure 1 is mostly based on the cognition of the readers and their awareness of the social reference of the text. Nevertheless, not in all cases, the purpose of the language employed and the intended meaning of the advertisement can be absolutely cognizable by the target audience. In the current study, the given model will be tested with the help of the upcoming discussion of advertising samples to evaluate its relevance in terms of message delivery through sarcasm in social and commercial advertising.

**Figure 1**  
Ironic advertising impact model



### Sarcasm as a means to deliver messages in social advertising

In a study on irony and sarcasm in advertisements, Lagerwerf (2007) discusses the probability of ironic and sarcastic advertising being incorrectly interpreted and publicly criticized (p. 1704). He also argues that sarcasm actually cannot be included in advertising because of its negative connotation (p. 1708), however, this statement is arguable for a number of reasons. Firstly, sarcasm does not always rely on the positive meaning of the utterance to convey a negative message. Then, advertising campaigns do not necessarily follow the ethics of politeness in terms of language usage. And finally, some advertising choices have proven their effectiveness through the creativity of sarcastic language. In a social advertisement by the National Insurance Institute of Costa Rica the speaker is telling the audience with a serious facial expression how to exceed the speed limit while driving a car (<https://youtu.be/8goDVjYr5g4>).

The detailed description given by the speaker who appears close-up in the video first arouses a weird sense of interpreting the literal meaning of the utterance. Why would a serious person explain how to do something illegal like exceeding the speed limit of a car? However, as we continue watching the

video, we are represented in a zoomed-out perspective of the speaker where we notice that he misses one of his legs which is apparently caused by a car accident because of exceeding the speed limit. Thus, in this example, the speaker absolutely means what he utters because he has already experienced that yet there is a non-literal hidden meaning in the context where people are indirectly warned about the consequences of exceeding the speed limit while driving a car. Now, let us just compare the impact index of a



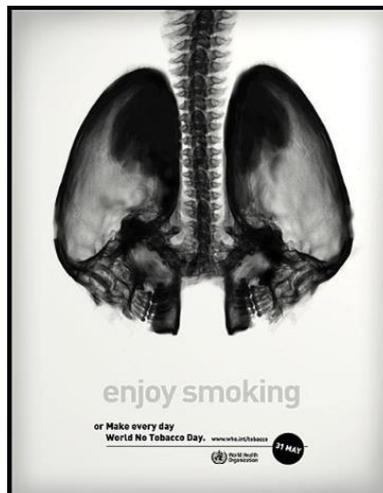
scenario where people are directly warned “Do not exceed the speed limit!” and the mentioned social advertising strategy which is sarcastically representing what may happen to anyone if they decide to exceed the speed limit and indirectly warns them not to do so. The answer seems obvious since people usually tend to breach rules that are imperative with no visual explanation of why the rule should be followed. So, Lagerwerf’s (2007) statements about the probability of ironic and sarcastic advertising being incorrectly interpreted can be challenged by the above-mentioned example where a creative usage of sarcasm in social advertising proves its effectiveness in delivering the message to the target audience and makes a bigger impact of a result.

Social advertisements have a great influence on any society’s collective decisions and have proved their effectiveness alongside the development of marketing strategies. The pragmlinguistic significance of the used language in the social advertising system is of notable importance and it is a fundamental part of its impact on public management. The more creative the advertising campaign is, the greater its efficacy in achieving the desired or intended result.

In some cases, the creativity of the advertising strategy used is derived by means of verbal irony, that is by meaning the exact opposite of the literal meaning of the utterance. A quite influential example of it is the social advertising campaign by the World Health Organization devoted to **World No**

**Tobacco Day** (<https://www.deviantart.com/gartier/art/NO-TOBACCO-POSTER-2012-308867895>).

The expression “*enjoy smoking*” does not actually convey a message of wishing people to enjoy this bad habit but, in fact, it proposes a sobering and alerting non-literal message by means of verbal irony. Now, the question is whether this example of verbal irony can also be sarcastic. The answer is positive if we consider the bitter and harsh impact of the statement on the reader. The sarcastic intention of this campaign is not to mock or make fun of smokers but it is to make the message of convincing them to give up smoking even stronger and hopefully achieve desirable outcomes. In this example, we also come across a creative usage of sarcastic language for better purposes than sarcasm is generally used and perceived. This strategy has come to prove its effectiveness in delivering simple messages than the one where people are warned about the negative effects of something bad by just an imperative statement. However, in this social advertising campaign, the text and its conveyed idea would not make such an impact on the reader if not for the illustrated x-ray picture of the blackened lungs of a smoker. The implicature of the statement merely is not a sufficient factor for the successfulness of the advertising strategy so in this case, linguistic and extra-linguistic components complement each other for achieving the communicative goal of sarcasm. It is of great importance to understand sarcasm on co-textual and contextual levels of analysis by taking into consideration the notion that linguistic and extra-linguistic components of the language come together to serve as a whole text with one complete and united message. The pragmatic function of sarcasm is derived from a combination where different aspects of the text are complementary.



In the following environmental social advertising, we come across another sarcastic statement that sends a strong message regarding the extermination of rhinos. The statement **“THE FINE ART OF EXTERMINATING AN ENTIRE SPECIES”** appears sarcastic due to the ironic remark that the exterminating species of rhinos can serve as a special material for making fine art and its caustic effect on the readers as well (Campaigns of the world).



The sarcastic headline of the advertisement follows the purpose to capture more attention by means of an illogical proposition that readers might also find irrelevant without paying attention to the visual content. In this advertisement, the picture of the rhino is represented in a distorted and designed way aiming to demonstrate how unscrupulous people kill these extinct animals to exploit their horn material for commercial purposes, as a result of which exterminating a whole species of rhinos. The non-literal meaning of this social advertising campaign is “Making art does not justify killing rhinos.” and it is delivered through a statement that overtly deems the opposite. The intended meaning of the utterance does contradict its literal proposition and, thus, creates a more captivating structure for viewers’ involvement.

So, if we evaluate the analyzed examples of sarcasm in the social advertising campaigns in terms of the ironic advertising model, it is apparent that their headlines are extremely captivating since they state something very unusual and irrelevant to the viewers, e.g., **“How to exceed the speed limit?”**, **“enjoy smoking”** and **“THE FINE ART OF EXTERMINATING AN**

*ENTIRE SPECIES*”, thus they capture more attention. In terms of the content of the advertisements, the viewers naturally try to resolve the issues as they do not sound relevant to them. The more the tension grows, the more attention they will pay to the advertisements, and the involvement in decoding the message will dramatically increase. As a matter of fact, all of these stages may function as they are supposed to, however, not all cases may lead to a favorable attitude considering the negative context of the message. Yet, if the context is negative it does not necessarily mean that its effect is less than that of a positive context. In fact, using sarcastic implicature to deliver your message to the target audience indulges a higher probability of achieving the anticipated results of the campaign.

### Sarcasm as a creative strategy in commercial advertising

Western advertising campaigns usually apply a creative language and quite often they undertake the policy of making an insignificant product presentation into a hilarious advertising idea. There have always been controversies in the discussions of the application of sarcastic language for the creativity of the message. For instance, in their book *“The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work”* Gottman and Silver (1999) discuss the relevance of sarcastic remarks in healthy relationships and consider them toxic solutions in terms of language choices. Meanwhile, in a latest study about the creativity of sarcastic language Huang, Gino, and Galinsky (2015) conducted four experiments to prove how sarcasm impacts the increase of creativity of both parties of conversation. Thus, the debate around the purpose of using sarcastic language can be relative to how and when people tend to appear sarcastic in social situations. So, to have a more tangible understanding of whether sarcasm delivers a more caustic and toxic message or it does actually foster effective communication through its creative solutions to language several examples of commercial advertising campaigns are analyzed where sarcasm plays a crucial role in making an impact on the level of involvement of the viewers in understanding the intended meaning of the advertising campaign.

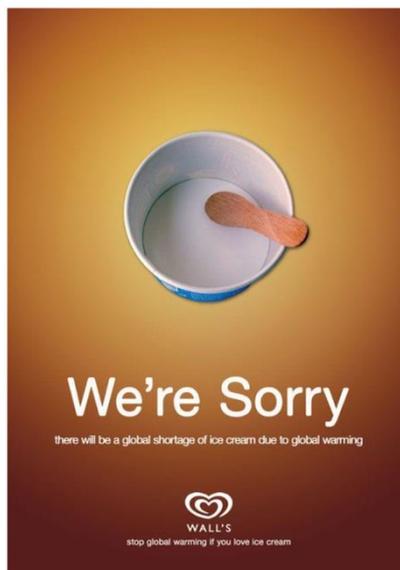


In the following example of the cough medicine advertisement, the sarcastic intention of the statement is revealed by the word “*cough*” in parenthesis. The expression’s literal meaning is contradicted by its non-literal implicature of the referent not being “*just a friend*”. The syntactic structure of the sentence is conditioned by the interpretation of its non-literal meaning as well as the explanation of the advertisement at the bottom of the picture (<https://www.creative-copywriter.net/blog/copywriting-samples/>).

The utterance “*She’s just a friend*” might not be of great importance in this advertisement if we do not consider the general context of the reference. The creativeness of the utterance is accompanied by the intention to pretend a situation where “*cough*” may imply a specific pragmatic meaning which will lead to an undesirable effect for the speaker. This is where we detect the sarcastic proposition of the utterance since the effect might be reversed which means that the victim of the used sarcastic utterance may be the speaker himself/herself. Therefore, it is important to evaluate all contextual elements of the reference including all the lexical components represented in the text to perceive the intended sarcastic meaning.

Another sarcastic solution to the language used is represented in the following commercial advertising campaign that in fact follows the purpose of increasing the social awareness of global warming. The British ice-cream company *Wall’s* came up with the idea of advertising an empty ice-cream cup with the statement “*We’re Sorry*” as an alerting message about the global warming issue (<http://www.conseilsmarketing.com/actus/les-publicites-les-plus-creatives-sur-la-canicule>).

The sarcastic intention of the text is conditioned by the literal meaning of the utterance that does not oppose the non-literal implicature. It is in the company’s interest to be actually sorry for not being able to provide their customers with their favorite ice cream, thus the illocutionary act of apology is sincere, yet in reality, they do not have any issues with producing ice cream. Coming from this, we can see that the intention of the advertising campaign is



not only to spread awareness about climate change but also to increase the company's reputation by promoting issues that are of global importance. This creative strategy uses a sarcastic main line to provoke the judgment of the readers toward the topic they focus on and increases their involvement in the message.

At first sight, it really makes sense to associate the global shortage of ice cream with climate change, but when you give it a second thought you realize that global warming is not necessarily related to the production of ice cream and the freezer industry, so the advertising campaign relies on the associations of the readers of something cold melting because of something hot, and it apparently achieves the desired effect. In this regard, sarcasm plays a fulfilling role in making the statement more relatable to the actual meaning they want to convey and for this reason, it leads to a more favorable and positive attitude toward the advertisement and the company regardless of the above-mentioned comments on the relevance of the topic.

Commercial advertising strategies do not always use sarcastic remarks to deliver the intended message of the campaign. Sometimes, they can also demonstrate a visual representation of the idea that conveys a sarcastic proposition. One of the giant companies in the motor vehicle industry worldwide *Volkswagen* came up with an advertising campaign idea to introduce its new precision parking system where the cars are allegorically replaced by animals, specifically, fish inside plastic bags filled with water and a hedgehog (NOVA Marketing Insights).



It is clearly visible in this picture that the plastic bags filled with water are intact even though they are in close proximity to the hedgehog thorns. This is a metaphor that implies the idea of perfect parking precision where the hedgehog is a *Volkswagen* car and the fish are other brands. The ironic implication of the advertisement is conditioned by the choice of a hedgehog no matter its sharp quills that can easily pierce the plastic bags. However, that choice appears to be sarcastic as well, at least for two reasons. Firstly, the parking system is introduced to be so precise that even the hedgehog's long quills do not touch the easily penetrable bags, and then, the plastic bags filled with water with fish inside allegorize the weakness of their rival companies and mock their parking systems. As a result, the sarcastic intention is revealed by the viewers' competence in interpreting the pragmatic context of the topic and deducting logical conclusions from the visual content alongside two descriptive lines: "*Precision Parking*" and "*Park Assist by Volkswagen*".

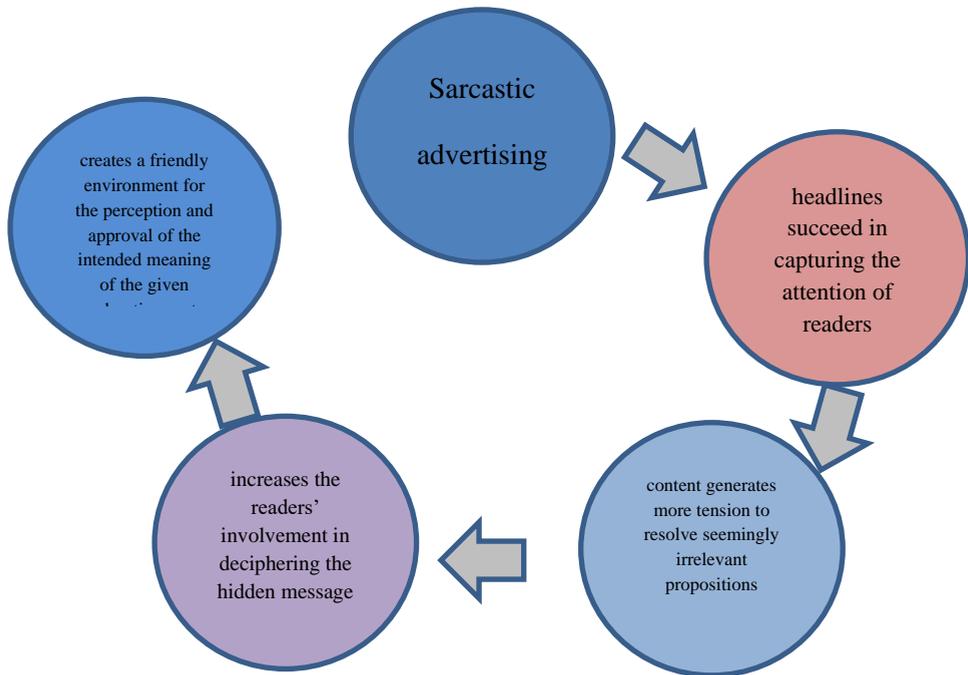
### Conclusion

The analyzed examples of commercial advertising campaigns demonstrate how sarcasm can stimulate the creativity of the language employed in terms of delivering non-literal implications through lexical and syntactic components of the text, the pragmatic characteristics of the utterance, and the interpretation of the visual content as a text. The purpose of using sarcastic language may still be questionable for different reasons, yet its impact on the creativeness of effect in social and commercial advertising strategies is undeniable:

- sarcastic headlines succeed in capturing the attention of readers,
- sarcastic content generates more tension to resolve seemingly irrelevant propositions,
- the process of resolving the issue of the advertisement increases the readers' involvement in deciphering the hidden message,
- decoding the message creates a friendly environment for the perception and approval of the intended meaning of the given advertisement.

Thus, the given points being tested in the discussed samples of social and commercial advertising discourse come together to represent an upgraded version of the ironic advertising model which is visualized in Figure 2 below. The introduced model is based on the pragmalinguistic function of sarcasm within the linguistic and extra-linguistic levels of analysis and opposes the traditional perception of sarcastic language in achieving an effective result among the target audience.

**Figure 2**  
Sarcastic advertising impact model



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## ՄԱՐԿԱԶՄԸ ՍՈՑԻԱԼԱԿԱՆ ԵՎ ԿՈՄԵՐՑԻՈՆ ԳՈՎԱԶԴԻՆԵՐՈՒՄ. ԼԵԶՎԱԳՈՐԾԱԲԱՆԱԿԱՆ ՍՈՏԵՑՈՒՄ

Հայկ Դանիելյան

Ժամանակակից սոցիալական և կոմերցիոն գովազդային համակարգերը մեծ կարևորություն են տալիս օգտագործվող լեզվական տարրերի ընտրությանը տարբեր գովազդային արշավներում՝ նպատակ ունենա-

լով հասնելու առավելագույն ներգործության արդյունավետության թիրախային լսարանի նկատմամբ: Սույն աշխատանքը նպատակ ունի սարկազմի միջոցով բացահայտել լեզվի գործածության գործաբանական առանձնահատկությունները: Վերլուծության լեզվական և արտալեզվական մակարդակները ծառայում են որպես հիմնական բաղադրիչներ սոցիալական և կոմերցիոն գովազդներում օգտագործվող լեզվի սարկաստիկ բնույթը բացահայտելու համար, ինչպես նաև դրանց ազդեցությունը տեքստի ոչ բառացի իմաստը փոխանցելիս: Գովազդային խոսույթի քննարկված նմուշներում սարկազմը դրսևորվում է որպես հաղորդակցության ստեղծագործական և արդյունավետ ձև՝ գովազդային արշավի համար նախատեսված ուղերձը տեղ հասցնելու առումով: Այս հասկացությունը մեծապես հակասում է հեգնական խոսքին վերաբերող ավանդական տեսակետին, մասնավորապես՝ սարկազմի օգտագործմանը, քանի որ ենթադրվում է, որ այն ունենում է դառը և խայթող ազդեցություն:

***Բանալի բառեր.** սարկազմ, լեզվագործաբանական նշանակություն, սոցիալական և կոմերցիոն գովազդներ, լեզվական և արտալեզվական բաղադրիչներ, արշավներ, ստեղծագործ խոսք:*