Psycho-Pragmatic Study of Sarcasm in Selected Quranic Verses

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Abstract

The present study investigates the recognition and comprehension of sarcasm in some selected verses of Al Quran Alkarim from a psych-pragmatic perspective. The aims at tracing the steps of understanding the sarcastic implicatures in utterances, specifically, the selected Quranic verses. To achieve this aim, the present study employs the Relevance Theory of Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) to analyze ten verses in terms of sarcasm. Thereby, the study addresses the question: How does the Relevance Theory contribute to the interpretation of sarcasm in the selected verses. The analysis reveals that the Relevance theory plays a significant role in interpreting sarcastic utterances. However, Quranic verses are miraculously organized with a highly complex structure that needs specific encyclopedic knowledge of Quran language and content to process the relevance in interpretation.

Introduction

Sarcasm is one way to express attitudes implied in op opposite to the uttered represented utterances. Sarcasm indicates using specific linguistic forms (or echoed ones) to mean the reverse for different purposes such as mocking, criticizing, showing dissatisfaction, and other functions. From a psych-pragmatic perspective, the mental processing of the linguistic form to recognize the sarcastic implicature is a matter of relevance between the literal linguistic cues and the cognitive processing of the contextual information involved in comprehending an opposite intention. Sperber and Wilson (1986) propose a theoretical account of this relationship and its constituents. This account is termed The Relevance Theory, which suggests that language use is not interpreted by only external contextual factors that support the textual ones. Instead, the cognitive contextual information stored in the mind is essential to process the intended meaning like sarcasm, which exists significantly in Al Quran Alkarim to criticise the unbelievers.

The present study consists of three sections. The first section reviews the literature on psycho-pragmatics, sarcasm in the Quran, and the Relevance Theory. The second section compromises an account of the data, method, and analysis and data analysis model. Conclusions and references are drawn after that.

Psycho-Pragmatics

To illustrate this approach, psycholinguistics and pragmatics are to be introduced. On the one hand, psycholinguistics is the study of language to convey and perceive messages. It examines the link between language and psychology regarding language processing, thinking, and language acquisition. On the other hand, pragmatics studies language use concerning context (Crystal, 1992).With continuing interest in pragmatics, many sub-branches of it have arisen. Psycho-pragmatics is one of these fields which is concerned with the relationship between language use and mind. It is further concerned with mindest processes engaged in verbal and nonverbal communication. This approach is also termed use as cognitive-pragmatics or psycholinguistic pragmatics. Dascal (1978: p. 9) proposed the term 'psycho-pragmatics' in a conference lecture in Tel Aviv to be the mental use of language. Accordingly, the present study examines the mental comprehension and use of sarcasm in selected glorious Quran verses.

Sarcasm as a Concept

From a traditional perspective, sarcasm denotes mocking, humor, or delivery of scornful meaning. However, sarcasm is proposed as producing one thing that means another thing else (Cudden, 1979). For McDonald (1999), sarcasm is the state where indirect speech is used intentionally to create a particular impact on the receiver and convey aggressive thoughts and emotions in one's mind. Haiman (1998) defines sarcasm as an intended overt irony used as a means of verbal aggression.

Essential functions of sarcasm are proposed by Ducharme (1994, pp. 51-52):

1-   Speakers use sarcasm to blame members of a particular group for inappropriate behaviour.
2-   One can use sarcasm to declare allegiance and blame themself for inappropriate behavior.

e.g., I broke it! That is what I need now!

3-   To strengthen social solidarity and distance.
4-   To explain the refusal of a situation that is seen as unacceptable by someone,s standards.
5-   To perform aggressive humour for fun by saying the reverse of what is accurate within a group.
e.g., when someone says something clear in itself:
sarcastic comment: **Really, Sherlock? You are smart.**

Sarcasm in the Glorious Quran

As far as Arabic literature is concerned, Al-urjani (n.d, p. 62) explains that sarcasm is performed when two opposite accounts are used to ridicule and decrease the value of the other. This definition corresponds to that of Cudden (1979).

Resemble McDonald (1999), Al-Zamkhshari (1948) define sarcasm by interpreting some Quranic verses. as a means used to convey an opposite meaning than the literal one through, e.g.

((الشَّيْطَانُ يَعِدُكُمُ الْفَقْرَ وَيَأْمُرُكُم بِالْفَحْشَاءِ))
البقرة : 268

((Shaitan promise you with poverty and enjoins you to be niggardly))

The Cow: 268

Here, Almighty God uses the word "promise" with "poverty" when it usually is for God's promise to occupy goodness. God, the most merciful, ridicule the devil's deeds.

OR as in the statement of the <u>disbelievers</u> to underestimate in:

((أَهَٰذَا الَّذِي يَذْكُرُ آلِهَتَكُمْ)) الانبياء : 36

((Is this the one who makes an evil mention of your gods?)). (Al Islam, 2021)

Approaches to Sarcasm

Traditionally, sarcasm was interpreted employing Grice's (1975) cooperative principles alongside with figurative speech tools like metaphor, simile, hyperbole or understatement. In this approach, flouting the maxim of quality generate sarcasm configuration. However, this approach has its limitation. The problem is that sarcasm represents verbal communication and needs not be learned or interpret. Another point, Gricean approach to sarcasm, views it as an indirect form of communication. On this view, relevance theorists points out that indirectness requires more cognitive effect to be understood. Still, traditional approaches view sarcasm as a decorative rather than a communicative device. Regarding the extra cognitive processing required to understand sarcasm, and from a psychological (part of cognitive) perspective, Sperber and Wilson (1995) approach sarcasm as a natural and spontaneous, and universal phenomenon of verbal communication. This approach is termed 'The Relevance Theory' (RT).To tie the bond with the study orientation (i.e., psycho-pragmatics), and it is previously mentioned, psycho-pragmatic deals with mental use of language by employing both psycho- and cognitive methods through important pragmatic issues such as speech acts, scalar implicature, metaphor, neo-Gricean a pragmatic Theory, and relevance theory (Haung, 2017).

Concerning relevance theory, it seeks the relevance between language and cognition. This theory uses an essential psychological feature related to language use, as the theory name suggests. The notion of 'relevance' is said to be 'relevance in context'. The latter indicates mental context that compromises mentally represented information like beliefs, doubts , hopes, wishes, plans, intentions, wonders, and dreams structured when understanding possible available contexts to an individual. Relevance Theory also shows the relationship of some internal mental representations that can bring input to cognitive operations. These representations are contextual in helping the listener interpret an input such as; memory, thoughts, smell sounds , sights , music, a situation in memory, physical aspects, and a lot more. According to the Relevance Theory, processing uttered proposition is parallel and complex. Interpreting content goes along with contextual factors and cognitive effects based on relevance between these angles. Take an example:

a- John: Let's ask Steve to watch the film with us.
b- Tela: He has to finish his homework.

To interpret (b) as a response to (a), Tela needs to develop encoded logic from the proposition and combine it with the textual implications to convey a normal expected response. To consider the invitation and retrieve the stored information about the exam and its relation to the night

intended, a result logical encoded is that steve cannot come to watch a movie to do his homework (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).To analyze the presence of sarcasm in the selected data, the Theory of Sperber and Wilson (1995) is adopted to cope with the psycho-pragmatic orientation. Sarcasm is interpreted in terms of relations between the basic proposition and the contextual mental factors. The latter factors lead to understanding the utterance without measuring the quality or relation maxims correspondence since the core of language processing in all its tools exists in our minds.

Relevance and Sarcasm: Key Concepts

Relevance Theory (RT) is a psychological model for understanding the cognitive interpretation of language use. It is an inferential approach to pragmatics. As it is developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986). Relevance Theory concentrates on the link between cognitive psychology, mental deductive functions, grammatical processes, and the listener's effort and the submitted information. Some key concepts, in theory, are essential to comprehend the sarcastic statements of Quranic verses. These concepts are tackled below:

Explicture vs Implicature

Levinson (1983) denotes that 'implicature' refers to the intended meaning related to context, and this concept manages the border between semantic content and pragmatic content.
Sperber and Wilson (1986, p. 182), on the analogy of implicature, propose the term "exiplicature" to indicate the explicit meaning communicated.
Relevance Theoretics, in terms of sarcasm, premises that the speaker produces an explicture that is different from the implicature but relevant, and the hearer should employ his cognitive environment to process the communication comprehending the sarcasm.

Assumption

Blakemore (1987) views 'assumption' as similar to 'belief' and that it is thoughts representing the person's view of the world.
Sperber and Wilson believe that the mind consists of two systems: (a) input system to receive information, and (b) central system which combines the input with previous information from memory to perform tasks of inference.

Analytic, Synthetic, Contextual implication

Richards (1985) reports that what favours RT on previous Theories is its distinction between these types of implication (i.e., analytic, synthetic, and contextual).Assumption can be understood by analysing the information essential for comprehension (non-trivial information) and the extra, non-essential information for comprehending a message (trivial information). The latter information should be eliminated to identify the basic assumption. Synthetic implication denotes the set of assumptions. In interpretation, two assumptions at least are brought and processed with the stored information in mind. Contextual information is the new information resulting from the merging of old existing and newly added information.

Sarcasm triggers

Echo as a Sarcasm trigger

For Sperber and Wilson (1995), sarcasm is an interpretive use implying a belief attributed from the speakers to someone other than themselves, and this use represents the speaker's attitude to the belief being conveyed. This echo involves an attitude that is different from the thoughts or meaning represented (dissociation). (Curco, 2000).Echo is the partial or complete repetition of a previous utterance; it involves the speaker's reaction and attitude towards it. The attitudes compromised by the resembling echoic utterance include acceptance, endorsement, rejection, irony, or sarcasm. The echo of an utterance means not that the speaker adopts the belief

underlying echo, but dissociation of it (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

Invalid Contextual Information

Yus (2012) draws attention to an essential factor in recognising sarcasm and achieve the correct sarcastic implications like jokes. Yus notices that sarcasm or ironical propositions can be recognised by inappropriate contextual information, which triggers the search for the implied sarcastic attitude. The dissociative attitude is fundamental to identify the sarcastic implicature. Explicature-invalid contextual information activates the process of recognising and comprehending sarcasm. To conceptualise this invalid or irrelevant information, Yus (2009) proposes seven sources of contextual information to help to process and interpreting the irony:

A-   Encyclopedic knowledge or general knowledge of the world, culture, society, beliefs, or moral criteria.
B-   Particular encyclopedic knowledge about the speakers and their habits, beliefs, viewpoints, style.
   C- Knowledge stored in the working memory like events that have happened recently.
D-   The co-text or utterances in the same or previous conversation. (Previously said utterances).
E-   The non-verbal behaviour of the speaker like tone, voice, intonation, gestures, or facial expressions. Also, there are called ostensive contextual acts.
F-   The linguistic cues used by the speaker, like the lexical or grammatical selections. Some expressions are considered fixed ironical ones like "Fine friend" or "a nice favour." Superlatives also denote irony or sarcasm (Partington, 2011).

e.g., A kind a lot, you care about.

G- The situation, place, time, or the physical environment surrounding the utterance during a conversation or a speed.
e.g. [During the rainy, gloomy day] It is the best time to go out, don't you think?

Figurative speech.

It's generally assumed that figurative or rhetoric devices provide a faster and more straightforward interpretation of an utterance. Relevance theorists point those stylistic effects are traditionally effective in pursuing relevance of linguistic forms to a further reflection or implication. Thus, repetition, metaphor, simile, personification, and rhetorical questions are essential to draw their attention to the sarcasm implied. These figures often convert an "ad hoc" (unlexicalised) concept, which is more specific or general than the linguistically represented concept. Relevance theorists suggest that such looser interpretation would lead to more accessible and less cognitive processing of relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1990).
These three ostensive factors help to recognise and efficiently process and conceptualise sarcasm.

Methodology

Data Selected

The present study investigates the mental use of sarcasm in ten Quranic verses that are intentionally selected to have sarcastic content. These verses are to be written in Arabic and English translation adopted from the online web (Al Islam, 2021), Al-Hilali and Khan (1996), and (Haleem, 2005). The meanings and interpretations used in the analysis are adopted from Ibn Ashur (2000).

Modal adopted

To analyse the Quranic verses from a psycho-pragmatic point of view. The study adopts Sperber and Wilson's (1986, 1995) Relevance Theory to qualitatively examine how Quranic sarcasm is comprehended through examining the interaction between language input and cognitive

context inference. According to the Relevance Theory framework, each verse is to be analysed in the following steps :

1-   Figuring out the explicature and assumptions.
2-   Anlayse and Synthesise implications of assumptions.
3-   Infere contextual implications to cognitive processing.
4-   List the relevant assumptions.
5-   Select the most relevant assumption that dissociates the explicature and suits the context as the intended sarcastic implicature.

Data Analysis

1- آل عمران : 2	((فَبَشِّرْهُمْ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ))

 (Give news of agonising torment) (Haleem, 2005)

In verse (1) above, the almighty God explicitly promises disbelievers addressees with dire torture. Here, for an ordinary rather than religious interpreter, the explicature is that. God promises them with severe pain. The main assumptions are: "a promise" and "pain."

The synthetic implications are:

-God promises them to torture them.
-God threatens them to be severely tortured.

The context implication is to cognitively process these assumptions with background knowledge of the lexical relevance. It is concepulized that the act of promising goes typically along with positive futural things. Torture, on the contrary, is related to the act of threatening. With this cognitive effort to disambiguate the verse, it appears that the term "We promised" is a sarcastic explicature which means the reverse "We threatened". The pragmatic content of the sarcastic function here and in the following nine verses is not to be tackled to avoid personal interpretation of the glorious text.

البقرة : 171 ﴾)) ((وَمَثَلُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا كَمَثَلِ الَّذِي يَنْعِقُ بِمَا لَا يَسْمَعُ إِلَّا دُعَاءً وَنِدَاءً ۚ صُمٌّ بُكْمٌ عُمْيٌ فَهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ

(Calling to believers is like a herdsman calling to things that hear nothing but a shout and a cry: they are deaf, dumb, and blind, and they understand nothing). (Haleem, 2005)

In the second verse, the explicature or the explicit literal meaning is ambiguous because of the word" like the one who caws." Two synthetic assumptions or concepts are necessary to disambiguate the meaning: (those who disbelieved) and (like the tone who caws). To operate the cognitive contextual implication, "to caw" is relevant to the crow animal; using this conceptual evidence retrieved from the long-term memory, we know now that the verb "caw" is used here in the figurative form of simile serving sarcasm of the disbelievers when the almighty God resembles their voice to the crow.

The prophet Ibrahim (May peace be upon him) says to the idols of the disbelievers (الاصنام) or the gods:

الصافات : 91-92 ﴾ أَلَا تَأْكُلُونَ))	مَا لَكُمْ لَا تَنْطِقُونَ))

These questions might be taken explicitly as questions about the ability to eat or speak. Two synthetic assumptions are: eat, speak. Employing and inferring the linguistic context around the verses (The prophet Ibrahim asks the rock gods) with the cognitive context of information stored in mind that rock can't eat or speak results in the implicature that the questions are rhetorical ones used as sarcastic questions to ridicule the rock gods.

2- البقرة : 94 ((بِئْسَمَا يَأْمُرُكُمْ بِهِ إِيمَانُكُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ)) ((How evil are the things you believe Commands you to do, if you are believers!)) (Haleem, 2005)

The verse is ambiguous in that it generates the explicature "what your belief orders you are pitchy. This verse is an echo of a previous one. The attitude implying this echo consists of two assumptions:

(a pitchy command) (by your belief). These assumptions are contradicted in that believing in God does not make a negative command. The question follows "If you were believers" provides a context that explains that, by mentally processing these facts, it is a sarcasm of those called "believers, but they are not". The attitude dissociates the belief conveyed by the words to denote a sarcastic use of proposition.

3- ((وَإِذَا تُتْلَى عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتُنَا بَيِّنَاتٍ مَا كَانَ حُجَّتَهُمْ إِلَّا أَنْ قَالُوا ائْتُوا بِآبَائِنَا إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ)) الجاثية : 25

((When our clear revelations are recited to them, is to say, bring back our forefathers if what you say is true.)) (Haleem, 2005)

The explicit meaning of this verse is that they were told clear verses, but they demanded to bring back their dead fathers. The two synthetic assumptions are: (Our verse proof) (no other than bringing their father). The sarcasm is evident in the contradiction between the synthetic assumptions. Cognitive ability and grammatical knowledge in memory operate to the best relevance to suit the first assumption or concept. The exception tool here underestimates what follows it. Thus, the interpretation of verse suggestss that the 'word' is used for sarcastic effect that the disbeleivers demanded something foolish compared to the almighty God's verses that are the clearest and glorious.

4- المسد : 1 ((تَبَّتْ يَدَا أَبِي لَهَبٍ وَتَبَّ))

Perish the two hands of Abu Lahab (an uncle of the prophet) and perish he! (Al-Hilali & Khan, 1996)

According to the interpretation of Fathin (1988, p. 203) the sarcasm underlies the word (Abu Lahab). However, it appears as an explicature to be as a proper noun. To arrive at the sarcastic implication, many contextual factors are inferred. First, to derive the specific encyclopedic knowledge of 'Abu Lahab the uncle of the prophet, which is relevant to his evil nature. Another trigger of sarcasm is the lexical metonymy of 'AbuLahab by substituting his name with another attacking his hostility to the prophet (PBUH). By inferring two types of contextual information derived from the memory and processed, relevance found to be that the term 'Abu Lahab is used as sarcasm.

5- الكهن : 29 ((وَإِنْ يَسْتَغِيثُوا يُغَاثُوا بِمَاءٍ كَالْمُهْلِ))
(And if they ask for help (relief, water), they will be granted water like boiling oil). (Al-Hilali & Khan, 1996)

The explicature of the verse consists of two assumptions: (they ask for help) and (they are granted with boiling water). The inappropriate contextual information raises the need for further interpretation. The linguistic cues of (ask for help: يستغيث) contradict with the use of the verb (granted: agree to help) but with boiling water. Processing our general encyclopedic knowledge of the word (المهل) allows us to notice the dissociated context. Cognitively processing the fatal sequence of (asking for help), we can conclude that they (the disbelievers) are sarcastically threatened rather than being helped.

6- هود : 87 ((إِنَّكَ لَأَنْتَ الْحَلِيمُ الرَّشِيدُ))

Verily, you are the forbearer, right-minded! (Al-Hilali & Khan, 1996)

The explicature of the verse entails the praise of Shuaib's people to the prophet Shuaib. However, processing our specific encyclopedic knowledge will arise and identify the contextual information

as inappropriate because Shuaib's people did not believe in him. The exact knowledge of those people with the linguistic cue (Lam Al-Qasam: لام القسم) which is emphatic, we can find the relevance of sarcasm in appraising to implicitly disappraise their prophet. After conceptualising this relevance, the implicature arises to be similar to (you think yourself the only right-minded person.

7- الانفال:19 ((فَقَدْ جَاءَكُمُ الْفَتْحُ ۖ))

(Now has the judgment come unto you) (Al-Hilali & Khan, 1996)

The explicator indicates the informative statements of the judgment to come. However, where consider the surrounding information in the previous and following verser which addresses disbelievers, then it would be inappropriate for (الفتحmeaning conquest and victory to be given by God to disbelievers. Thus, contextual resources are to be activated to interpret. Using the co-text information to be cognitively processed concerning our general encyclopedic knowledge, we can conclude that the dissociation of the elements of the attitude denotes the sarcastic implication as a Godly response to the disbeliever's demand for victory against Muslims in the battle of Badr. It is a sarcasm of opposite reality involved the Muslim's victory against the disbelievers.

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19 (وَجَعَلُوا الْمَلَائِكَةَ الَّذِينَ هُمْ عِبَادُ الرَّحْمَٰنِ إِنَاثًا ۚ أَشَهِدُوا خَلْقَهُمْ ۚ سَتُكْتَبُ شَهَادَتُهُمْ وَيُسْأَلُونَ) الزخرف

(The consider the angels – God's servants- to be female. <u>Did they notice their creation</u>? Their claim will be put on record, and they will be questioned about it.) (Haleem, 2005)

The question in the glorious verse is explicitly a question of whether the disbelievers noticed the creation of the angels or not; however, the inappropriateness of the contextual information (God asks for an answer). An alternative way to reveal and understand the question's implication, contextual resources are to be in service. Our general encyclopedic knowledge suggests the impossibility of a fundamental question. This knowledge also eliminates the possibility that any human could have noticed God's creation of anything. In addition, using the co-text denoting that this claim (regarding angel as female) is to be recorded and questioned will process the question as a sarcastic one to show the falseness of the disbeliever's claim

Conclusions

The present study has investigated the mental use of sarcasm in some selected Quranic verses employing the Relevance Theory. The analysis of the data shows that:

1-   Relevance Theory contributes to how we mentally process literal and figurative utterances to gain their sarcastic implicature. This theory raises awareness of the cognitive abilities as a basic level of understanding.
2-   Unlike conversations that can be quickly processed in terms of casual language and standard conventions, the Quranic verses need extra contextual knowledge to process the dissociative assumptions. The language of the Quran has its complexity, so; professional semantic knowledge and knowledge of the stories, situations, and participants to conveniently process the correct relevance employing the contextual information properly. For ordinary people, sarcasm may not be accessible without specific encyclopedic knowledge of the glorious Quran's language and content. Based on these points, the research question has been answered.

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