

Sarcasm in the Age of Trump

Review of John Haiman's book, "Talk is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language" Oxford University Press; 1 edition (March 26, 1998). Kindle Edition, \$50.65. Paperback, \$18.70

Review by Lacey X. Okonski

Alec Baldwin helped many Americans come to terms with Trump's election as the President of the United States by playing a satirical Trump. In one of his first Saturday Night Live speeches, he begins by stating, "Yes, this is real life, this is really happening." He continues on stating with a sarcastic tone: "We have got some of the biggest performers in the world lined up. Hold onto your tits and bits because we have got Three Doors Down." Today, figurative language and sarcasm are more relevant than ever. Whether people are looking for comedic relief, if they are blaming comedians for Trump's rise to power, or if they are trying to decipher what exactly Trump meant in his latest tweet, theories of sarcasm are necessary tools for social scientists, political analysts and comedians alike. After nearly two decades, John Haiman's book, "Talk is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language" remains a valuable tool as an encyclopedia of sarcasm, enumerating the ways in which speakers use and mark its expression. This book also serves as a great resource for literary and cross-linguistic examples of the various facets of sarcasm. For the purposes of this review, we will focus on sarcasm in the English language, specifically using the sarcasm surrounding President Trump as a case study.

Trump is bringing sarcasm into the spotlight in American culture. He has made multiple headlines in high profile news venues bringing these linguistic devices into the mainstream discourse. These examples will be examined using insights gleaned from Haiman's work as well as considered in light of more recent work in psycholinguistics since this volume's date of publication.

Summary of Strengths

Haiman, in many respects does a thorough job at investigating sarcasm. Given an interest in political language this book offers many insights. One such strength is the inclusion of cross-cultural factors related to sarcasm. Viewing the US president on an international stage, it is relevant to acknowledge how such an alienated or divided self might be viewed by other cultures. Haiman notes that in Japanese culture they have a mask metaphor along with four terms to express this divide: "tatemae" the outward, social self; "omote" face, front, or public self; "honne" hidden inclinations; "ura" private inner self; and "enryo" reserved, specifically denying the hidden private selves (p. 62). The book is rich with cultural insights that could be applied to the current political context. For example, given these various levels of masks that the Japanese carefully distinguish between personal and private affairs, how might the Japanese leader interpret Trump's handling very sensitive business at his Mar-a-Lago dining room with so many non-professional spectators present? It could perhaps be a

violation of proper “enryo” than might be expected of someone in a world leadership position.

Another strength is Haiman’s rich knowledge of examples gathered from various literary, political and pop-cultural contexts. If you are not well read on the classics be prepared to look up examples from the literary realm. For example, he mentions the Marc Antony speech from Julius as an example of sarcastic repetition as Antony continues to mention the phrase “honorable men” but he does not unpack that idea much further. These literary references often leave the reader wanting more. Nonetheless, this is an excellent resource to find literary examples even if they are too numerous to explain fully in the given text. In that way, this book can seem dense which is why it might be best viewed as an encyclopedia of sorts.

Haiman’s political examples highlight how various types of figurative, sarcastic, and other nonliteral speech acts have great rhetorical value in political discourse. One example of this would be his discussion of coded speech and euphemisms. He defines it so well that immediately examples come rushing to mind from the current political players. Speaking in code is “a socially acceptable way of pretending to be better than you are or turning bigotry and ignorance into moral principles” (Fish, 1994 as cited by Haiman, p. 82). He describes coded language used to speak about the ambitions of homeless people as an “alternative” economy, thereby minimizing the poverty and anguish these people experience. Kellyanne Conway’s recent defense of Sean Spicer, noting that he wasn’t lying, he was merely presenting “alternative” facts also works with

Haiman's definition in that the ignorance espoused by the White House Press Secretary on his very first briefing is made to seem like he is fulfilling a moral obligation by presenting alternative facts.

Haiman continues to explain that euphemisms: "provide us the socially sanctioned means for talking antiseptically about socially tabooed or unpleasant subjects." He provides a politically relevant example: instead of referring to class differences we can use the term "lifestyle" as a euphemism for class. One current political example of euphemism might be Ben Carson's referencing slaves as though they were just like other immigrants dreaming of a better life or Education Secretary Betsy DeVos's recent statement that likened historically black colleges and universities as the "real pioneers" of school choice. These euphemisms work twofold: they cover up unpleasant truths about slavery and segregation and they provide conservatives with a more socially sanctioned vocabulary to use for speaking about these matters. This works with a theory called the Social Norm Model, which suggests that it is more socially acceptable to be polite. In turn, it makes those who criticize this sort of language seem angry or aggressive. This is a problem that the social justice movement must confront.

A final strength to recognize in Haiman's writing is his treatment of theories related to sarcasm. One such theory is that likening sarcasm to a mood or attitude that could even be grammaticalized like the subjunctive: "the sarcastive"(p. 28). While sarcasm is just as pervasive in language it is more like an emotion: even though anger is quite common, it is often expressed in pitch rather than grammar. He argues that because "the indices of sarcasm, like those

of anger and other more personal emotions, belong to the same communicative realm: they are not really representative signs of thought but presentative symptoms of affect... and affect tends not to get coded “ (p. 58). The idea that sarcasm is more related to emotion even though it functions like other formally grammaticalized aspects of language is intriguing and perhaps an area ripe for further inquiry.

Understanding Sarcasm

Sarcasm can be understood as a form of irony in which the speaker's statement contradicts the state of affairs, is critical towards the topic being discussed, and is often critical of the person to whom the statement is addressed (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2010). Going back to our Alec Baldwin example, his statement about the performance artists for Trump's inaugural celebration was sarcastic precisely because there was widespread agreement that the line up was disappointing and because of the cultural knowledge that Three Doors Down is not among the ranks of the biggest performers of the world. Haiman takes an even more intricate stance on sarcasm noting that what distinguishes sarcasm from metaphor is, “the idea of the speaker as a divided self: more specifically the speaker's self-conscious alienation from the actual referential content of his or her message” (Haiman, 1998). Although Baldwin speaks in hyperboles (like his real counterpart), as an audience we know from the political context that this comment is sarcastic coming from Baldwin. In this way Baldwin alienates himself

from his message indirectly criticizing the president's ability to find support amongst world-class performance artists.

Inferring sarcasm relies heavily on being aware of the larger discourse context and referencing these different layers at once: knowing that Baldwin's seemingly positive comment is a thinly veiled insult relies on the knowledge of the larger context of pop culture and politics. How do ordinary speakers understand such utterances? Haiman outlines two theoretical models that have dominated discourse on sarcasm since the 70's and 80's respectively: the theory of pretense (Grice, 1975; Clark & Gerrig, 1984) and the theory of mention (Sperber & Wilson, 1981; Ducrot, 1984). The theory of pretense easily describes the examples of Trump's parody as Haiman explains, "The parodist pretends to be the author that he or she parodies" (Haiman, p. 25) In this way, sarcasm resembles a type of performance even when used by ordinary speakers where they pretend to take an attitude that is not authentic to how they actually feel. The theory of mention, also known as echoic mention, refers to sarcasm that is achieved via repetition or quotation. Haiman notes that these aren't mutually exclusive as they both underline the fundamental notion of repetition. He also provides us with a theater metaphor to distinguish the "reel" playacting (the surface value of the sarcastic utterance) from the "real" truth that reveals the speaker's attitude towards the topic of conversation (ibid, p. 26).

People often seem to understand sarcastic speech readily in context. How do everyday speakers do so? Haiman demystifies this in two chapters. First, in a chapter on sarcasm and its neighbors, he carves out what sarcasm is by

describing what it isn't. For example, we can distinguish sarcasm from irony (sarcasm is a specific type of irony; while a situation can be ironic only a person can be sarcastic) or from dishonest communication (in contrast, sarcasm has an honest metamessage). In the next chapter, he gets on to the metamessage and how to identify sarcasm. The succinct metamessage that Haiman argues for is: "I don't mean this" (Haiman, p. 28).

Next, he unveils the trickiest part of sarcasm from a research perspective: "sarcasm is primarily expressed by intonational or even paralinguistic means" (Haiman, p. 28). This chapter, like most of the book remains a valuable resource on markers of sarcasm, such as the inverse pitch obtrusion that we could note in Alec Baldwin's use of sarcasm where the stressed syllables are uttered at a lower pitch than the surrounding syllables. However, none of the markers are necessary and sufficient to mark sarcasm and they can also mark other types of language (Gibbs, 2000). This can make it hard to systematically discover sarcastic utterances via the markers alone.

Sarcasm detection can be quite complex because markers of sarcasm can often be used in other non-sarcastic contexts. It requires an understanding of the entire discourse context and the speaker's intentions. Consider the recent controversy in which Trump first proclaimed that Obama was the founder of ISIS: in August of 2016, at a rally in Florida, Trump first put this idea out to his supporters. CNN published a piece titled, "Donald Trump: I meant that Obama founded ISIS literally" (Kopan, 2016, August 12). The same day Breitbart (a far right opinion website) published an article titled, "Fact Check: Were Obama and

Hillary Founders of ISIS? You bet” (Timmerman, 2016 August 12). It is interesting to note that both CNN and Breitbart, critical and supportive of the statement respectively, supported a literal interpretation. Breitbart wrote: “Trump is correct—and quite literally, so.” They use repetition to again emphasize: “Donald Trump is literally correct.”

Trump himself went on to defend that he meant what he said in an interview. When Hugh Hewitt asked him to clarify if he was speaking loosely, Trump replied, “No, I meant he’s the founder of ISIS... He was the most valuable player. I give him the most valuable player award. I give her, too, by the way, Hillary Clinton.” (Koplan, 2016 August 12). Then Trump tweeted again, August 12, 2016:



Trump distances himself from his earlier statement by claiming he was using sarcasm. The concept of alienation that Haiman sets forth in his book becomes relevant here. His words written nearly 20 years ago provide an excellent commentary on Trump’s claims of sarcasm:

“The sarcast is a disdainful playactor who advertises his or her insincerity by self-consciously keeping the performer and the persona alive, distinct, and opposed. The ostensible

message delivered in character expresses the role, but the metamessage—an aside directed to the other members of the play—expresses the performer’s sincere alienation from the role which for whatever reason, he or she elects to play” (Haiman, p. 61).

Indeed, the same day that Trump tweeted out the early morning sarcasm claim, he later claimed that he was “not that sarcastic” at his own rally. Trump is not using sarcasm in the traditional sense but rather he is using the principle of alienation to claim his speech was not literal when he faces critics while simultaneously reaffirming that he still meant what he said to his own supporters. In this way he was able to maintain the association of his opponents with terrorist organizations, an association that was critical in his rise to power. Trump is not asserting his dominance in the arena of figurative speech. Rather, he is asserting his dominance over reality.

Is Figurative Language Cheap Talk?

In chapters 6 and 7, Haiman gets right to the heart of the debate on figurative language: Is plain language more basic or honest? Is figurative language then deviant? To consider this further, Haiman quotes George W. Bush’s language when he was on the campaign trail in Nebraska: “How nice it is to be out where the real people are—“ (Russel Baker, New York Times, October 27, 1990; As cited in Haiman, p. 83). This instance of “un-plain speaking” is a linguistic device used by Bush to connect with his

audience, to recognize them, and to claim that “he was not a phony” (p. 83). This “un-plain” speech is only “un-plain” if you consider figurative language to be special or deviant. The phrase itself, “real men”, is actually quite basic and easily understood even with an elementary vocabulary. Yet the idea that the “bedrock of conversation is plain referential speaking” remains a popular folk notion.

To better understand these distinctions it’s necessary to revisit Grice who held that the primary goals of conversation are to “tell the truth, to be relevant, to say no more than is required, and to avoid obscurity (Grice, 1975: 47; Haiman, p. 99). Under this model, figurative language is a dishonest form of communication and therefore the literal meaning of the sentence must be first rejected before the listener arrives at the metaphorical interpretation. According to this view, literal language *is* plain language. However, this traditional view has not held up well over the years. Since the early 80’s there has been a growing number of scholars who are paying attention to a different class of metaphors that are sprinkled throughout the conversations of everyday people. Haiman presumes a metaphorical attitude towards language but in the end of Chapter 7 he rejects this view. He concludes that his “metaphorical attitude” towards language is actually invalid (Haiman, p. 126).

In contrast to Grice, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) were able to accumulate the linguistic evidence that metaphor is very common in everyday language and is an essential device to conceptualize

subjective, abstract or otherwise complex concepts via more familiar, experiential domains. Consider you are in a conversation where someone is describing a love relationship and they make the comment: “I don’t know where this is going but I think we may end up going our separate ways.” This is an example of a conceptual metaphor. The conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY helps speakers to express important aspects of love relationships. These simple metaphors are ubiquitous in speech and they serve as a basic tool used by humans to conceptualize the world.

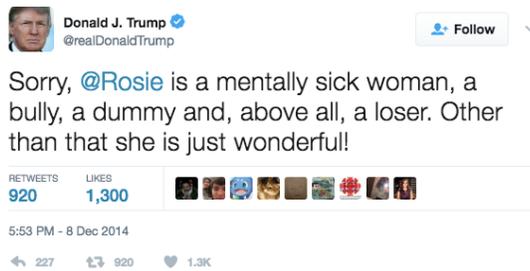
Most scholars now agree that these conceptual metaphors are everywhere in everyday speech. We now have a wealth of empirical evidence to suggest that embodied conceptual metaphors also play a pivotal role in many facets of ordinary cognition (Gibbs, 2006; Bergen, 2012). For example, in one study, participants read about either successful or difficult romantic relationships. The interesting manipulation here was that for half of these participants, the story included a phrase inspired by the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY: “Your relationship was moving along in a good direction.” After reading these scenarios, participants were asked to walk or imagine walking towards a marked distance. If embodied metaphors cause participants to activate the embodied domain of journey as they think about relationship scenarios then these participants should walk longer after reading difficult scenarios and shorter in the successful scenarios but those who do not read the metaphor should show no such differences. The results confirmed

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) showing that only those in the metaphor condition show significantly different walking times and that trend is exactly the direction that would be predicted: the difficult context led participants to walk longer as if they were on a difficult journey while the successful context led participants to walk along more quickly as if they had an easy journey (Gibbs, 2013).

Results like this suggest that metaphors are actually very powerful cognitive devices that organize and structure our thoughts, despite appearing to many to be clichéd or cheap speech. Metaphor is not simply an ornamental aspect of language, but is a critical tool for thinking. For example, the following is a quote, used while campaigning, where Trump recycles a metaphor more commonly associated with Charlie Sheen: “We will have so much winning if I get elected that you may get bored with winning!” (Duffy, 2016 November 26). Although this metaphor may not seem very novel or creative, it is now a cultural meme that conjures up some very masculine American imagery. Sheen himself has been noted to use this as if he were in a battle or athletic competition with his opponents or in reference to accomplishing his goals (Gibbs, Okonski, & Hatfield, 2013).

It’s important to note that these metaphors need not be recognized as metaphors in order for them to work as powerful conceptual devices. Trump uses a simplistic vocabulary which gives him the impression of being a “real” person instead of an elite politician. He is capitalizing on

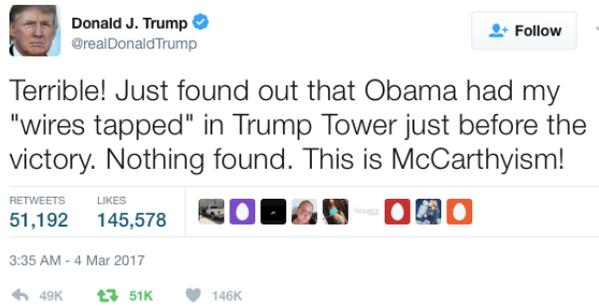
these everyday linguistics devices that are easily understood in spite of any educational differences amongst his constituents. Although his explicit use of the term sarcasm may be questionable it is also true that Trump uses sarcasm correctly in other unmarked contexts such as in the following tweet:



The language in this particular tweet is seen as humorous based on the string of insults followed by the sarcastic compliment. The Daily Show, known for political satire, held a competition to select the “greatest Donald Trump tweet of all time” (“Third Month Mania”, 2017) and this particular instance, along with a number of other ironic tweets, made it to the final rounds based on popular vote. The sarcasm used here may be, in part, why this particular tweet is seen as memorable and humorous.

Dirty devices?

In another tweet, Trump accused Obama of tapping his phones in Trump Tower, NYC during the presidential campaign:



The director of the FBI and the DoJ came forward to state that there was no evidence to support such accusations. Sean Spicer, the White House Press Secretary, defended Trump’s tweet stating: “The president used the term wiretaps in quotes to mean, broadly, surveillance and other activities” (Diamond, 2017 March 4). Given this example in conjunction with Trump’s post hoc claims of sarcasm it would seem that President Trump is using loose language to lie or at the very least to cover up his missteps. Is this an example of the dirty side of figurative language: using sarcasm and metaphor to distance himself from the impact of his messages when they become inconvenient? The metamessage that is hard to ignore in these cases, as stated so well by Haiman, is the following: “I don’t really stand by this; confronted by opposition I will cut and run... You thought I was serious? Haha!” (p. 95) This is an apt description of the tactics being used by Donald Trump and his staff. But is it reflective of figurative language use in general?

It is true that sarcasm has a bad reputation. Some even say it is the lowest form of wit. Psychologist and marriage expert John Gottman and his colleague Nan Silver (1999) have found that a high rate of sarcasm between marital partners is an excellent predictor of divorce. Another study found that sarcasm

can produce stronger negative effects than literal language (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2010). Yet, sarcasm is not always negative. Some studies (Dews et al., 1995; Dews & Winner, 1995) have found that insults communicated via sarcasm are interpreted as less critical than negative literal statements (“That was just terrific” vs. “That was just awful”). Other types of verbal irony, such as satire also produce muted effects compared to the non-ironic language (ibid.). Haiman refers to sarcasm as a type of attitude (p. 28) but the goals of ironic communication can be complex. These goals could include: “being humorous, acting aggressively, achieving emotional control, elevating one’s social status, expressing attitudes, provoking reactions, mocking others and muting the force of one’s meaning” (Colston, 1997; Dews, Kaplan, & Winner, 1995; Kreuz, Long, & Church, 1991; Kreuz & Roberts, 1995; Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg, & Brown, 1995; as cited in Gibbs, 2000).

Sarcasm can be used in other positive ways. For example, sarcasm can be used to strengthen the bond between people or in humorous ways that many find fun. In one study, friends were recorded having conversations and subsequently these were analyzed for instances of irony (Gibbs, 2000). It was found that friends, without any prompting, do use sarcasm quite a bit in their personal conversations (28% of all recorded utterances). These conversations revealed that, while some of the time sarcastic statements elicited a response where their partner decided to change the subject (29% of the time), many responses elicited irony in return (33% of the time), some instances also elicited laughter, and 75% of all sarcastic utterances were found to be humorous. The

ironic utterances back were, at times, playful and this showed a sort of “tacit collaboration” amongst the friends using sarcasm (Ibid.)

Sarcasm can also be used as a sort of coping mechanism, as can be witnessed in the post election popularity of the SNL Trump comedy skits. Critics of Trump, who may worry about the gravity of the situation, can find a catharsis of sorts in watching SNL skits. Haiman only touches on this briefly noting: “Sarcasm is often a form of humor... the humor in sarcasm (as in irony) lies in the contrast between the speaker’s flattering or sympathetic words (his or her ostensible message, the ‘lyrics’ of his or her song) and his or her hostile intentions (conveyed in the often deniable but far more fundamental metamessage, or the ‘tune’)” (p. 21). The positive benefits of sarcasm include muting negative messages, creating humor, and providing emotional catharsis after negative events. These positive aspects deserve further attention in the sarcasm literature.

Conclusions

Even with all of the examples and the thorough treatment of sarcasm that Haiman offers in his book, it would be beneficial to also read the empirical work around sarcasm. For example, research shows that when sarcastic utterances echo someone’s previous statement or implied beliefs they are quite memorable

(Gibbs, 2007). This kind of evidence gives us support for the echoic mention theory of sarcasm. Another study showed that “people using sarcasm and hyperbole adopted pretense to a greater extent than they echoed a previous statement” (Gibbs, 2000). Thus, while echoic sarcasm may bolster memory, pretense sarcasm may be more prevalent in natural speech. A great volume to read in conjunction with Haiman’s book would be “Irony in Language and Thought: A Cognitive Science Reader” (Gibbs & Colston Eds., 2007). Taken together, these types of resources are more valuable than ever. While much emphasis has been placed on STEM careers in the past two decades, it is also important to understand the more human aspects of experience. When times get rough, it’s hard to deny the power of the arts: music, poetry, theater, dance and comedy. The vast experience offered here by linguists and psycholinguists might be useful going forward in these confusing times.

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