

A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SARCASM IN ENGLISH MEDIA AND NEWS ARTICLES

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With the rapid development of information technologies, the implementation of visual content has become a complementary component of social discourse, particularly in the media and news sectors. In this respect, it is increasingly important to pay huge attention to media literacy and relevant information processing. Sarcasm, one of the most widely used language choices in social discourse, can easily be a part of any media or news article. Sarcastic remarks are used for numerous reasons, namely, to indirectly express contempt, pretend an attitude, mock a situation or a person, or perhaps, they are more creative solutions to anger-provoking situations. The aim of the present research is to detect sarcastic messages in media and news articles through the multimodal markers of the discourse. The dataset analyzed to achieve the above-mentioned goal is derived from American and British media and news platforms *Politico*, *The Guardian*, and *The Sun*.

Keywords: sarcasm, multimodality, social discourse, media and news articles, multimodal discourse analysis.

Introduction

Multimodal features of media and news articles may serve as key components in entailing sarcastic propositions and are widely evidenced in numerous publications. **Multimodal Discourse Analysis** is theoretically based on the **Systemic Functional Linguistics** devised by Halliday (1961, 1992, 1994). According to Liu (2019, p. 1523), various linguists and scholars have focused on research activity around multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; Lemke, 1998; Royce, 1998; O'Halloran, 1999; Baldry, 2004). The essence of the interest is in how textual meaning is derived through

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a combination of linguistic and extra-linguistic elements to employ a specific connotation. As a matter of fact, language has different modes and the concept of multimodality is contrasted with the traditional view of so-called monomodality for interpreting a text within textual markers only (Kress, & van Leeuwen, 2001). Image, voice, colors, and other extra-linguistic elements are in line together to express the multiple modes of discourse analysis and we intend to highlight those multimodal markers of the discourse to elicit sarcastic messages in media and news articles.

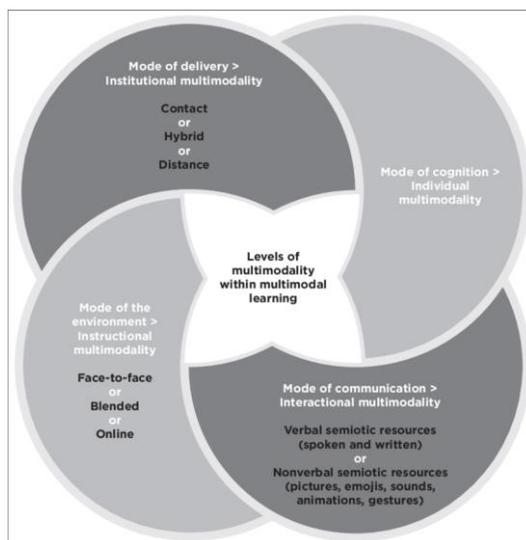
Discourse Markers for Multimodal Method of Analysis

According to Olivier (2021), there are four levels of multimodality within multimodal learning:

- *Mode of delivery > Institutional multimodality*
- *Mode of cognition > Individual multimodality*
- *Mode of communication > Interactional multimodality*
- *Mode of the environment > Instructional multimodality*

Figure 1

Levels of multimodality within multimodal learning



Each of these levels represented in Figure 1 incorporates specific markers of multimodal perception of the given context. This concept is designed to be implemented within a multimodal learning system. However, it gives us valuable insights into which levels of various resources sarcasm can be

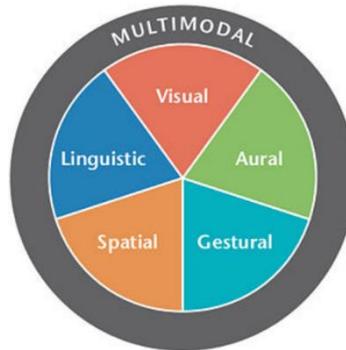
expressed. We are also inclined to utilize the given model in uncovering the multimodal nature of sarcastic communication in media and news articles.

Multimodal communication consists of numerous modes which cooperate together to communicate a message to the audience. According to Arola, Sheppard and Ball (2014), there are five modes of multimodal communication:

Figure 2

The five modes of multimodal communication. Modes. (Web Services, 2015)

- *Linguistic*
- *Visual*
- *Aural*
- *Gestural*
- *Spatial*



The focus of the multimodal discourse analysis of sarcastic media and news articles is mainly on the linguistic and visual modes of communication in view to underline their cooperation in conveying a comprehensive meaning of the text. They are mostly the constituent parts of interactional multimodality which contains **verbal semiotic resources** (spoken and written) or **nonverbal semiotic resources** (pictures, emojis, sounds, animations, gestures) (Olivier, 2021).

Multimodality in Interpreting Sarcastic Messages

In the following political news caricature from an American media platform *Politico*, sarcasm is demonstrated through an act of pretense. The caricature is headlined *THE SIX STAGES OF GRIEF AFTER LOSING AN ELECTION* and sarcastically alludes to the former US president Donald Trump. All the mentioned six stages are so-called “recommendations” visually assisted by aggressive cartoon images of the ex-president. From the point of view of multimodal analysis, we need to take into consideration the interactional level of multimodality in terms of verbal and nonverbal components. Verbal elements include written communication and nonverbal ones represent animated images, symbolic colors, and sarcastic references pertaining to the appearance of the former president.

Figure 3

The six stages of grief after losing an election (Wuerker, 2022)



The first stage of the caricature suggests:

(1) FALSELY CLAIM THE ELECTION WAS STOLEN AND USE THE BIG LIE TO RAISE MONEY!

This suggestion pretends an attitude resemblance to the ex-president and overtly hints at an implication that Trump, as a matter of fact, did so after losing the elections to his opponent. The visual text cooperates with the verbal text *I WON!* to construct the sarcastic suggestion of the claim. If we pay close attention to Trump's right hand in the first picture, we will notice that his fingers are crossed which is a common gesture indicating that the person is lying. His right hand is higher showing a fist that symbolizes his power and ambitions. His tie is red and touches the ground, which is also a sarcastic remark since Trump is quite tall. It might also indicate his lying attitude referring to the length of the tie, for instance, the longer it is, the more he lies. Thus, the sarcastic message of the first stage is carried out through three-dimensional multimodal communication including linguistic, visual, and

gestural modes. The linguistic mode alone would not be a sufficient ground for making the message sarcastic and here is why multimodality plays an important role in constructing the comprehensive sarcastic meaning of the text.

The second stage of dealing with “grief” is represented as follows:

(2) KEEP LYING AND PRESSURE PEOPLE TO CHANGE THE VOTE TALLY ... AND RAISE MONEY!

Here the linguistic mode is slightly different compared to the first suggestion. The utterance includes ellipses after which we can see an echoed phrase *RAISE MONEY*. In the visual mode, we see a wired red telephone in Trump’s hand which signifies that even if he lost the elections, he is still in his office and he is trying to apply an abuse of power to reach his goal. We can only see a zoomed-in perspective where the length of the tie as well as the left hand is not visible. On the interactional level, there are both verbal and nonverbal components, namely, linguistic and visual modes that allow us to interpret the non-literal message.

The third stage goes like this:

(3) KEEP LYING AND TRY TO SEAT YOUR OWN ELECTORS ... AND RAISE MONEY!

We come back to a zoomed-out perspective where we do see the red tie again touching the ground with the text suggesting to continue *LYING*. In this image, he is even angrier since he realizes the plan is not working and his rage is demonstrated through the steam coming out of his ears. The key phrase *RAISE MONEY* is echoed again aiming to increase its impact on the viewer and giving the expression a pragmatic significance for applying an illocutionary act of commanding.

The fourth stage suggests as follows:

(4) KEEP LYING AND MOUNT A VIOLENT COUP TO STOP THE PEACEFUL TRANSFER OF POWER ... AND RAISE MONEY!

The contextualization of the visual text of this suggestion is correlated with the verbal text *FIGHT LIKE HELL!*. The image visually and verbally communicates a message that Trump is dissatisfied with the development of actions and expresses an emotional command. In the linguistic mode, there is a sarcastic proposition *to stop the peaceful transfer of power through violent acts*, which deliberately pretends or mocks an attitude. In the visual mode, the rage of the former president is represented through different components. First, his eyes are disguised as he is yelling, the right hand is higher holding a distorted document (presumably the election results), and the left hand is pointing to his

left side while he is commanding to *fight like hell*. Since Trump was a Republican right-wing politician, the choice of pointing in the left direction might be a symbolic one connoting the country's left-wing political system, which was his opposition at the time. Then, looking closely at his image it can be noticed that this is the only case where the red tie is not touching the ground and this is the only image where his knees are bent. This elaborate detail reveals the sarcastic intention in terms of nonverbal text interpretation. So, connecting this to a previous assumption that the length of the tie is relevant to the plentiful lying, we might deem this as a non-literal message that his lies are not having any effect.

The fifth stage recommends the following:

(5) KEEP LYING AND KEEP RAISING MONEY

The verbal message of this statement implies similar ideas to previous suggestions with a different structure. Instead of *RAISE MONEY!* this stage offers to *KEEP RAISING MONEY* without an exclamation mark at the end, unlike all previous similar assertions. This makes a lot more sense when we combine the visual text of the image with the verbal one. In the visual mode, the meaning of the image implies that Trump is losing control of the situation and he is not that existed about his statement of *keep lying* anymore. He is holding money in both of his hands and cries without tears which is an indication of an early stage of his frustration, and the tie is back to its original position touching the ground but this time it looks worn out since there are sketchy lines on it. This may suppose, that no matter that lies are continuing, they have already lost their effectiveness of impact because of being repeated too many times.

The final stage proposes:

(6) IGNORE OVERWHELMING EVIDENCE THAT IT'S A BIG LIE ... AND KEEP RAISING MONEY

The verbal text of the image states *I NEED MORE MONEY!* This statement does not have an illocutionary force anymore and it does not sound assertive since in the visual mode we can see Trump's total frustration. His head is leaned backward and this time he is crying with tears. The tie is worn out and touching the ground again. In this stage as well, there is no exclamation mark at the end of the statement of the stage description. This signifies that the intended plan is not working anymore and the suggestion is just a desperate attempt in achieving the desired outcome. Significantly, the sarcastic intention of this statement is already achieved on the linguistic level by the stylistic

choice of the language such as the understatement *IGNORE OVERWHELMING EVIDENCE THAT IT'S A BIG LIE*.

The Guardian's completely new series of media and news publishing *First Dog on the Moon* has introduced an innovative format where only the combination of multimodal communication delivers the news to the audience. The goal of the media and news publishing series is to assemble attention to challenging issues of the world with the help of sarcastic remarks throughout all articles. The headlines demonstrated in Figure 4 are the following:

(1) *Climate change is GREAT for termites! Wait what is this?*

(2) *Abolish the monarchy and replace the whole sordid crew with a marsupial!*

(3) *Woohoo! Australia is punching above its weight in *checks notes* inequality!*

Figure 4

First dog on the moon (*The Guardian*)



The multimodal communication in these alternative news articles is conditioned by linguistic and visual modes of text interpretation. Although the linguistic level alone already provides grounds for the detection of sarcastic intent in terms of information processing, the publishing series focuses on the cooperation of linguistic and visual modes, namely, the interdependence of verbal and non-verbal markers of the discourse.

In terms of the linguistic mode analysis, absolutely all headlines come with either an exclamation or an interrogative mark, or sometimes, with both. Some headlines may even have a couple of interrogative marks and an exclamation mark like in the following headline:

Was it wrong to mock the perky boffins attempting to de-extinct the thylacine??! (First dog on the moon)

As seen in the examples in Figure 4, the articles are illustrated with a thematic choice of animals along with the main hero dog allegorizing the events of the topic concerned. The animated illustrations represent verbal texts as well such as:

(7) TERMITES – WE THOUGHT THEY WERE OUR FRIENDS

(8) HOW TO ABOLISH THE MONARCHY

(9) RAMPANT INEQUALITY? NOT IF YOU ASK ALL OUR MILLIONAIRES

Not all verbal texts on these illustrations have punctuation marks but all of them are capitalized. The capitalization of all headlines represented in the animated illustrations follows the purpose to gather attention to the topic of the article with short and catchy sarcastic statements or questions. However, the strategy of bringing about as many viewers as you can is more effective when considering the multimodal integrity in communicating hard-to-deliver messages. That is why just one article of this format offers four different aspects of information processing: sarcastic headline, short and catchy verbal text, non-verbal (visual) text and allegoric integration to support the linguistic mode. All these aspects are combined to deliver a comprehensive message which determines the creativity of the strategy employed through sarcastic text interpretation. This statement can be validated with the help of the statistics of viewer interaction with articles (viewing, commenting, sharing). As can be noticed in Figure 4, there are hundreds of comments under the articles of the series within just a couple of days after their publication which obviously does not compete with the numbers of regular news, however, it accumulates a significant amount of activity and interest around the articles that represent challenging topics.

The content of the articles is demonstrated within interactional multimodal communication as well. In most cases, the body of the article does not include monomodal textual information, instead, there are animated scenarios with verbal and nonverbal texts and allegorized events of the news, like in the following article:

Figure 5

A first dog on the moon article - Woohoo! Australia is punching above its weight in
checks notes inequality! (*The Guardian*)



The body of the article is a combination of verbal and nonverbal texts. On the verbal level, there are multiple usages of interjections and emotionally colored words such as: *Woohoo! Yeah! Hooray!*

Some interjections are introduced along with facial expressions of animated characters assisting to express contextual sarcastic meanings. In contrast with only verbal interjections, they are all capitalized and without punctuation marks like: *AGGH; HELP; NOOO; ERK*.

It might seem that these utterances are irrelevant to the context, however, their purpose is to complement the expressed sarcastic verbal texts with multimodal integrity and convey a more comprehensive message.

The headline of the article is an example of an overstatement of the discussed fact by capitalizing on the overstated utterance:

(10) A new report claims Australians are the RICHEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD! Yeah!

Meanwhile, the body of the article provides explanations and descriptions with oversimplified statements and irrelevant chart data like *It's not that all of us are the richest person the world... (sic.)*

One of the paragraphs of the body represents a suggestion by “economists” with their visual images and a verbal text “Economists” under the passage pointing to them. In this case, the correlation of verbal and nonverbal texts arrives at a sarcastic proposition, however, the verbal description alone would not provide necessary grounds for interpreting the text as sarcastic.

Multimodal discourse markers in constructing sarcastic text interpretation are highly observable in regular news articles as well. One of the newest examples where the article delivers a sarcastic message through multimodal markers of text interpretation is demonstrated in Figure 6. The article is about Prince William and Princess Kate of Wales meeting with the volunteers and

operation staff who were involved in the funeral service after the death of Queen Elizabeth II. The reporter of the article indirectly criticizes the Prince and Princess for being cheerful in their interactions with the public and staff members.

The represented image for this news article includes verbal text with two different font sizes and nonverbal text in the background of the Prince and Princess of Wales. The main and secondary lines of the verbal text are as follows respectively: *WILLS' GRIEF*; *Prince William reveals moments of sadness 'catch him out' as he grieves the Queen with Princess Kate*.

Figure 6

Will's grief (*The Sun*)



It must be noted that the placement of the apostrophe mark in the utterance *WILLS' GRIEF* is not a typographic error but the reporter's choice to contract the Prince's name to *Wills* instead of *Will*. This can be discovered in the body of the article where the Prince is referred as *Wills* which expresses a deliberate sarcastic attitude toward Prince William. The reason for this attitude is the Prince and Princess' inappropriate cheerfulness with their public interaction during the days of grief. The article leaks a video footage where the viewers can see the sheer happiness of the Prince and Princess when meeting people. However, the commentator of the video directly criticizes their actions uttering:

(11) The Royal family has said they won't undertake official engagements this week because they will have a week of private mourning... it wasn't something on their calendar or diary.

This strategy directly criticizes the actions of the Royal family members with no hidden sarcastic meaning. Even though this attitude is only in the commentary of the video and it does not correspond with that of the reporter, it does actually complement the multimodal combination of verbal and nonverbal

components for expressing the general sarcastic attitude of the article. The sarcastic intention of the text is revealed by combining the happy and smiley images of the Prince and Princess with the capitalized verbal text *WILLS' GRIEF* implying that he might not actually be mourning. The utterance *catch him out* is also a part of this combination since it refers to Prince William's explanations of the occurrence and is cited in the body of the article by the reporter: *Wills admitted "certain moments catch you out"*.

Conclusion

Multimodal discourse analysis has a significant role in interpreting sarcastic messages in modern English social discourse, particularly, in American and British media and news articles. The mode of communication preferred for this kind of interpretation is interactional multimodality which incorporates verbal and nonverbal discourse markers. The five modes of multimodal communication, namely, linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial, collaborate together in the construction of a comprehensive sarcastic meaning of the context. In this respect, the most cooperative communication is the combination of linguistic and visual modes. The impact of multimodal communication on sarcasm as a creative and innovative strategy for communicating challenging messages is of major value for the following reasons:

- The combination of multimodal discourse markers assists in the construction of conveying a holistic sarcastic meaning;
- Multimodal discourse markers deliver more comprehensive sarcastic messages due to the multimodal interaction for information processing;
- Sarcastic text interpretation through multimodal communication is a highly effective strategy for assembling more public interaction around challenging topics,
- Multimodality of sarcastic language addresses the issue of providing alternative solutions for effective communication.

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**Աստղիկ Չուբարյան
Հայկ Դանիելյան**

Տեղեկատվական տեխնոլոգիաների արագ զարգացմանը զուգընթաց պատկերային բովանդակության կիրառումը դարձել է հանրային խոսույթը լրացնող բաղադրիչ, մասնավորապես մեդիա և լրատվական ոլորտներում: Այս համատեքստում, ավելի ու ավելի է կարևորվում մեդիագրագիտության և համապատասխան տեղեկատվության մշակման խնդիրը: Սարկազմը՝ որպես հանրային խոսույթի մեջ լայնորեն տարածված լեզվական նախընտրություն, հեշտությամբ կարող է լինել ցանկացած մեդիա և լրատվական հոդվածի հիմքում: Սարկաստիկ ասույթները կարող են օգտագործվել բազմաթիվ նպատակներով, այն է՝ անուղղակիորեն արտահայտել արհամարհանք, ձևացնել վերաբերմունք, ծաղրել իրավիճակը կամ անձին, կամ դրանք առավել ստեղծագործ լուծումներ են գայրույթ առաջացնող իրավիճակներում: Սույն հետազոտության նպատակն է բացահայտել սարկաստիկ հաղորդագրությունները բազմաեղանակային խոսույթի տարրերի միջոցով: Վերոնշյալ նպատակին հասնելու համար օգտվել ենք ամերիկյան և բրիտանական մեդիա և լրատվական այնպիսի հարթակներից, ինչպիսիք են Politico-ն, The Guardian-ը և The Sun-ը:

Բանալի բառեր՝ սարկազմ, բազմամոդայություն, հանրային խոսույթ, մեդիա և լրատվական հոդվածներ, բազմամոդալ խոսույթի հետազոտություն: