Contrastive Metapragmatics and the Shifting Semantics of “Sarcasm” in English and Danish

Cliff Goddard | ORCID: 0000-0003-2523-2855
Professor, Griffith University, Nathan, Queensland, Australia
Corresponding author
c.goddard@griffith.edu.au

Carsten Levisen | ORCID: 0000-0002-7497-2406
Associate Professor, Roskilde University, Roskilde, Denmark
calev@ruc.dk

Received 7 June 2023 | Accepted 28 September 2023 | Published online 17 November 2023

Abstract

Despite valuable studies into the uses/functions of sarcasm, no previous investigation has focused on the semantics of “sarcasm” as an emic metapragmatic category. We provide a contrastive lexical study of English and Danish using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach. We find that the English noun sarcasm has been undergoing semantic innovation and is now polysemous, as is its corresponding adjective. Roughly, older sarcasm₁ expresses a positive message with an obvious negative intention, while newer sarcasm₂ expresses a negative message with the aim of being amusing. For Danish, sarkasme is shown to closely align with sarcasm₁, but semantic innovation has been happening in Danish too. A new expression sarkastisk humor overlaps with sarcasm₂ but is tailored to fit into Danish humor discourses. The study sheds light on insider understandings and metapragmatic discourses in Anglo and Danish linguacultures. There are cautionary implications for the use of “sarcasm” as a second-order concept.
Keywords

sarcasm – metapragmatics – lexical semantics – semantic innovation – humour studies – NSM (Natural Semantic Metalanguage)

1 Contrastive Metapragmatics and “Sarcasm”

By contrastive metapragmatics, we understand the contrastive study of the emics of metapragmatic words and phrases; that is, the study of the words people use in different linguacultures to capture, comment, and contest their own discourse practices and linguistic realities. We here provide a contrastive lexical study of the metapragmatics of “sarcasm” in English and Danish. Our primary focus is on the English noun sarcasm and its adjective counterpart sarcastic, and the apparently corresponding noun and adjective in Danish, sarkasme and sarkastisk, as well as the uniquely Danish word dumsmart. Danish is a language which is widely known in the intercultural communication literature for its “sarcastic” humour style (Lundquist 2014, 2021). Our method of lexical-semantic description will be the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach, which uses explanatory paraphrase in simple, translatable words as a way of representing hypotheses about meaning.

There have been a number of valuable studies into sarcasm conducted in the intersection zone of linguistic pragmatics and the philosophy of language, e.g., Taylor (2015, 2017), Dynel (2016a, 2016b). One common focus of interest has been to clarify the relationship between sarcasm and the traditional rhetorical figure of irony. Another has been to clarify the relationship between so-called first-order and second-order uses of the terms “sarcasm” and “irony”, corresponding, respectively, to their everyday emic meanings and to their use as specialist analytical categories.¹ Our study differs in several ways. The first and most obvious is that we are bringing a lexical-semantic lens to “sarcasm”, and, as far as we know, ours is the first such study to do so. Taylor, Dynel and others have clearly recognised that first-order understandings of “sarcasm” and related words are an important topic of research interest and have made a number of highly pertinent observations, but they have not deployed a systematic

¹ We use the word “emic” in what may be considered its ordinary meaning in contemporary English, as it appears in dictionaries such as Cambridge Dictionary or Merriam-Webster Dictionary, e.g. “studying or describing a language or culture from the point of view of the people who use the language or live in the culture”. As such, it closely aligns with the concept of “insider perspective”. For a review of the history of “emic” in linguistics and anthropology, see Mostowlansky and Rota (2020/2023).
method of lexical-semantic analysis. We believe that our study allows a higher level of semantic granularity and detail and can thus bring to light facts that would not otherwise be clearly visible. Second, in the descriptive-analytical sections of the paper (sections 2–4), we will not concern ourselves with “irony” or with second-order terminology at all. We will focus solely on the emics of words in everyday English and everyday Danish. We have a story to tell about the “new polysemy” of the everyday English words sarcasm and sarcastic, a story about semantic change and innovation in progress, and we have a story to tell about semantic innovation in Danish too, which somewhat parallels developments in English but which in broader perspective connects with Danish cultural discourses on humour and is, thereby, distinctively Danish.

This is not to say that our findings and proposals have no relevance to the broader disciplinary concerns of linguistic pragmatics, philosophy of language and humour studies. We would, however, prefer to postpone comment on these points of relevance and dialogue until the discussion section (section 5) and begin instead with a semantic-lexicographical starting point.

We will start then by sampling what some leading scholars and dictionaries have had to say about the meaning of the English word sarcasm. The entries in Table 1 are representative. Haiman (1998) and Attardo (2000) are well known scholars in the field. The Concise Oxford English Dictionary, Webster’s Dictionary, Longman, and Merriam-Webster Dictionary are major dictionaries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>A sample of scholarly and dictionary definitions of sarcasm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“overt irony intentionally used by the speaker as a form of verbal aggression ...”</td>
<td>(Haiman 1998: 20, 24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“sarcasm is an aggressive type of irony, with clearer markers/cues and a clear target”</td>
<td>(Attardo 2000: 795)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the use of irony to mock or convey contempt”</td>
<td>[Concise Oxford English Dictionary 2011 (12th edition): 1276]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In SARCASM ridicule or mockery is used harshly, often crudely and contemptuously, for destructive purposes. ... manifested chiefly by vocal inflection”</td>
<td>(Webster’s, cited Partington 2006: 212)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

2 Taylor (2016) provides a survey of over 50 scholarly papers on irony and sarcasm.
“a way of speaking or writing that involves saying the opposite of what you really mean in order to make an unkind joke or to show that you are annoyed. ‘Good of you to arrive on time’ George said, with heavy sarcasm (= very clear sarcasm). [Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/sarcasm, accessed 20–05–2023]

1. a sharp and often satirical or ironic utterance designed to cut or give pain,  
2a: a mode of satirical wit depending for its effect on bitter, caustic, and often ironic language that is usually directed against an individual. [Merriam-Webster http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sarcasm, accessed 20–05–2023]

Examining the definitions given in Table 1, one may see that they display many of the usual failings of non-systematic lexicography, such as complex defining vocabulary (“irony”, “aggression”, “mockery”, etc.) and the frequent use of disjunction and hedges (“or”, “often”, “especially”) (Wierzbicka, 1996: Ch 9; Goddard, 2017a). Disregarding these issues for the moment, we would note that the sources in Table 1 emphasise two things: first, that sarcasm is negative (“aggressive”, “harsh”, “unkind”, “designed to cut or give pain”, etc.); and second, that it is or can be obvious (“overt”, “with clearer markers”, “to show that you are annoyed”, etc.).

Looking ahead, we are going to argue that in ordinary usage this tells only half the story. The English words sarcasm/sarcastic, we will argue, now each have two distinct meanings: in addition to the traditional “aggressive+obvious” meaning (sarcasm1/sarcastic1), there is a more recent meaning (sarcasm2/sarcastic2) which is not aggressive in intent and is not necessarily obvious.3 In Danish, we can observe something similar: there is a traditional meaning sarkasme/sarkastisk ‘sarcasm1/sarcastic1,’ and a humorous expansion sarkastisk humor ‘sarcastic humour’. We aim to explicate these meanings to a higher standard of accuracy and clarity than that offered by conventional definitions, such as those given in Table 1.

3 We have found one standard dictionary, the Britannica Dictionary, which mentions that sarcasm can be used not only to insult or show irritation, but “in order ... to be funny”. The Britannica also stands out in not mentioning anything about obviousness. https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/sarcasm [accessed 20-05-2023].
To this end we will employ a highly systematic method of lexical semantic description, known as the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach (Wierzbicka, 1996; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014; Goddard, 2018a). It is not necessary here to give a full account of the NSM theory. The key point is that it depicts meanings using explanatory paraphrases (termed, explications) composed of simple, cross-translatable words. These can be either universal semantic primes or universal or near-universal semantic molecules. Semantic primes are words which can be regarded as representing elementary meanings: words which are so simple and clear that they cannot be explained (without circularity) by means of other words. Evidence suggests that semantic primes have equivalents in all or most languages. Semantic primes are listed in Table 2, in their English versions. Comparable tables are available for about 30 languages, including Danish; see [nsm-approach.net/resources].

Semantic molecules are other relatively basic words, themselves definable in terms of semantic primes, which function alongside primes as basic building blocks of meaning. Examples include “sun”, “water”, “head”, “eyes” and “children”. Some semantic molecules may be universal or near-universal, but many are not. In the explications presented in this study, only two semantic molecules are employed: “voice” and “laugh”. They are marked with [m] to distinguish them from semantic primes.

The small size of the defining language forces a very fine-grained resolution of meaning, and because NSM explications are cross-translatable they are able to make language-specific meanings accessible to speakers of other languages.

4 The bibliography of NSM publications is extensive. For a searchable database of publications, along with other information and resources, see [nsm-approach.net].

5 For ease of reading, portmanteau expressions are also allowed in explications, e.g., ‘often’ for ‘at many times’, ‘they (pl)’ for ‘these people’, ‘they (sg)’ for ‘this someone’, ‘later’ for ‘after this’.
TABLE 2  Semantic primes, English exponents (after Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014)

| I~ME, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, PEOPLE, BODY |
| KINDS, PARTS |
| THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE |
| ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW |
| GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL |
| THINK, KNOW, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR |
| SAY, WORDS, TRUE |
| DO, HAPPEN, MOVE |
| BE (SOMEBODY), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/ SOMETHING), (IS) MINE |
| LIVE, DIE |
| WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT |
| WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH |
| NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF, VERY, MORE, LIKE~AS |

Notes: Exponents of primes can be polysemous, i.e., they can have other, additional meanings. Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phraseemes. They can be formally, i.e., morphologically, complex. They can have combinatorial variants or allolexes (indicated with ~). Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

2  English Sarcasm, and Sarcastic,

We now proceed to make the case that there are two distinct meanings of the English words sarcasm and sarcastic, starting with the older and better established meaning.

Examples (1a) - (1c) can serve, in our opinion, as stereotypical exemplars of everyday interpersonal sarcasm, in Anglo English. Even in written form, without prosody, their most plausible interpretations are sarcastic.

(1a)  I just love what you’ve done with your hair.
(1b)  You’re so hilarious!
(1c)  Yeah, ... because that worked so well last time.

The examples in (2a) – (2d) show four kinds of sarcasm,-related phraseology, based primarily on data from WordBanks Online. In the phrases in (2a), the adjective sarcastic is used to modify a noun denoting an act of speaking, while in (2b) and (2c) it modifies the speaker’s voice or facial expression. The expressions in (2d) are common collocations with the noun sarcasm.
(2a) sarcastic comment, sarcastic remark, sarcastic response, sarcastic aside, ...
(2b) sarcastic tone, sarcastic voice, ...
(2c) sarcastic smile, sarcastic grin, sarcastic manner, ...
(2d) biting sarcasm, bitter sarcasm, heavy sarcasm, ...

On the evidence reviewed so far, including the definitions listed in Table 1, four observations can be made. (i) Sarcastic comments are ostensibly positive, often extremely so. (Note, for instance, the use of love in (1a), and intensifier so combined with positive evaluators in (1b) and (1c).) (ii) Although a sarcastic utterance need not be literally about the addressee, there is an apparent intention to "wound", "sting" or "cut" the addressee. (iii) All this is, or, at least, can be, obvious from the speaker's tone of voice. (iv) Less obvious on collocational evidence, but clear enough, we believe, from an intuitive point of view, the sarcastic speaker seems able to get some gratification out of it.

These observations can be captured in the semantic explication presented in [A]. This depicts what one may term the “sarcasm, scenario”. For convenience, it is broken into four sections, labelled (a) – (d). Section (a) depicts the apparently positive nature of the speaker’s dictum. Section (b) spells out that it is obvious from the speaker’s voice that the speaker does not truly think positively about the person or topic in question, but actually “thinks something bad about it”. Section (c) sets out the prototypical illocutionary intention, namely the intention to express, non-verbally, a certain, rather complex, message whose content is portrayed in the four indented subcomponents. Notice that the final line of this section is overtly “hostile”; i.e., part of the implied message is “I want you to feel something bad when I say this to you”. Section (d) states that “when someone says something bad when I say this to you”. Section (d) states that “when someone says something bad when I say this to you”. Section (d) states that “when someone says something bad when I say this to you”. Section (d) states that “when someone says something bad when I say this to you”. Section (d) states that “when someone says something bad when I say this to you”. Section (d) states that “when someone says something bad when I say this to you”.

These observations can be captured in the semantic explication presented in [A]. This depicts what one may term the “sarcasm, scenario”. For convenience, it is broken into four sections, labelled (a) – (d). Section (a) depicts the apparently positive nature of the speaker’s dictum. Section (b) spells out that it is obvious from the speaker’s voice that the speaker does not truly think positively about the person or topic in question, but actually “thinks something bad about it”. Section (c) sets out the prototypical illocutionary intention, namely the intention to express, non-verbally, a certain, rather complex, message whose content is portrayed in the four indented subcomponents. Notice that the final line of this section is overtly “hostile”; i.e., part of the implied message is “I want you to feel something bad when I say this to you”. Section (d) states that “when someone says something bad when I say this to you”. Section (d) states that “when someone says something bad when I say this to you”. Section (d) states that “when someone says something bad when I say this to you”. Section (d) states that “when someone says something bad when I say this to you”. Section (d) states that “when someone says something bad when I say this to you”.

---

6 This explication is partial in that it does not include the top-level components connected with the status of sarcasm as an "abstract noun". Essentially, these components capture the role of abstract nouns as reified discourse topics, cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014: 205–222).
[A] *sarcasm*₁ (the “sarcasm₁ scenario”)

sometimes it is like this:

a. someone says something good about something to someone else
b. when people hear it, they can know that this someone doesn’t think something good about it
   they can know that this someone thinks something bad about it
   they can know this because they can hear this someone’s voice [m]

c. people often say something in this way when they want to say something like this to someone else, not with words:
   “I know that you think something good about something
   I don’t know how you can think like this
   I feel something bad because of it
   I want you to feel something bad when I say this to you”
d. when someone says something bad when I say this to you

Readers may be surprised at the length of explication [A], but it is a natural consequence of the requirement that the whole thing be stated using only simple, cross-translatable words.

3 English *Sarcasm*₂ and *Sarcastic*₂

As anticipated above, there is clear evidence, from a lexicographic point of view, that the English words *sarcastic* and *sarcasm* also have a second meaning, which presumably is more recent than the “traditional” *sarcastic, meaning explicated in section 2. Briefly and informally, the differences include the following: (i) A *sarcastic*₂ statement is usually ostensibly negative (not positive as with *sarcastic*₁). (ii) It is not said with the intention to hurt anyone’s feelings but with the intention of being “amusing”. (iii) It is not associated with any audible “tone of voice”. Remarkably, it seems that most dictionaries of English, with the exception of the Britannica Dictionary, have not yet detected this meaning. Among scholarly studies, Dress et al. (2008: 81–82) may have come closest, albeit they interpret the difference as one of usage rather than meaning (cf. Taylor, 2017: 212).

The existence of the *sarcastic*₂ meaning is particularly obvious in the expression *just being sarcastic* (179,000 google search hits, 20–05–2023), which would not make much sense on the traditional *sarcastic* meaning, firstly, on account of the “minimising” word *just*, and also because the expression clearly implies that the speaker “doesn’t mean it”.

10.1163/26660393-BJAI10107 | CONTRASTIVE PRAGMATICS (2023) 1–24
Here are some helpful textual examples of this use of *sarcastic*₂, selected from online sources.

(3) *After Daniel Craig recently said he'd rather “slash [his] wrists” than play James Bond in another 007 movie ... his Spectre costar Naomie Harris downplayed the actor's controversial comments ... Harris, 39, told BBC News on Tuesday, Oct. 13, that Craig was “just being sarcastic” ... [*http://www.usmagazine.com/entertainment/news/daniel-craig-being-sarcastic-about-james-bond-comment-says-costar-20151310*]*

(4) *After many health officials expressed their dismay, Trump repeatedly claimed that he was just being sarcastic. [*https://theconversation.com/why-i-was-just-being-sarcastic-can-be-such-a-convenient-excuse-141764*]*

(5) *“She told me she couldn't come to my birthday party, and I said she wasn't my friend anymore, but I was just being sarcastic.” [*www.scarymommy.com/author/rachel-finnemore*]*

The most salient feature of being *sarcastic*₂ is not that one is being negative, as with *sarcastic*₁, but rather that one is “not serious” or “just kidding”; that is, *sarcastic*₂ is often associated with humour or with attempted humour. The apparent or ostensive intention may be to get a laugh or to raise a smile, to impress the listener with one's irreverence, or merely to be facetious. *Sarcastic*₂ is found in the following collocations, which would be incompatible with the traditional *sarcastic*₁.

(6a) sarcastic humour, a sarcastic sense of humour, sarcastic jokes ...
(6b) sarcastic people, a sarcastic person, sarcastic friends, ...

Example (7) gives another example of *sarcastic*₂ being used as a metalinguistic comment. The speaker is a magazine feature writer (Safran, 2015: 20), who is reporting on his interview with Musa, a young Muslim radical. The interviewer has asked Musa whether he thinks adulterers should be stoned to death.⁸

(7) *“They don't have to be stoned”, Musa says. “You could also cut their heads off”. I laugh reflexively, as if one of my sarcastic friends had said something transgressive for effect. But he's not being sarcastic. I don't quite know what to say.* [emphasis added]

---

⁷ It would take us too far afield to delve into the exact semantics of the English word *serious* and the expression *just kidding*, but see Goddard (2009, 2017b).

The meaning of “being sarcastic₂” can be stated as in [B], using the same format as [A] above. Sections (a) and (b) say that the utterance is overtly negative about something, but that this does not reflect the speaker’s true attitude. The components in section (c) depict the speaker’s apparent or purported motivation, which, roughly speaking, amounts to the desire to say something unexpected which will momentarily puzzle the addressee in order to get a brief “amused” reaction, i.e., so that someone can “feel something good for a short time like people often feel when they want to laugh” (Goddard 2017b). Unlike as in the “sarcasm₁ scenario”, there is no implied message. Finally, as with sarcasm₁, the speaker him or herself can potentially extract some good feeling from speaking in this fashion, section (d).

[B] being sarcastic₂ (the “sarcasm₂ scenario”)
[sometimes it is like this:]

a. someone says something bad to someone else
b. this someone doesn’t say it because they think something bad about something, this someone doesn’t say it because they feel something bad
c. they say it because they think about this someone else like this: “this someone doesn’t know that I will say something like this at this moment because of this, when I say this, this someone won’t know why I say it, a moment later they can know it because of this, they can feel something good for a short time like people often feel when they want to laugh [m] I want to say it because of this”
d. when someone says something in this way, they can feel something good because of it

It is worth noting a fine detail of the second component of section (c): “when I say this, this someone won’t know why I say it, a moment later they can know it” (emphasis added). The phrasing (with “can”) allows for the possibility of misunderstanding and the evident risk that the overtly negative statement will

---

9 Goddard (2017a) argues that this is a key semantic component of the English word amusing, as opposed to funny, which is hinged around a more direct reference to laughing (essentially, wanting to laugh, while feeling something good at the same time). We cannot pursue this matter further here, except to note that both words (amusing, funny) are semantically complex and lack precise equivalents across languages.
incurs a bad feeling. This is consistent with online discourse about the danger of sarcasm₂ being misunderstood.

Insight into the sarcastic₂ meaning is provided by online discussions in which people debate how best to signal that they are just being sarcastic₂ using emojis or emoticons. There is ambivalence in the iconography of the emojis, but it is notable that some of them use a smile, such as the 😃 Upside Down Face, which consists of yellow smiley turned upside down, and the 😉 Smirking Face. One may presume that, iconically, the smile stands for the implied good feelings. The text-based emoticons :S and /S, said to be popular on Reddit, are sometimes explained as representing a “joking smile”. One online source (from 2013) explained as follows: “The “S” represents a joking smile and may also be short for “sarcastic”. It is used to express sarcasm and may be used after a sarcastic or joking comment that should not be taken seriously” [https://pc.net/emojis/smile/sarcastic].

How the new meaning sarcastic₂ arose must await further study, but we conjecture that the locus of the semantic innovation was the adjective sarcastic, rather than the noun sarcasm. It is known that agnate words from different parts of speech may be differently susceptible to semantic change. Wierzbicka (2011, 2014) shows that the noun happiness is more semantically conservative than its corresponding adjective happy. Similarly, the abstract noun friendship is more semantically conservative than the social category noun friend (cf. Wierzbicka, 1997: 35–55). Our hypothesis is that the semantic shift started with the adjective, i.e., that sarcastic developed a distinct meaning (sarcastic₂) and that the noun then followed suit. It also seems likely to us that the innovation originated in America (perhaps, specifically, in the Northern dialects, cf. Dress et al. 2008), and then spread via mass media and internet.

In any case, there are indications that in the USA, sarcastic₂ and sarcasm₂ are now the “trending” meanings in ordinary, non-scholarly discourse. For example, Dynel’s (2016a) study of the US TV series House found that of 16 metapragmatic evaluations based on the label “sarcasm”, only 7 “show any indication of ... being aimed to cause verbal harm or be offensive towards chosen hearer” (p.81). She comments: “Essentially, the emic label ‘sarcasm’ denotes even perfectly benign forms of the figure of irony, which carries no (intended or perceived) aggression”. (p.84)

We return to the broader implications of our analysis in Section 5. To pave the way, we now provide a contrastive perspective with Danish, a language which is widely known for its “sarcasm” (Lundquist, 2014, 2021).
4 Danish *Sarkastisk Humor* ‘Sarcastic Humour’

As in English, the Danish metapragmatic terms *sarkasme* ‘sarcasm’ and *sarkastisk* ‘sarcastic’ traditionally stand for an “aggressive+obvious” category, but at the same time there are new developments which partly run parallel to those of English. In the following we first review the traditional category of *sarkasme*, before focusing on the “humorous” turn and the development of the metacategory *sarkastisk humor* ‘sarcastic humour’.

In Danish pragmatics, *sarkasme* is dealt with as an “aggressive” category. The Danish pragmaticist Ole Togeby explains the distinction between *ironi* ‘irony’ and *sarkasme* ‘sarcasm’ as follows:

> Forskellen på ironi og sarkasme synes blot at være dette at ironien går efter bolden, mens sarkasmen går efter spilleren. Ved ironien er det tanken der udstilles og dementeres, mens det ved sarkasme er tankens ophav der kritiseres og hånes.

The difference between *ironi* and *sarkasme* is, seemingly just that *ironi* plays the ball, while *sarkasme* plays the man. In *ironi* it is the thought that is being exposed and refuted, while in *sarkasme* it is the source of the thought that is being criticized and mocked. (Togeby, 2013: 482)

In Togeby’s analyses, *sarkasme* is *en hån af adressaten* ‘a mockery of the addressee’. What he says is fully in accord with the traditional sense, i.e., section (c), of our explication of English *sarcasm*. Togeby’s second-order understanding appears to be in agreement with the first-order Danish concept. Consider, for instance, Danish interjections and speech routines. Something like “sarcastic empathy” and “sarcastic admiration” have special, dedicated interjections: *Nääeeeh!* sarcastically mimics the verbal consolation that a small child with a grazed knee would attract. *Nøjjjj* or *navra* can serve as tools for “sarcastic admiration”. A range of other secondary interjections, especially *flot!* ‘beautiful, excellent’, *dejligt!* ‘lovely, nice’, and *lækker!* ‘delicious, yummy’ are also common.

In terms of collocations, the Danish examples in (8a) – (8c), from the daTenTen20 corpus, are similar to those of English *sarcasm*,10

---

10 An interesting feature is that *sarkastisk* more often co-occurs with male names (e.g., Brian, John, Jesper, Lars, Søren, Peter) than with female names; and as well, the mentioned male names are typical of 40–60 year-olds.
So how does Danish compare to the newer developments in English? Danish does not seem to provide a match for the English *sarcastic* – at least not in absolute terms. For instance, there is no conventional phraseological Danish equivalent of the English expression *just being sarcastic*, and most of the other collocational patterns of English *sarcastic*, given in (6a) and (6b), are either unavailable or infrequent in Danish. There is one striking exception, however: the expression *sarkastisk humor*, and the related phrase *sarkastiske jokes* ‘sarcastic jokes, quips’.

In terms of semantic innovations, then, the relevant comparison would seem to be between English *sarcastic* and the Danish *sarkastisk humor* concept. The fact that *sarcastic* is a lexical innovation (a new polysemic meaning) and *sarkastisk humor* is a phraseological innovation is interesting from a historical perspective, but synchronically the most significant point is that *sarkastisk humor* has a more transparent semantics: this concept is a fusion of the benign, pro-social concept of *humor* and the aggressive interpersonal concept of *sarkasme*.

Also significant is that the phraseme does not designate a type of *sarcasm*, but rather a type of *humor* (the fusion is *sarkastisk humor* ‘sarcastic humor’, not *humoristisk sarkasme* ‘humoristic sarcasm’). *Sarkastisk humor* suggests a new emic category in which *sarkastisk* speech is interpreted by default as being humorous by intent, and whereby *sarkasme* has become a flavour of *humor*. As with semantic fusions generally, however, the result is not simply the sum of the constituent parts, and this means that a separate semantic explication of *sarkastisk humor* is needed.

---

11 There are only 217 occurrences of the sentence *Jeg var bare sarkastisk* ‘I was just being sarcastic’ on google.dk (May 2023), and some of these are from material translated from English.
Understanding *sarkastisk humor* in its wider ethnopragmatic context, one has to take into account the general landscape of humour elaborations in Danish (Levisen 2018, 2019a). A large class of locally named humor types exist in the language, e.g., *sort humor* ‘black humour’ (roughly, murky humour), *plat humor* ‘flat humour’, *fed humor* ‘fat humour’, *skæv humor* ‘crooked humour’, *mørk humor* ‘dark humour’, *tør humor* ‘dry humour’, *syg humor* ‘sick humour’, more than a dozen others. These categories typify different local ways of laughing, and the integrated category of *sarkastisk humor* has developed within this general structuration. The many phraseological elaborations of humor bear witness to the keyness of humor ‘humour’ in Danish linguaculture.

Let us take a look at the main features of *sarkastisk humor* as an emic metapragmatic category, and as meaning-in-use. According to Danish phraseology, *sarkastisk humor* is something a person can “have”, as in examples (9)-(10). This is similar to how humor is construed in general, cf. *at have humor* ‘having humor’.

(9)   *Jeg hedder Camilla, jeg er 19 og er en sød lyttende glad pige, jeg indrømmer jeg har en lidt sarkastisk humor men jeg skal nok opføre mig ordenligt ;)*

‘My name is Camilla, I’m 19 and a sweet, listening, happy girl, I admit that I have a bit a of *sarkastisk humor* but I promise to behave’.

[daTenTen20]

(10)  *Han har bedste sarkastiske humor og elsker ham for det. Dejlige mand.*

‘He has the best *sarkastisk humor* and I love him for it. Great guy’.

[daTenTen20]

Those who have it can use this kind of humor to maintain pre-established socialities and relationships. *Sarkastisk humor* allows for playfully toying with aggressive themes but when packaged in “benign” humorous speech, this can create a positive sense of togetherness. Consider (11), an observed example. After a conflict with his students, a teacher uses *sarkastisk humor* with the overall intent of easing things up. Applying the key Danish sociality term *hygge* ‘pleasant togetherness’ to describe an unpleasant situation (Levisen, 2012: ch3), his *sarkastisk humor* intervention inserts a benign frame into the situation.

---

12  English too has such expressions, e.g., *dry humour, black humour, slapstick humour, galloows humour*, but they are far fewer in number.
The speech routines shown in (12a) and (12b) are clichéd interaction rituals between older male friends. (12a) is a *sarcastisk humor* greeting between friends who have not seen each other for a long time. (12b) is a *sarcastisk humor* question asked at a party where copious amounts of alcohol are being consumed. Playing with the potentially taboo themes of sudden death and alcoholism, the interactants assert the friendly bonds between them.

(12a) *Hvad fanden, lever du endnu?*

‘What the hell, you’re still alive?’

(12b) *Nå, er du stadig på antabus?*

‘So are you still on antabus?’ (antabus: drug used to support the treatment of chronic alcoholism)

In the literature on humour in intercultural communication, examples of Danish *sarcastisk humor* often fall under the headline of “failed humour”. Consider a case from Lundquist (2014). It concerns a Frenchman who had moved to Denmark with his family in order to take up a new job but was having trouble learning Danish. A Danish colleague gave him the following advice:

(13) *Anyway, in order to learn Danish, well, there is no choice, you have to divorce and marry a Dane* (Lundquist, 2014).

Not recognising the humorous intent, the French learner described the incident as “very hurtful”. He elaborated that “it came up very coldly in a discussion”, and “at a moment when I was trying desperately to learn Danish”.

Another instructive example concerns the imbroglio over film director Lars von Trier’s “sympathy for Hitler” remarks in Cannes in 2011. We will discuss this in section 5, but for moment we just note that while most Danish commentators distanced themselves from his comments, there was often some side remark to the effect that this kind of “sarcastic humour” would not be such an issue in Denmark.

Based on these observations, we explicate *sarcastisk humor* as in [C]. This explication has many components in common with explication [B] for English *being sarcastic*, but it is not exactly the same. The main difference, as foreshadowed above, is that in *sarcastisk humor* the speaker’s negative utterance is framed from the onset in terms of the intention to elicit laughter, in accordance with the meaning of the Danish noun *humor* (Levisen, 2018a).
[C] **sarkastisk humor** (the Danish “sarkastisk humor” scenario)

[sometimes it is like this:]

a. someone says something bad about something to someone else
b. they don’t say this because they want to say how they think about it, they say it because they want this someone else to laugh [m]
c. when they say it, they think about this someone else like this:
   “this someone doesn’t know that I will say something like this at this moment
   because of this, when I say this they won’t know why I want to say it
   a moment later they can know it, they can laugh [m] because of it
   I want to say it because of this”

There are indications that **sarkastisk humor** is not as ingrained in the verbal culture of young Danish speakers as it is in that of the older generation. In a Danish comedy award show (**Guldtuben**, Sept. 2017), an established stand-up comedy artist Anders Matthesen was introducing the prizes given to young you tubers and social media stars. He was later accused of **mobning** ‘bullying’, and an (inter)generational crisis over **sarkastisk humor** broke out in Danish public discourse. Given its canonical status, it would be premature to claim that **sarkastisk humor** is under threat in the discourse of Danish teenagers, but there are other ethnopragmatic constraints working against it, which seek to minimise the potential problems with **sarkastisk humor**.

Emic evidence for this claim comes in the form of the concept **dumsmart** ‘stupid-smart’, to which we now turn.

5 **Danish Dumsmart ‘Stupid-Smart’**

The word **dumsmart** ‘stupid-smart’ was coined by Queen Margrethe II in her New Year’s speech to the nation in 1984. This was one of the most memorable and controversial of the speeches ever given by the monarch, and its message still resonates, along with the **dumsmart** concept. Examining critically the interaction between “old Danes” (“us, the Danes”) and “new Danes” (“them, the migrants”), Queen Margrethe II chastised Danish verbal culture. This is what she said:

*Så kommer vi med vores danske humor og små dumsmarte bemærkninger.
Så møder vi dem med kølighed, og så er der ikke langt til chikane og grovere*
metoder. Det kan vi ikke være bekendt. Hvis vi ønsker, at de nye år skal blive bedre end det gamle, er her et godt sted at begynde.

Then we approach them with our Danish humour and small dumsmart remarks. And then we give them a chilly reception, and then there is not a long way to harassment and abusive methods. That’s not okay. If we wish for the new year to be better than the old one, this is the right place to begin.

The phrase små dumsmarte bemærkninger ‘small stupid-smart remarks’ and the word dumsmart ‘stupid-smart’ were quickly adopted into Danish discourses of humour; and especially in critiques of sarkastisk humor in the context of intercultural communication where, according to the Queen, the breakdown of the positive intent and culture of inclusivity turns into an excluding sociality of Danes against non-Danes. Dumsmart is an oxymoron, combining dum ‘stupid, dumb, silly’ with smart ‘smart, clever, shrewd’. It was likely modelled in part on the pre-existing negative adjective dumstædig ‘stupid-stubborn’. While we cannot know for sure whether the Queen intended to mainly criticize (failed) sarkastisk humor only, as opposed to other “stupid” humor practices, it is worth noting that both dumsmart and sarkastisk co-occur with bemærkninger ‘remarks’: sarkastiske bemærkninger ‘sarcastic remarks’, dumsmarte bemærkninger ‘stupid-smart remarks’.

Now let us go back to Lars von Trier’s notorious “I understand Hitler” comment, mentioned in section 4.\textsuperscript{13} While the international media tended to interpret the remarks as either downright “anti-Semitic”, or alternatively as “failed sarcasm”, in Denmark the term dumsmart was applied. Below is a quiz from The Tabloid paper Ekstrabladet published after the incident, with the question and response options shown in (14).

\begin{enumerate}
\item[14] \textbf{Kan Lars Von Trier tillade sig at gøre grin med Susanna Biers jødiske baggrund og kalde sig selv ’lidt nazist’?}
- Nej. Det er barnligt og stødende
- Ja. Det var en dumsmart bemærkning. Slap dog af
- Det ved jeg ikke
\end{enumerate}

\textsuperscript{13} See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpUqplhoIRw for the press conference, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_Hp3qBzF9Q for follow-up interview and explanation.
Can Lars von Trier take the liberty to make fun of Susanne Bier’s Jewish background and call himself a bit of a Nazi?
– No. It’s childish and offensive
– Yes. It was just a dumsmart remark, relax man
– I don’t know

On the one hand, dumsmart offers a critical take on von Trier. It judges him as somebody who was trying to say something clever, but failed and instead came across as arrogant and stupid because he neglected to carefully think through the context in which he was speaking. At the same time, it clearly places von Trier’s remark in a would-be humorous frame. By judging his remarks as dumsmart, the Danish newspaper offers its readers a “humour critique”, rather than a critique based on alleged racism or anti-Semitism.

[D] is a semantic explication for dumsmarte bemærkninger ‘stupid-smart remarks’. Notice that the opening components position the concept against the backdrop of sarkastisk humor, as explicated in [C].

**[D]**

*dumsmarte bemærkninger* ‘stupid-smart remarks’ (the Danish “dumsmart scenario”)

sometimes it is like this:

a. someone says something bad to someone else
b. they say it because they want this someone else to laugh [m] when they say it, they think like this: “I can think well, I can say something like this well”
c. after this someone says it, this someone else feels something very bad because of it, they don’t laugh [m] as this someone wanted it is bad if someone says something like this
d. it is bad because this someone didn’t think like this before:

“maybe some people here can feel something bad if I say something like this”

Explication [D] models the oxymoron between *dum* and *smart* in the contrast between (b) and (c). The *smart* ‘smart, clever’ part is in the mind of the speaker, as represented in (b). He or she wants to cause someone else to laugh and is confident in his or her own verbal cleverness (“I can think well, I say something like this well”). The reality, however, the speaker’s performance is *dum*, as set out in (c), because it induces bad feeling, fails to get a laugh and is disapproved of. Section (d) links the bad outcome with the speaker’s thoughtlessness.
6 Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The NSM technique of explanatory paraphrase into simple, cross-translatable words allows for different components of closely related meanings to be teased apart, both within a single language and across different languages, and this makes it a very servicable tool for contrastive metapragmatics. To briefly re-cap, we have seen that though most dictionaries and scholarly studies have not yet clearly recognised this fact, the English words *sarcasm* and *sarcastic* now each have two distinct meanings. Co-existing with the older “traditional” meaning *sarcasm*, which designates an ostensibly positive message delivered with an intended-to-be-obvious aggressive intent, there is a newer meaning *sarcasm*, which designates an ostensibly negative message delivered non-seriously, with an implied humorous intent. Danish *sarkasme* and *sarkastisk* are closely aligned with English *sarcasm*. Danish has innovated a new phrase *sarkastisk humor*, whose meaning overlaps with *sarcasm*, but which explicitly belongs to the highly elaborated Danish domain of “humour discourse”. We now turn the wider implications these findings.

We first note the cautionary implications for linguistic pragmatics and for humour studies. In these fields, the word *sarcasm* is often used not only as a first-order term (i.e., as a word in ordinary non-technical English), but also as a second-order term (i.e., as a technical term), without clear recognition of the lexical polysemy of *sarcasm* (and *sarcastic*) in contemporary English. This lack of clarity, in our opinion, means that scholars often end up talking at cross-purposes with one another, and it also complicates the already fraught relationship between so-called first-order and second-order meanings; cf. Goddard (2018b).

Several scholars in pragmatics have called attention to these problems, most notably Taylor (2015, 2017). Critiquing Culpeper’s (1996, 2011) proposed equation ‘*sarcasm* = mock politeness’ (where ‘politeness’ is here the second-order sense), Taylor (2015: 127) comments:

[T]he equation of mock politeness with sarcasm/irony is problematic because the label of sarcasm is simultaneously too broad, because behaviors labelled as *sarcastic* do not always perform mock politeness, and too narrow because there are mock polite behaviours which would not be labelled as *sarcastic* in either the lay or academic/theoretic senses.

In the light of the present study, it seems apparent that one source of the mismatches to which Taylor refers is the fact that the word *sarcastic* actually has
two distinct-but-related meanings in ordinary English (so-called “lay English”). Likewise, when interpreting corpus evidence about the kinds of situated utterances which ordinary speakers describe as being sarcastic or as displaying sarcasm, one needs to be mindful that these words can be used with different lexical meanings, which may be unevenly distributed across geographical and sociolinguistic speech communities.

The problem is further multiplied if cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparisons are being attempted. The present study has detected small but significant differences even between two linguacultures as close to one another (so far as “sarcasm” is concerned) as English and Danish. It is only to be expected that similar or greater differences will exist between English sarcasm and its cognates or dictionary equivalents in other languages; and indeed, this is the picture that emerges clearly from Taylor’s (2016, 2017) corpus-based investigations of the uses of first-order “sarcasm” and “irony” in British English and their translation equivalents (sarcastico, ironico) in Italian. We believe that lexical-semantic analysis, as demonstrated in the present paper, can make a highly constructive contribution to scholarly discourse about sarcasm and related phenomena in linguistic pragmatics.

This contribution can also be helpful, we would argue, to intersecting discourses in the philosophy of language, in which the nature of “irony” and its relation to “sarcasm” is a recurring theme. In our opinion, Dynel’s position (2016b) that the term “irony” deserves to be preserved as a time-honoured technical concept – “a rhetorical figure known since ancient times” – has much to recommend it, notwithstanding that even technical understandings of the term can be clarified using paraphrase into simpler, cross-translatable terms. There seems to be little point, however, in trying to establish “sarcasm” as a technical (second-order, theoretic) term. It seems far preferable to recognise it as a folk concept (Dynel, 2016b: 229) and at the same time to subject it, and its counterparts and nearest equivalents (if any) in other languages, to detailed lexical-semantic analysis. As Taylor (2017: 212) remarks, “it [sarcasm] is something which belongs to a community, and so it becomes crucial to know whose folk concept is being discussed in any study”.

Similar concerns apply to humour studies (Attardo, 2014; Bell, 2015; Ruiz-Gurillo, 2016), a vibrant interdisciplinary field which is already labouring under the burden of the Anglo origins of its constitutive term “humour” and the danger of slippage between first-order and second-order concepts that go by the same name. If there is to be any prospect of “de-Anglicising” humour studies, the research field needs to be re-framed in terms of, roughly speaking, “social laughter” or “laughing with other people” (Goddard, 2018b, 2020; Goddard and Mullan, 2020), while at the same time paying renewed attention
to local metapragmatic words and categories (Levisen, 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Arab, 2020).

To end on a positive note, we would like to commend lexical-semantic analysis as a crucial source of insight into emic metapragmatics and ethno-pragmatics generally (Goddard, 2006; Goddard and Ye, 2015; Levisen and Waters, 2017). With appropriate methods of lexical-semantic analysis at hand, differences and shifts in meaning across different languages and within single languages cease to be problems to be overcome or hindrances to be worked around, but rather become windows into culturally-shaped assumptions and ways of thinking about speaking.

Acknowledgments

We thank two reviewers for their helpful comments on the manuscript. We are also grateful to Maite Taboada for helpful observations on sarcasm in English.

References


Levisen, Carsten and Sophia Waters (eds.) 2017. Cultural Keywords in Discourse. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.


Biographical Notes

Cliff Goddard is Professor of Linguistics at Griffith University, Australia. With Anna Wierzbicka, he is one of the leading proponents of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach. He has published widely in semantic theory and description, ethnopragmatics and language typology. His most recent book is the edited volume Minimal Languages in Action (2021, Palgrave Macmillan). He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities.

Carsten Levisen is an Associate Professor at Roskilde University, Denmark, where he teaches Danish Studies and Global Humanities. His research is in sociocultural linguistics, broadly conceived, with semantics and pragmatics as areas of special interest. He is a co-pi in the research projects ‘Danish in the Making’ and ‘Sustainable Linguistics’ and an editor of two journals: Journal of Postcolonial Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies in Language.