A pragmatic look at sarcasm in Thai

Archara Pengpanich
Ramkhamhaeng University

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 perspicious
    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 utimately 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

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 khɔ̌ɔŋ 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 Englsih 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:

ทำไมไม่มาเสียพรุ่งนี้ล่ะ

thammay mây maa sĭa phrûŋ níi lâ
why   not come   tomorrow this PARTICLE
Why don't you come tomorrow?

(2) Context: The husband saw his overweight wife
eating greasy pork stew wholeheartedly said
sarcastically to her:

กินเข้าไปเถอะ ยังผอมอยู่

kin khâw pay thə̀ yaŋ phɔ̆ɔm yùu
eat in go   yet thin still
Darling, you should eat a lot more of it, you are still
thin.

2. SIMILE:

(3) Context: Chuchai asked Nirut for a comment on his
pretty girl friend's look, who he thought was
shapely. Nirut said:

เอวบางเหมือนยางรถยนต์

ʔew baaŋ mĭan yaaŋ rótyon
waist thin like tyre car
Her waist is as thick as a car tyre.

(4) Context: By being sarcastic, a wife is criticising her
husband for being too generous to others.

ใจดีเป็นพระเวสสันดรเชียวนะ

cay dii pen phrá wêtsăndɔɔn chiaw ná
heart good be Phra Vessantara PARTICLE
You are as generous as Phra Vessantara. (Phra
Vessantara is an earlier incarnation of the Lord
Buddha. He gives away even his wife and children.)

3. METAPHOR:

(5) Context: Chuchai is extremely indifferent to what has
been happening around him so his colleagues
sarcastically say to him.

เขาทำตัวเป็นพระอิฐพระปูน

khǎw	tham	tua	pen	phrá	ʔit	phrá	puun
he	make	self	be	Buddha	brick	Buddha	stucco

He is a plaster statue.

(6) Context: A was very cross with B who always pushed
him around and made him do many things at a time.
A said sarcastically to B.

ฉันไม่ใช่พระนารายณ์สี่กรนะ

chǎn	mây	chây	phrá naaraay	sìi	kɔɔn	ná
I	not	be	Narayana	four	hand	PARTICLE

I've got only two hands.
(Narayana is a God with four hands).

4. HYPERBOLE:

(7) Context: Sak, who is very fond of having his meal hot
from the oven has been complaining about the lunch
in front of him i.e. it is not hot enough. His wife says
sarcastically to him:

กินไฟเสียเลยดีไหม

kin	fay	sĭa	lǝǝy	dii	mǎy
eat	fire	all		good	QUESTION PARTICLE

Why don't you eat fire?

(8) Context: Mother thought her son's room is as untidy
as a pigsty. Then she asked him when he last tidied
it up. Her son replied:

เมื่อปีมะโว้มาแล้ว

mîa	pii	máwóo	maa	lɛ́ɛw
when	year	long time	come	then

I tidied it up million years ago.

B. The speaker's violation of the maxim of manner: In this
classification, the speaker flouts the maxim of manner by being

deliberately ambiguous through (1) the use of puns, (2) the change of vowels, tones, and consonants.

1. The use of puns
   (9) Context : A looks down upon B who is going to do a difficult job.

   A: เธอทำไม่ได้หรอก

thəə	tham	mây	dây	rɔ̀ɔk
you	do	not	can	PARTICLE

   You can't do it.

   B: ไม่ต้องมาดูถูกฉันหรอก

mây	tɔ̂ŋ	maa	duu	thùuk	chǎn	rɔ̀ɔk
not	must	come	look	down upon	I	PARTICLE

   Don't look down upon me.

   A: ใช่สิ ฉันดูไม่ผิดหรอก

   (says sarcastically)

chây	sî	chǎn	duu	mây	phìt	rɔ̀ɔk
yes		I	look	not	wrong	PARTICLE

   I don't think I'm wrong saying that.

   ดูถูกแล้ว

duu	thùuk	lɛ́ɛw
look	right	then

   I think I'm right .
   (In the example, the word *thùuk* is a pun. *thùuk* can be a part of *duuthùuk* meaning *to look down upon* . Also, *thùuk* can mean right.)

   (10) Context: A and B are looking out of the window and they happen to see an old lady who is dressed up as a teenager. Both of them take turns to make comments on the look.

   A: แหม ทำตัวเป็นวัยแรกแย้ม

mǎæ tham tua pen way rǽæk yǽæm
EXCLAMATION make self be age first bloom
She's dressed up as a teenager.

B. แย้มฝาโลงน่ะซิ

(says sarcastically)
yǽæm fǎa looŋ nâ sĩ
pry...open lid coffin PARTICLE
She is mutton dressed as lamb.
(The word yǽæm has two meanings: (1) to bloom
and (2) to pry open

2. The Change of Vowels, Consonants and Tones:
 (11) Context: By being sarcastic, A says to B ,who wants
   to be rich and famous:

ไม่ดังก็ดับนะ

mây daŋ kɔ̂ dàp ná
not famous then dead PARTICLE
Published or perished.

 (12) Context: A. says sarcastically to B, who always
   applies too much cosmetics to her face and looks
   over-ripe.

ไม่ใช่นางงามแต่เป็นนางงอม

mây chây naaŋ ŋaam tæ̀æ pen naaŋ ŋɔɔm
not be Miss beautiful but be woman over-
           ripe
If you don't become a beauty, you will be as
beautiful as a mud fence.

 (13) Context: By being sarcastic, A says to B, who wants
   to become rich and famous.

ก่อนเป็นมวยจะม้วยเสียก่อน

kɔ̀ɔn pen muay cà múay sĩa kɔ̀ɔn
before be boxer will dead all before

(14) Context: Having to get to his office on time, A came to his office by driving on an expressway. So he was held up for nearly an hour. His colleagues who came with him said sarcastically:

นี่นะหรือทางด่วน ทางด่วนน่ะไม่ว่า

nîi	nâ	r̆ɨ	thaaŋ	dùan	thaaŋ	dûan
this	PARTICLE	Q	way	express	way	amputated

	nâ	mây	wâa
	PARTICLE	not	say

This should not be called an expressway. It should get another name i.e. a crippled way because there are a lot of traffic jams on it

Discussion and Conclusion:

When it comes to the notion of perlocutionary acts or the effectiveness of sarcastic utterances, it is difficult to measure it. This is because perlocutionary acts resulting from sarcastic remarks are not as noticeable as those of requests or greetings etc.. To be precise, they are exhibited in the form of the hearer's being angry, looking sulky, being flushed etc.. In addition , the degree of effectiveness of sarcasm is a continuum   i.e. it ranges from being 'slightly hurtful' to 'very hurtful'. This depends on many factors involved: the speaker's style, the speaker's and the hearer's relationship (i.e. it is a good or bad relationship), body language (i.e.contemptuous attitude etc.) Consider the example (14) as an illustration.

If it is said by a frustrated driver to the Director of the Department of Expressway or the chief engineer who has been proudly involved in the construction of the expressway, the perlocutionary act yielded will be more hurtful than when it is said by a friend to complain about traffic jams.

The findings can partly answer the questions addressed. As agreed earlier, speech acts alone cannot account for sarcasm. To interpret meaning as the speaker intends to convey, one has to resort to the notion of implicature based on Grice's Cooperative Principle.

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