

# A pragmatic look at sarcasm in Thai

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This paper is the investigation into the use of sarcasm in Thai. The term SARCASM employed will cover related phenomena (its synonyms) which are included in the definition of SARCASM in Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language (unabridged, second edition, 1983).

Sarcasm is defined as:

“ a bitter laugh

- 1) a taunting, sneering, cutting, or caustic remark;  
a gibe, jeer, general ironical remarks
- 2) the making of such remarks

Synonym: irony, banter, jeer, derision, satire.”

This study will mainly focus on the making of a cutting and caustic remark. The investigation is based on the speech acts theory and Grice's Cooperative Principle. As Levinson (1983:226) says:

“speech acts remain, along with presupposition and implicature in particular, one of the central phenomena that any general pragmatic theory must account for.”

Thus, this study is intended to address two questions: (1) To what extent can speech acts and Cooperative Principle theories help explain sarcasm in Thai? (2) What are other factors (if any) involved?

On the basis of speech acts, a speaker expresses his/her intention by means of illocutionary acts or sometimes fails to do so. In other words, the speaker's intention or meaning is conveyed by his/her utterance (locution) and at the

meantime the speaker aims it to be effective i.e. to urge the hearer's response (perlocutionary act). Speech acts only, however, cannot fully explain how conversation works, let alone sarcasm. As Grice (1975) points out, in order for conversation to be effective and perhaps even to be conversation, it must involve cooperation between the speaker and the hearer. Hence, Grice (1975:45-46) formulates maxims of conversation which jointly express a general cooperative principle. By this Grice means that when speaking, one has to, or may be expected to make one's contribution such as is required. The four maxims constituting the Cooperative Principle ( CP ) are described as follows:

- I. Quantity: Provide the right amount of information, i.e.
  1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.
  2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- II. Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true:
  1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
  2. Do not say that for what you lack adequate evidence.
- III. Relation: Be relevant
- IV. Manner: Be perspicuous
  1. Avoid obscurity of expression
  2. Avoid ambiguity
  3. Be brief
  4. Be orderly

Grice (1975:49) also coins the term " implicature" to designate inferences deriving from observing and flouting the maxims. For example, the speaker may deliberately flout a maxim. The latter Grice calls exploitation of the maxim. This is achieved by means of figures of speech, namely, irony, metaphor, hyperbole etc.. Clark and Haviland (1977:32) claim that this deliberate violation is perceived by the hearer interpreting what the speaker intends to say. As for the unostentatious infringement of a maxim, it will result in a breakdown in communication. But more likely it will be misattributed, leading to implicatures which may be ultimately recognised to be false (Coupland,1981) . This is due to the speaker's negligence. As far as my analysis and interpretation

speaker's deliberate violation of the maxims of quality and manner. The flouting of the maxim of quantity is not included because of the lack of evidence involving this phenomenon. As for the flouting of the maxim of relation, Grice (1975:54) says that it is perhaps rare. My data also lend support to this claim. This means that almost all of the utterances are relevant. To help the hearer to draw an appropriate implicature, Grice (1975:50) suggests that he/she should rely on the following data:

“(1) The conventional meaning of the words used, together with the identity of any references that may be involved.

(2) The CP and its maxims; (3) the context, linguistic or otherwise, of the utterance; (4) other items of background knowledge; and (5) the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items falling under the previous headings are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case.”

To put it more simply, the hearer should seek the help from the context both linguistic and extra-linguistic together with their background knowledge when deriving an implicature of what the speaker intends to say. Similarly, Hymes regards the role of context as the backbone of utterance interpretation. As he remarks:

The use of a linguistic form identifies a range of meanings. A context can support a range of meanings. When a form is used in a context it eliminates the meanings possible to that context other than those the form can signal: the context eliminates from consideration the meanings possible to the form other than those the context can support.

(Hymes, 1962, quoted in Wooten, 1975:44)

As people speak different languages, they have mastered different concepts and convey their thinking differently. For example, Thai greetings are distinct from those of English. In English when people meet for the first time on a day, they say “Hello, how are you?” whereas Thais mainly say “Where have you been?” or in Thai English “Where you go?” These locutionary acts are predictable and yield the same illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. The opposite is true of the uses of sarcasm. This is because sarcasm can be expressed in many ways.

namely, in figurative speech (simile, metaphor, irony, hyperbole etc..) and intonation ( in English) and tones (in Thai). Besides, sarcasm varies according to the speaker's style as Sperber and Wilson (1986:218) write:

“Choice of style is something that no speaker or writer can avoid. In aiming at relevance, the speaker must make some assumption about the hearer's cognitive abilities and contextual resources, which will necessarily in what she chooses to make explicit and what she chooses to leave implicit.”

The data were collected from a famous Thai novel called “khâa khǒng khon” or “The value of humans” and also from Thai informants. I have classified Thai sarcasm into two main categories in terms of their forms and the ways the speaker violates Grice's maxims.

Classification according to forms:

- A. the speaker's violation of the maxim of quality : the use of figurative speech.
- B. the speaker's violation of the maxim of manner.
  - 1. the use of puns
  - 2. the change of vowels, consonants and tones to convey the contrast of meanings

The following examples are intended to illustrate the classification. I have added context for every sarcastic utterance in order to clarify what the speaker purports to convey. After the description of the context, Thai version followed by the representation of Thai transcription together with English literal translation and English broad translation will be provided.

A. The speaker's violation of the maxim of quality: In this category, the speaker flouts the maxim of quality by means of figures of speech, namely, irony, simile, metaphor and hyperbole etc..

#### 1. IRONY:

- (1) Context: Mali had an appointment with Chuchai and he was two hours late so Mali said to Chuchai: