

Unveiling the Language Techniques Behind the Pragmatic Meaning of Sarcasm in American Confrontational Film Discourse¹

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Abstract. This article delves into the concept of sarcasm in confrontational American film discourse, examining its primary functions and characteristics. Specifically, the study focuses on how sarcastic statements are used in American television series to heighten emotional engagement and aesthetic appeal. The defining features of sarcasm, namely implicitness and double meaning, are also discussed. The analysis is conducted through a case study of the modern American drama series *This Is Us*, which highlights the key mechanisms utilized to achieve the pragmatic effect of sarcasm, including intonation, metaphors, and repetitions. Additionally, the article examines the work of translators, their professional challenges, and the methods and techniques employed to convey the semantic content of sarcastic messages in the target language. The findings suggest that translational means such as literal translation, ellipses, and equivalent translation are effective in transferring the intended sarcasm across languages. Overall, this study provides insight into the language techniques and translational strategies involved in the implementation of sarcasm in confrontational American film discourse.

Keywords: sarcasm, film discourse, conflict interaction, pragmatic meaning, conflictual communication, metaphors, repetitions, implicitness.

In order to give a text meaning, heighten emotional engagement and aesthetic appeal, writers often resort to various tropes and figures of speech. Film discourse, which is a genre of art in its own right, is currently enjoying a surge in popularity, contains all kinds of confrontational situations, dialogues and conflict scenes, and they are full of various methods and techniques for achieving a pragmatic effect. The most

¹ English translation from the Russian text: Pleshkova D.S. 2023. Unveiling the Language Techniques Behind the Pragmatic Meaning of Sarcasm in American Confrontational Film Discourse. *Professional Discourse & Communication*. 5(1). P. 62–73. (In Russian). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24833/2687-0126-2023-5-1-62-73>

commonly used rhetorical device in confrontational scenes is sarcasm, which helps make the film more dramatic and colourful, and this, in turn, has a greater impact on the viewer.

The relevance of this study lies, first of all, in the current incomplete understanding of the difference between the concepts of sarcasm and irony, which are indeed close in meaning, as well as in the low level of awareness of the pragmatic meaning of sarcasm and how it is used in conflict discourse in films. It may also be useful in terms of exploring the various kinds of difficulties that a translator may encounter when attempting to convey the intentions of sarcasm. After all, sarcasm is destructive and damaging, and it can be expressed through an entire range of linguistic means, equivalents of which are often impossible to find. Sometimes, satire is conveyed using the realities of the source language, which may be incomprehensible to a native speaker of the target language.

With this in mind, the present article aims to identify the common linguistic means of achieving sarcasm in a script and ways to translate this rhetorical phenomenon into Russian.

In terms of source material, we have used conflict scenes from the American drama series *This Is Us* that contain examples of sarcastic turns of phrase, as well as their translations into Russian.

Sarcasm as a Subject of Linguistic Research. A Brief Theoretical Summary

The fast pace of modern life means that people are increasingly turning to cinema as a favourite pastime. In this medium, the artistic intention of the creator(s) is conveyed using the moving image. In this regard, film discourse is of great interest, not also for sociologists and psychologists, but also for linguists. Anna Zareckaya defines the concept of film discourse as “a coherent text that makes up the verbal component of a film and, together with nonverbal components and other extralinguistic factors that are significant for the semantic completeness of the film, the audio-visual range of that film” (Zareckaya 2010: 70).

Researchers from various fields have attempted to define the concept and essence of sarcasm, because sarcasm resides in the comedic realm and thus penetrates all spheres of human life. Philosophically speaking, researchers have offered such definitions as “a judgement containing an element of mockery”²; while, from the point of view of psychology and pedagogy, sarcasm is seen as “ironic, cruel mockery built on exaggerating the contrast between what is expressed and what is implied”³.

² Ilyichev L. F. 1983. *Filosofskij enciklopedicheskij slovar'* [Philosophical Encyclopedic Dictionary]. Nauka. Iskustvo. Velichie [Science. Art. Greatness]. URL: <http://philosophy.niv.ru/doc/dictionary/philosophical/index.htm> (accessed 22.10.2022).

³ Matyushkin A. M. 2012. *Enciklopedicheskij slovar' po psihologii i pedagogike* [Encyclopedic Dictionary of Psychology and Pedagogy]. Nauka. Iskustvo. Velichie [Science. Art. Greatness]. URL: <http://med.niv.ru/doc/dictionary/psychology-and-pedagogy/articles/1307/matyushkin.htm> (accessed 22.10.2022).

However, the most interesting studies of the nature of sarcastic statements are those by T. V. Vavilova, E. G. Nozhevnikova and A. S. Kostygova, who examine the phenomenon of sarcasm from the linguistic standpoint.

Vavilova, for instance, studies sarcasm within the paradigm of the comedic and comes to the conclusion that sarcastic comments are a less definite and more complex form of communication. She also argues that sarcasm always implies a certain conflict, since the dual nature of the phenomenon is aimed at hurting and humiliating the interlocutor, undermining his or her authority, etc. (Vavilova 2010: 149).

Sarcasm is a kind of malicious irony or caustic mockery, the main purpose of which is to imply something by contrasting the implicit with what is expressed. Sarcastic comments are made in a veiled manner, using such linguistic techniques as, for example, gradation, metaphor and intonation (Khrumchenko 2012; Kostygova 2013). In order to express the pragmatic meaning of sarcasm, authors often resort to rhetorical questions and special marker expressions that can be used to kick off a conflict situation, neutralize another person's negative rhetoric, protect oneself against attacks by an opponent, or discredit or place another participant in a conflict at a disadvantage. Repetition also plays an important role in achieving the main function of sarcasm in film discourse, conveying significant additional information to create emotionality, expressiveness and stylization (Arnold 1973: 244).

A distinctive feature of any sarcastic statement is that it is implicit, which implies that the target of the statement may have difficulty understanding and denouncing the essence of the message being conveyed. For example, the speaker can use words and expressions to convey his or her subjective point of view that in their direct meaning would carry a positive semantic meaning, be it approval, praise, admiration, etc. However, when used sarcastically, these words carry the opposite meaning.

When used in confrontational film discourse, sarcasm can perform a number of functions: to provoke a conflict; to express veiled disapproval; as a way of identifying with a group; and as a way of placing someone in opposition with a group:

- 1) The most commonly used function of sarcasm is to **provoke a conflict**. Here, sarcastic statements are intended to offend one's interlocutor, put them in an awkward position, ridicule them, or even cause negative emotions and anger.
- 2) Sarcasm can also be used to express negative judgement through **veiled disapproval**. In this case, the pragmatic effect of a sarcastic comment comes from the substitution of the denotative meaning of the phrase being said. The implicit nature of the statement allows the speaker to express dissatisfaction with the situation or the actions of the opponent, while "saving their face".
- 3) Another important function of sarcasm is the **function of identification**, that is, of belonging to a particular group. Often, the implicit nature of a sarcastic comment is hidden behind an extralinguistic context. Recognizing a humorous statement as such places the person in a particular group and enhances the feeling of connection within the group.

- 4) At the same time, sarcasm can perform the exact opposite function – the function of opposition. That is, a sarcastic comment can be used to exclude people who do not share the same views (Nozhevnikova 2018: 148).

Materials and Methodology

The following methods were used for this study: linguo-stylistic analysis, contextual analysis, continuous sampling, and quantitative analysis.

For the source material, we chose the popular U.S. drama series *This Is Us*, which is of great interest in terms of the practical study of achieving the pragmatic effect of sarcasm. *This Is Us* is an American drama television series created by Dan Fogelman. The story revolves around the trials and tribulations of the Pearson family, their relationships with each other, and problems that they face and are likely familiar to us all. In other words, the show is relatable, and it shows viewers ways that could help them overcome life's hardships.

The main reason we chose *This Is Us* is its practical significance, since it is full of all kinds of conflict situations, during which the protagonists often resort to the use of sarcastic comments. Moreover, the series is of social interest, as it depicts domestic fights, family relationships, disagreements at work, lovers' quarrels, etc. In short, the show touches on aspects of life that we all know well.

We analysed over 120 scenes depicting conflict situations to determine the language means that are used to achieve the main communicative function of sarcasm, as well as the techniques used by the translator to render sarcastic statements in the target language and assess how accurately they are able to preserve the meaning intended in the original.

Results and Discussion

Let us look at the most striking and illustrative cases of the use of sarcasm in conflict discourse selected as the empirical material of this study:

Kevin: **Why do you think your daughter was hiding in my car? Why do you think your daughter was hiding in my car?** Have you ever thought about that? She's **avoiding the Randal show**. Welcome to the Randal Show, ladies and gentlemen (Subslikescript)⁴.

In this example, the use of the repetitive syntactic construction ("Why do you think your daughter was hiding in my car?") leads to escalation and creates emotional tension. The words, spoken with rising intonation, show Kevin's mood and reveal his

⁴ Subslikescript. Huge database of movies and series' English scripts. URL: https://subslikescript.com/series/This_Is_Us-5555260 (accessed 22.10.2022).

attitude to the situation. The subsequent use of a metaphor (“Welcome to the Randal Show”) puts the opponent at a complete disadvantage, since it compares his life to a show in which everything is absurd, comical and implausible.

Translating this syntactic construction into Russian, the translator does not to change the question, rendering it verbatim (“Как думаешь, почему твоя дочь спряталась в моей машине?”), which preserves the pragmatic effect of the original text. The translation of the metaphor is also literal, because it does not carry any extralinguistic context – it simply implies an awareness of the events that happened to the main character. Moreover, the translator’s choice of the lexical unit “устала” (lit. “tired, tired of sth.”) is the best, as it directly shows the attitude of Randal’s daughter to what has happened.

Kevin: And cue Randal out the door and cue mum chasing her favorite son.
This is such a predictable movie. You are so **predictable** (Subslikescript).

Кевин: И Рэнделл хлопает дверью, а мама бежит за своим любимчиком.
Как все предсказуемо. Вы такие **предсказуемые**.

The metaphor (“This is such a predictable movie”), spoken in a sarcastic manner, pokes fun at the current situation, comparing it to a mushy film or TV show that breaks the fourth wall. The lexical repetition of the word “predictable” shows Kevin’s attitude to the actions and behaviour of his relatives and reflects his disappointment and annoyance with the person he is speaking with.

In the translation, the translator does not preserve the metaphor, evidently seeing its use unnecessary. However, the chosen mode of transmission retains the pragmatic effect of the original and is achieved through the use of the pronoun “все” (“everything”) and the word order, thus preserving the pragmatic meaning of sarcasm in the target language. The translator also preserves the lexical repetition of the original, placing the relevant words at the end of the sentence, which emphasizes the relation of the utterance to the subject.

Kevin: Tell everyone the truth, which is that you love Randal the most. He is your favorite, right?

Rebecca: **It’s not true, Kevin. That’s absolutely ridiculous!**

Kevin: **That’s not true? It’s ridiculous. Yeah? Okay, it’s ridiculous** (Subslikescript).

Кевин: Просто скажи правду: ты любишь Рэнделла больше нас.

Ребекка: **Это неправда, Кевин. Это просто смехотворно.**

Кевин: **Неправда? Смехотворно?**

Here, the excessive use of lexical repetition (“ridiculous”) and the rhetorical question (“That’s not true?”) is aimed at neutralizing the other person’s negative rhetoric and minimizing the existing conflict. However, the phrase, uttered with falling intonation, shows that Kevin disagrees with what his mother is saying.

The translator does not stray too far from the original, using nominative and impersonal sentences (“Неправда? Смехотворно?” – lit. “That’s not true? That’s laughable”) to convey these syntactic constructions, thus giving a sharpness and dynamism to the statement and drawing the listener’s attention to the absurdity of what the speaker is saying.

Rebecca: How long has it been going, Jack? The drinking.

Jack: Few weeks.

Rebecca: Wow, I had no idea.

Jack: Yeah, well, you haven’t really been around.

Rebecca: **Ah, got it, awesome, thank you** (Subslikescript).

Ребекка: Как давно это продолжается, Джек? Как давно ты снова начал пить?

Джек: Пару недель назад.

Ребекка: Ух-ты. Я и понятия не имела.

Джек: Да, тебя почти не было рядом.

Ребекка: **А, ясно, круто, спасибо.**

In this example, falling intonation is coupled with the stylistic device of gradation to achieve the pragmatic effect of sarcasm (“Ah, got it, awesome, thank you.”). Arranged in ascending order, lexical units allow you to bring a conversation to a kind of turning point, expose the subjectivity of the statement and thus protect yourself from negative words spoken by your interlocutor.

The gradation is also preserved in the translation: lexical units arranged in ascending order of pragmatic meaning (“А, ясно, круто, спасибо” – lit. “Ah, that’s clear, great, thanks”) allow the translator to achieve the communicative function of sarcasm.

Jack: What happened with Ben?

Rebecca: He tried to kiss me.

Jack: And?

Rebecca: **And...? I’m sorry, are you kidding me right now? Are you actually serious? Oh, wow.**

Jack: **Great conversation, Rebecca. Great way to have things out** [Subslikescript].

Джек: Что произошло у вас с Беном? Ребекка: Он пытался поцеловать меня.

Джек: И?

Ребекка: **И? Прости, ты сейчас издеваешься надо мной? Или ты серьезно? Ничего себе.**

Джек: Да уж, отлично поболтали, Ребекка. Во всем разобрались сразу.

In this example, rhetorical questions (“Are you kidding me right now? Are you actually serious?”) are used to draw attention to the information being communicated. Rebecca does not need an answer to these questions – she merely wants to get Jack’s attention, raise the emotional tone, and demonstrate the absurdity of his thoughts and words.

The use of opposition through the conjunction “или” and the translator’s refusal to utilize gradation and overuse the adverb “actually” have the greatest communicative effect in the target language. The colloquial expression “ничего себе” as a translation of the English interjection “wow”, which typically reflects a reaction to something good and unexpected, is used in this context to convey the exact opposite meaning, which reveals the essence of the sarcastic comment, its implicit nature.

Jack reacts to Rebecca’s words and actions (she leaves the room) with a sarcastic comment (“Great conversation, Rebecca. Great way to have things out”), thus veiledly expressing his opinion on what his wife has done.

To convey this remark in Russian, the translator departs from the literal translation and uses the exclamation “Да уж”, which is typical for expressing annoyance and irony. However, an important detail is omitted from the second sentence – “Great way” – that Jack uses to ridicule Rebecca’s way of dealing with the problem. In this regard, the Russian translation of this sentence (“Во всем разобрались сразу” – lit. “You dealt with everything at once”) does not fully reflect the pragmatic meaning of sarcasm intended by the speaker.

Kevin: You know, it sucks. You know it’s like you get all of the firsts, right? And then I’m supposed to what, uh, just cling desperately to my phone, just hoping for a text from you? (Subslikescript)

Кевин: Это отстой. Ты рядом во все моменты. **А я должен гипнотизировать телефон в надежде на твоё сообщение.**

Maddison: Look, I’m sorry **that you are feeling feelings or whatever you’re doing right now**, but this is not a picnic for me, okay? (Subslikescript) /

Мэддисон: Слушай, **мне жаль, что ты переживаешь или что ты там делаешь, но мне тоже нелегко**, ясно?

Here, Kevin uses the rhetorical construction “I’m supposed to what” to convey his sarcasm, thus demonstrating his disappointment in the current situation, and the subsequent arrangement of syntactic constructions in ascending order of semantic meaning puts his wife at a disadvantage, because the words reflect his despair and the fact that he is resigned to his fate.

In turn, Madison counters with the phrase “feeling feelings or whatever you’re doing right now” as a way of ridiculing Kevin while at the same time helping him “save face”. She then neutralizes her negative rhetoric with the expression “I’m sorry” and the idiomatic “this is not a picnic for me”, thus defending herself from Kevin’s attacks and letting him know that it is not easy for her either.

Here, the translator decided not to use a rhetorical construction, replacing it with a simple sentence: “А я должен гипнотизировать телефон в надежде на твое сообщение” (lit. “And I am supposed to hypnotize the telephone in the hope that you might call”). The thematic division of the sentence conveys the communicative intention of the speaker, thus showing that Kevin has nothing to do but sit and wait for his wife to call.

It is obvious why the translator decided not to use the Russian versions of the idiom “to be no picnic” (such as “не сахар” – lit. “not sugar”, or “не подарок” lit. “no present”) as they do not quite fit the context of a quarrel between husband and wife and are more suited to a conversation between friends or teenagers, for example. Instead, the translator goes for the more neutral expression “но мне тоже нелегко” (lit. “but it’s not easy for me either”), which has greater communicative effect by contrasting the lives of Kevin and Maddison.

Conclusion

By way of a conclusion, we can state that sarcasm is an effective satirical and stylistic tool that is typically aimed at a person or situation. The only way to achieve the maximum communicative effect is if the participants in the communicative act use linguistic and extralinguistic factors.

The examples we analysed in this article showed the most frequently used stylistic and semantic methods of expressing the pragmatic effect of sarcasm in confrontational discourse as portrayed in film. In most cases, prosodic and stylistic means of achieving a pragmatic effect prevail. More often than not, this is the use of intonation and repetition, which reflect the aggressive emotions of the participants in the communicative act and their attitude towards the object of aggression.

We also analysed translations of sarcastic comments into Russian. The most commonly used techniques are literal translation, omitting redundant words or constructions, and using equivalent expressions in the target language.

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