# Differentiating between Irony and Sarcasm: An Illustration of Sarcasm's Negative Impact on Audiences

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# An Illustration of Sarcasm's Negative Impact on Audiences

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## Abstract

The following in-class activity helps students differentiate between ironic and sarcastic messages. In turn, students will recognize the negative impact of sarcastic messaging identified by Dynel (2013) and Averbeck (2013) in an effort for students to improve their own messages when attempting to persuade audiences.

## Courses

Argument and Debate, Interpersonal Communication, Public Speaking

## Introduction and Rationale

Irony is a rhetorical technique where the speaker presents an idea at face value while implying a message to the contrary. Kierkegaard (1965) refers to the ironist as "becom[ing] intoxicated…by the infinity of possib[ilities]" (p. 279). These possibilities allow an individual to view a situation from alternative points of view, thus, providing a deeper perspective on an issue. The alternative perspective is not stated obviously by the speaker, so the audience must discover it. That internal moment of discovery forces reflection upon the listener. Burke (1989) states, "As an overall ironic formula here, and one that has the quality of 'inevitability,' we could lay it down that 'what goes forth as A returns as non-A.' This is the basic pattern that places the essence of drama and dialectic in the irony of the 'peripety,' the strategic moment of reversal" (p. 260).

Rorty (1989) posits irony as the opposite of common sense, with ironic speakers aware that no vocabulary is final with definite meaning, and identifies ironists as stemming from a mislabeled field of literary criticism (pp. 73-90). Rorty (1989) further states, "The re-describing ironist, by threatening one final vocabulary, and thus one's ability to make sense of oneself in one's own terms rather than [someone else's], suggests that one's self and one's world are futile, obsolete, powerless. Re-description often humiliates," (p. 90). Regarding satirical irony, Booth (1974) acknowledges that "every irony inevitably builds a community of believers even as it excludes" (p. 28). Booth (1974) offers the Roman satirical statement against Jesus before his crucifixion of "Hail, King of the Jews" as an example of this (p. 28). The unintended consequence of the Romans was that despite understanding the irony of the message, some were drawn to Jesus. This illustrates a backfiring of a sarcastic, ironic message. Booth (1974) also states, "In short, irony is used in some satire, not in all; some irony is satiric, much is not. And the same distinctions hold for sarcasm" (p. 30).

Sarcasm is viewed as "cutting, contemptuous, and biting remarks, delivered often in a hostile manner" (Berger, 1993, p. 49). Listeners process sarcastic messages in the same amount of time as literal messages and do not need vocal regulation to inform the listener to interpret a message as sarcasm (Gibbs, 1986). Context, or pragmatic information, provides the cue for interpreting a message as sarcasm; in turn, pragmatic information that echoes a listener's preexisting attitude increases the likelihood of remembering the sarcastic message (Gibbs, 1986). Although, the use of specific tones of voice identifying sarcasm has not produced reliable results (Woodland & Voyer, 2011). However, incongruity between the context of a situation and the message results in perceived sarcasm (Woodland & Voyer, 2011). Woodland and Voyer (2011) state, "the context that precedes a statement has a significant effect on whether an utterance is

perceived as sincere or sarcastic by a listener" (p. 235). Sarcasm results in negative effects between two individuals (Dynel, 2013). Averbeck (2013) states, "Considering that sarcasm is least appropriate and effective [than irony], one would only be advised to choose sarcastic argumentation if one intended to hurt the receiver without concern for the argument's effectiveness" (p. 54). Sarcastic arguments directly attack another person in a "malevolent" manner, whereas ironic statements do not, they imply an individual is the recipient, thereby saving face (Averbeck, 2013, p. 54).

This in-class activity seeks to help students experience why sarcastic arguments are ineffective. Since Averbeck (2013) and Dynel (2013) acknowledge the negative effects of sarcasm, students should witness the division between a speaker and recipient firsthand in this activity. While students can use irony to make light of a contradictory situation, they should avoid sarcasm when intending to persuade others in debates, speeches, and personal conversations.

**Objectives of Activity**

- Differentiate between irony and sarcasm.

- Understand the negative impact of sarcasm.

**Description of Activity**

This activity forces students to assume the role of responding to another person in five hypothetical situations. The brief situations illustrate moments of irony. In light of this irony, students will develop both ironic and sarcastic responses to experience the difference between

irony and sarcasm and understand the negative effects of sarcasm. The activity lasts approximately 35-45 minutes, including group work and class discussion.

**Procedure**

Provide brief explanations of irony and sarcasm, stressing the hostility associated with sarcasm. In this explanation, convey that irony demonstrates a contrast between an expectation of how something should occur and what actually happens. Relay that as a form of irony, sarcasm associates a particular person with that contrast in an insulting manner. The instructor should stress to the students how people may choose to make ironic or sarcastic statements to another person in response to revealing the irony of certain situations. This activity focuses on how those communicative distinctions are framed.

Then, assign students to groups of three to four, telling the groups to develop two (for a total of ten) illuminating verbal responses that they would say to the person in each of the following scenarios designed to display irony. Print out copies of the five scenarios or project them on a screen. The first response should reveal the irony of the situation in a face-saving way, and the second response should reveal the irony of the situation in a sarcastic, hurtful way. Students should be allowed approximately 20 minutes to complete this task.

a) A tow truck driver scratching their head while staring at their own tow truck broken down on the side of a highway.

b) A salesperson wearing wrinkled clothes selling irons in an appliance store.

c) A person wearing noise-canceling headphones with one headphone positioned off the ear so they can hear their surroundings.

d) A person tells their spouse, "I'll be fine on this business trip; I'm going to the safest city in the country." While on the trip, the person gets robbed.

e) A person that is afraid of water becomes a lifeguard.

**Debriefing**

After the groups of students have finalized their ironic and sarcastic responses, go through each of the five scenarios and ask groups to volunteer their examples of ironic and sarcastic responses for five to ten minutes. Then, follow this with the following questions to prompt class discussion for approximately ten minutes:

- What were the key differences in phrasing or delivery between the ironic and sarcastic responses?

- If you were a person in the scenarios, would you have been hurt after listening to the verbal responses?

- If so, which verbal response would you find more hurtful, the ironic response or the sarcastic response?

- Do you feel hurtful responses lead to an audience relating with or dividing from the speaker?

**Appraisal and Conclusion**

Students are forced to consider two verbal responses to the scenarios: an ironic response that saves face and a sarcastic, insulting response. In turn, the students may appreciate the effectiveness of a face-saving strategy when attempting to persuade an audience.

Students tend to find humor in developing descriptions for the activity. Since the activity forces students to differentiate between sarcasm and irony, they will better understand the distinction. Before the activity, I ask my students if they are sarcastic. Often the most eye-opening moment during this activity is when the students who identified as sarcastic realize that the insulting tone of sarcasm is not as effective as a means of persuasion as they thought since sarcasm tends to create division between the speaker and the audience.

A sarcastic speaker's intention may be to demonstrate the contradictory nature of a scenario, but this often results in hostility toward the recipient of the message. Such hostility results in division between the speaker and the speaker's audience, leading to division from the persuasive nature of the message as well. Students may apply this lesson to developing their arguments when attempting to persuade an audience, whether in public speaking or personal relationships.

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