The Contribution of General Pragmatic and Pragmalinguistic Characteristics of Sarcasm to the Recognition of Online Sarcasm: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study sought to identify the general pragmatic and pragmalinguistic characteristics of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm. In so doing, a qualitative thematic analysis design was used. The participants consisted of three groups (each consisting of 9 members) who were selected through snowball sampling. The first group consisted of English native speakers from Canada. The second group included Iranian ESL learners who were currently postgraduate students at Canadian universities. The third group consisted of Iranian students of the English language. To collect the data, a semi-structured interview was utilized. The data were then analyzed through manual thematic analysis. Results showed that the participants used Pragmalinguistic characteristics to recognize sarcasm. Moreover, the general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm were drawn on, as documented by the interviews, in the recognition of online sarcasm. Additionally, the exertion of such features seems inevitable in the recognition of the sarcastic meaning of utterance. The findings have some implications for policymakers, curriculum planners, material developers, EFL teachers, and researchers.

Keywords: Sarcasm, Online sarcasm, Sarcasm recognition, EFL/ESL learners

1. Introduction

Sarcasm is an important aspect of pragmatics. Several definitions have been proposed to cover different aspects of sarcasm as a pragmatic phenomenon. The term sarcasm can be traced etymologically to the Greek

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σαρκασμός (sarazein). It means "to speak bitterly" or "to tear flesh like a dog (Jorgensen, 1996). Sarcasm is defined as the act of saying or writing the opposite of what you mean, or speaking in a way that makes other people feel stupid or that you are angry (Nurmukhamedov, 2011). Similarly, sarcasm has been described as a way of using words that are the opposite of what they mean to offend or make fun of someone (Stevenson, 2010).The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2000) definition of sarcasm states that sarcasm refers to harsh remarks that are satirical and ironic and intended to cause pain or hurt.

These definitions agree that sarcasm is an aggressive communicative activity directed at the victim. However, there are some academic definitions of irony from many scholars and researchers that are offered. Scientists and researchers have qualified this general definition in other aspects. Some researchers for instance (Banasik-Jemielniak et al., 2022; Cheang & Pell, 2008; Riloff et al., 2013; Romeo, 2000) argue negative qualities of sarcasm. For instance, Hancock (2004) states that sarcasm is a form of verbal sarcasm, intended to do the practical opposite of what is being said in order to convey a negative attitude by the speaker. Similarly, McDonald (1999) states that sarcasm is a form of sarcastic speech commonly used to target specific victims and convey implicit criticism. Also, Bowes and Katz (2011) argued that rather than what is stated and mentioned about sarcasm, it could be suggested that sarcasm expresses negative attitudes and evaluations and includes victims of verbal barbs. Regarding the intended meaning of sarcasm, some researchers (Farha et al., 2022; Frenda et al., 2022) believe that sarcasm is a subspecies of verbal irony and therefore always contains an intended meaning that is the opposite of its literal meaning.

(Capelli et al., 1990) wrote in Ironic Irony that the intended meaning is the opposite of the literal meaning sayings. Although it is a common view that sarcasm conveys negative attitudes, some researchers argue that sarcasm can convey other attitudes as well. In their definition of irony, Kovaz et al. (2013) wrote that sarcasm is a subspecies of verbal sarcasm and is often accompanied by negativity and humor they assume that it might encourage speakers to use acerbic sarcasm. To get a good list of secondary sarcasm features, we need to search for different approaches to sarcasm and extract those features. However, the literature does not offer a separate approach to sarcasm. Rather, as already mentioned, it is irony within the general framework of verbal irony as its subspecies. Therefore, we see different approaches of irony for this purpose, (im)politeness theory distinguishes between layman's definitions or concepts of constructs and theorists/researchers. Watts et al. (1992) called the former

primary politeness and defined it as the different ways in which polite behavior is perceived and spoken of by members of a sociocultural group. A term within the theory of constructs, social behavior, and language use.

Irony is a popular topic that receives proportionally less attention from researchers than other pragmatic features (Colston & Gibbs, 2007; Colston, 2017; Kreuz, 2000; Sperber & Wilson, 2015). However, the majority of irony research is in the L1 region. In other words, L2 pragmatists invested little in irony. The current study explores the general pragmatic and pragmalinguistic characteristics of sarcasm that native speakers of English and EFL/ESL learners in Iran rely on when detecting online sarcasm that helps make up for EFL/ESL`s lack of sarcasm detection ability by examining their comprehension. In so doing, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do the pragmalinguistic characteristics of sarcasm contribute to the recognition of online sarcasm?
2. How do the general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm contribute to the recognition of online sarcasm?

2. Literature Review

Shively et al. (2008) conducted a study about the perception of verbal irony in Spanish as a second language. The participants were 55 Spanish learners studying at a public American University in the Midwest. All participants were American-English native speakers except one student. They were divided into three proficiency groups (20 beginners, 17 intermediate students, and 18 advanced students) according to the Spanish course they were in (second, fourth, or sixth). The researchers used quasi-natural data in this study: a set of excerpts taken from L1 Spanish films. In yet another study, Shively investigated the production of humor in L2 Spanish irony which was a kind of longitudinal case study. The participant was an L2 Spanish learner (Kyle) who was spending a semester-long study-abroad stay in Toledo, Spain. Among other things, the participant used sarcasm in the target language as a strategy to perform L2 humor. Results showed that the participant, over the study-abroad course, became more proficient in using L2 humor with his native speaker (henceforth, NS) friends. A main factor in developing this proficiency was the close friendship that he developed with his NS peers. The close relationship offered Kyle (a) the opportunity to acquire the NS strategies of humor, and (b) a high level of intimacy which enabled him to produce humor with his NS close friends (Shively, 2013).

In another study, Kim (2014) focused more specifically on the perception of L2 sarcasm rather than verbal irony in general. Participants were 28 Korean EFL learners (11 males and 17 females) who all studied English in South Korea and had no study-abroad experience in any English-speaking country. The data consisted of several sarcastic video clips taken from the famous American TV sitcom *Friends* along with written scripts. Participants were asked to complete three tasks after watching each clip and reading the script: First, the sarcasm identification task; second, the speaker's intent comprehension task, and third, the potential sarcasm cue identification task. A follow-up interview with every participant was done to obtain an in-depth understanding of the answers. Analysis revealed that learners drew upon certain features of L1 schema during the L2 comprehension process of sarcasm. Thus, this study attests to an L1 negative pragmatic transfer in the Korean learners' comprehension of L2 English sarcasm (Kim, 2014).

Peters et al. (2015) investigated the role of context and prosody in comprehending sarcasm. They compared the sarcasm-comprehension of English native speakers to that of L2 learners of English (whose L1 is Arabic). The authors constructed several 3-sentence spoken discourses. For each discourse, the first sentence introduced an action done by someone (Person 1). The second sentence introduced a context for that action (either positive or negative). The third sentence presented another person's (Person 2) reaction towards that action (said with either sincere or sarcastic prosody). Each discourse ends with a Yes/No comprehension question which elicits whether the participant believes that Person 2's reaction was sincere or sarcastic. Results showed that in the case of context-prosody matching, English native speakers did better in identifying sarcasm. In such cases, NSs relied on both context and prosody in identifying the sarcastic meaning. However, when context and prosody conflicted, NSs relied more on context than prosody in sarcasm comprehension. On the other hand, L2 learners appeared to rely exclusively on context in their sarcasm comprehension in almost all cases (Peters et al., 2016).

Togame (2016) investigated the perception of L2 irony by Japanese ESL learners adopting a relevance-theoretic account. The focus of the study was on the extent to which non-native speakers of English understand potentially ironic utterances in a similar way to native speakers. To this end, the researcher designed and conducted two experiments with written and spoken nature respectively. The first experiment consisted of twenty imaginary stories each of which contained

a target utterance. The participant's task was to read the story and rate how ironic the target utterance was on a scale from not at all 'to very much'. The experiment was conducted online via the Survey Monkey website. Fifty-three Japanese ESL learners participated in this research as well as 22 British English native speakers who provided a control. The second experiment was prosodic. It also contained some devised stories (22 brief stories) which were narrated by a professional English native speaker. Each one included a target utterance which was repeated three times with different tones: basic (a kind of default, unmarked tone), deadpan (with a narrower pitch range), and exaggerated (with a wider pitch range). The task was for the participants to listen to the narrated story and identify the ironic utterances, if any. Thirty-five Japanese ESL learners took part in this experiment. In addition, a control for this experiment was provided by 30 native speakers. The first online experiment yielded surprising results, suggesting that Japanese speakers can respond to potentially ironical utterances similarly to native speakers. Regarding the second aural experiment, the results indicated that Japanese participants could perceive the English prosodic structure of irony in similar ways to native speakers and were affected by prosodic contours in similar ways (Togame, 2017).

This research seeks to address the challenges surrounding the perception of online sarcasm among English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners compared to Canadian English native speakers.

3. Method
3.1. Research Design
In this study, a qualitative thematic analysis design (Terry et al., 2017) was used this method is appropriate for extracting the recurrent themes and patterns in the qualitative data.

3.2. Participants
The participants of the present study included three groups (each consisting of 9 members) who were selected through snowball sampling. The first group consisted of 5 male and 4 female undergraduate students (different branches) who were English native speakers from Canada. The second group included Iranian 4 male and 5 female ESL learners who studied in Iran with BA or MA degrees and all were PhD or MA students (different branches) at Canadian universities at the time of conducting the current study (Members of this group have lived in Canada for 1-5 years.). The third group consisted of 5 Iranian male and 4 female EFL students

(different branches), at the PhD or MA levels, who were studying in Iran and had never been to any English-speaking country. Consent to participate in the study was obtained from participants using an information sheet and an informed consent form. Moreover, they were ensured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their personal information. All of the participants were given an amount of money as a reward to compensate for their cooperation.

3.3. Instrument

To collect the data, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 27 participants. The interview followed a detailed instruction on the general pragmatic and pragmalinguistic characteristics of sarcasm by the researchers for the participants. Then, the interviewees were asked to identify the characteristics that they drew in the recognition of online sarcasm and explain how they used the characteristics for sarcasm recognition.

The interview was conducted both face-to-face and online via voice call through WhatsApp and Telegram in a one-on-one format. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes. The interview was organized in English. Low-inference descriptors and member checks were used to establish the reliability and reliability of the interview data.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

To gather the required data, the semi-structured interview was implemented both face-to-face and online in WhatsApp and Telegram in a one-on-one format. The interviews were audio-recorded by the researchers with the permission of the interviewees for further analysis. Then, the audio-recorded files were transcribed verbatim to be subjected to thematic analysis. In so doing, in the first step that is, the familiarization step, the researchers sought to know the data and get a thorough overview of all the data that were collected before they started analyzing the data. More specifically, they tried to be familiar with the data by taking notes or looking through the data. In the second step, that is the coding step, the data was coded. It involved making some phrases and sentences of the text bold or highlighted and coming up with some codes that represented the content of the bold or highlighted parts. In this step, the researchers highlighted or made bold all the sentences or phrases that were perceived as relevant. In this way, some codes were extracted which allowed the researchers to get an overview of the recurrent points and meanings in the data. In the third step, generating themes, the codes were looked over to

identify the recurrent patterns in them and extract the themes. In so doing, related and similar codes were combined to reach a single theme since themes are usually broader than codes. Moreover, the codes which were non-relevant were omitted. In the fourth step, reviewing themes, the extracted themes were reviewed by the researchers to ensure their accuracy and usefulness. To this end, the researchers returned to the data to compare the themes against it. If any problems were identified with the themes, they were broken down, combined, or omitted. In sum, in this step, the researchers tried to make themes more useful and accurate.

4. Results
4.1. Results of the first research question

To answer the first research question 'How do the pragmalinguistic characteristics of sarcasm contribute to the recognition of online sarcasm?' the thematic analysis of the audio-recorded semi-structured interview data led to the extraction of the following themes:

4.1.1. Emotion

Emoticon (as a sub-category of graphological cues) was mentioned as a main pragmalinguistic characteristic of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm. This is evident in the following quotations:

According to the participant 1 (P1) from the English native speakers' group:

I pay attention to emoticons showing different states including thinking deeply, laughing, anger, etc. in recognizing online sarcasm. These visual aids are really helpful in the recognition of online sarcasm.

As said by P2 from the Iranian EFL group:

Different factors are effective when identifying online sarcasm. I found emoticons as signals of sarcasm. They pinpoint that something other than what has been mentioned in the text is meant.

As put forth by P3 from the Iranian ESL group:

Emoticons reveal the presence of sarcasm in the text. They in fact intensify the sarcastic tone of the saying. They serve a very informative function in conveying the sarcastic nature of the saying.

4.1.2. Laughing and exclamation marks

Another pragmalinguistic characteristic of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm, as revealed by the interview data, was laughing and

exclamation marks (as a sub-category of graphological cues). The following quotations represent this:

According to P4 from the English native speaker group:

Laughing marks connote sarcasm. They show that the speaker does not mean what she or he says. By using laughing marks, the speaker shows that he/she is just kidding.

As stated by P5 from the Iranian EFL group:

I myself use marks of exclamation or laughing in guessing about whether there is sarcasm or not. Such marks are like hints that indicate that we are reading a sarcastic extract rather than a serious one.

As mentioned by P6 from the Iranian ESL group:

Exclamation marks and laughing marks are awareness-raising tools in the sense that make us aware of sarcastic meaning. Via these marks, we understand that the text contains sarcasm.

4.1.3. Hyperbole

Hyperbole was also among the pragmalinguistic characteristics of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm, as uncovered by the interview data. The following quotations are reflective of this:

According to P7from the English native speakers group:

A thing that shows sarcasm is Exaggeration. You know when something is over-stated, it seeks to say something else. In such cases, the surface meaning is not emphasized.

As mentioned by P8 from the Iranian EFL group:

Hyperbole is a good tool to show sarcasm. Not only in written texts but also in oral communication, hyperbole can function as a sarcasm indicator language device.

As perceived by P9from the Iranian ESL group:

Hyperbole and sarcasm are related. Even in jokes, you may notice that hyperbole makes you laugh. When a feature is mixed with the taste of exaggeration, sarcasm exists with high probability.

4.1.4. Positive wording

Another pragmalinguistic characteristic of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm, as revealed by the interview data, was positive wording. As evidence of this, the following quotations are referred to:

According to P10 from the English native speaker group:

Positive sayings, particularly those flavored with overstatement are signs of sarcasm. Of course, they are not the only source of sarcasm but they make sarcasm really dominant. Through these signs, the attention of the audience is absorbed in the fact that something is wrong here.

As stated by P11from the Iranian EFL group:

A feature of the text that made me aware that something is mocked was exaggerated admiration. I soon understood that the opposite of that admiration is meant.

According to P12 from the Iranian ESL group:

I felt that big claims and good evaluations cannot be put there without any reason. Therefore, I focused on them more. I sought to find a specific intention in them. This helped me to recognize sarcasm.

In sum, the following pragmalinguistic characteristics of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm were identified: Emoticon, hyperbole, laughing and exclamation marks, and positive wording.

4.2. Results of the second research question

To answer the second research question 'How do the general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm contribute to the recognition of online sarcasm?' the following themes were extracted from the semi-structured interview data:

4.2.1. Allusion to antecedent

Allusion to antecedent was extracted as a general pragmatic characteristic of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm. This is gotten from the following quotations:

According to P13 from the English native speaker group:

In the texts I read, in many cases, sarcasm had come after the saying of someone else. In fact, the speaker had shown his opposition to the previous saying by means of sarcasm.

As put forth by P14 from the Iranian EFL group:

Sarcasm refers to a figure, character, event, or anything that is the topic of discussion here and now. It scoffs the things that happened in the past.

According to P15 from the Iranian ESL group:

When somebody said something, an answer was given by a sarcastic sentence. As such, an antecedent was necessarily there before mentioning sarcasm. Thus, I expected to see sarcasm in response to a previous saying.

4.2.2. Insincerity

Insincerity (as a sub-category of flouting quality) was extracted as a general pragmatic characteristic of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm, as understood from the interview data. The following quotations show this:

According to P16 from the English native speaker group:

I took untruthfulness as a move to the end of sarcasm. When someone is not kidding, as I believe, he or she speaks truthfully. Therefore, unrealistic sayings were coded by me as sarcastic.

As stated by P17 from the Iranian EFL group:

To make others laugh, people resort to untrue claims. It was clearly seen in the materials presented to me. However, this is different from telling a lie. It is just an untruthfulness that seeks to make you laugh.

As mentioned by P18 from the Iranian ESL group:

Unbelievable things that were said made me skeptical about the meaning behind them. I wondered if one could believe them. But very soon I understood that a sarcastic intention had been achieved through those sayings.

4.2.3. Contradiction

Contradiction was easily coded as a characteristic of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm. This can be seen in the following quotations from the interviews:

P19 from the English native-speaker group stated:

At first sight, it may seem surprising to you that a bad stupid player is, for instance, described as a field star. You get the point when you read the co-text and find that the discussion is to pull somebody's leg.

As mentioned by P20 from the Iranian EFL group:

Sarcasm is hidden, among other things, behind matters which are not congruent with the existing reality. To belittle somebody or something, you say something which is obviously contrary to the fact.

According to P21 from the Iranian ESL group:

Paradoxical issues represent sarcasm in my view. A small player can be called a giant hero just in sarcastic contexts. Otherwise, it does not make any sense.

4.2.4. Negative attitude

A general pragmatic characteristic of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of

online sarcasm, as reflected in the interviews, is a negative attitude. The following quotations support this:

According to P22 from the English native speakers' group:

Sarcasm is a bit far from politeness. In other words, sarcasm is better conveyed through impolite language than polite one. Impolite views imply sarcasm.

As stated by P23 from the Iranian EFL group:

To be offensive is a good way to touch sarcasm. One known way to make offense is negative words and wording. You can hardly be offensive through positive words.

As mentioned by P24 from the Iranian ESL group:

Negative expressions smelled of sarcasm to me. They were expressed negatively with the explicit purpose of making the words sarcastic. This negativity was of much help when recognizing sarcasm.

4.2.5. Victim

Victim was the last, but not least, general pragmatic characteristic of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm. The following quotations are presented to document this:

In the words of P25 from the English native speakers' group:

Sarcasm cannot be made in a vacuum. I mean it is against something or somebody. For the sarcasm to be recognized successfully, something or somebody should be known to all parties of the conversation.

As put by P26 from the Iranian EFL group:

Sarcasm targets a person whose behavior or performance has not been welcomed by a sarcasm maker. He has acted badly in one way or another from the viewpoint of the speaker.

According to P27 from the Iranian ESL group:

Usually, sarcasm smiles at someone. Generally, it wants to show ugliness in a variety of aspects. This was also true about the excerpts which I read in this study.

All in all, the general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on (as documented by the interviews) in the recognition of online sarcasm were an allusion to antecedent, insincerity, contradiction, negative attitude, and victim.

4. Discussion

This study sought to answer two research questions. Regarding the first research question 'How do the pragmalinguistic characteristics of sarcasm contribute to the recognition of online sarcasm? Emoticon, hyperbole,

laughing and exclamation marks, and positive wording were the characteristics used by English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners in the recognition of online sarcasm.

Consistent with this study, (Al-Fatlawi, 2018) and (Shively, 2013) found the same pragmalinguistic features of sarcasm used by the participants in the recognition of online sarcasm. Similar findings were reported in (Taguchi & Bell, 2020) and (Togame, 2017) studies.

In justifying this finding, the identified pragmalinguistic characteristics act as a kind of visual input enhancement (VIE) which makes online sarcasm more perceptible to the participants. In supporting this, (Huang & Galinsky, 2023) argument can be referred to according to which VIE has the potential to make input more perceptible to L2 learners by utilizing enhancement techniques. Their argument that VIE makes targeted form processing easier for L2 learners can also be taken as another justification for the results of the present study. As the third justification, the noticing hypothesis proposed by Smith (1981) according to which input needs to be noticed first to be processed for acquisition by second language learners, and the parallel argument that VIE can make input more noticeable for learners and therefore, comprehended by them can be referred to. In a similar vein, Schmidt's (1990) proposition that contextual language learning (in the case of the present study, sarcasm recognition) happens if learners notice the second language forms can be considered as a reasoning for the findings of this study. Similarly, this argument has been stated that it is noticing the input that improves learners' comprehension of forms (Krashen & Terrell, 2000 as cited in Al-Jamal, 2014). Thus, Krashen and Terrell's (as cited in Al-Jamal, 2014) belief is that learners should notice the input characteristics if they want to have a highly established language perception(Romeo, 2000).

Moreover, with a view to the significant role of consciousness-raising in L1/EFL/ESL learning (Fotos & Ellis, 1991), this finding can be justified by arguing that cue validity and dominance hierarchy generated by the pragmalinguistic features have raised the participants' consciousness and this in turn has helped them in online sarcasm recognition. Similarly, Alirezaei and Hoseinpour (2011) suggested that consciousness-raising significantly affects learning outcomes in ESL/EFL learning also they believe that consciousness-raising improves the language knowledge of learners.

In a more recent argument, consciousness-raising was found as an effective means to facilitate the acquisition and learning of target English forms (Cheang & Pell, 2013). Hendrick (2010) believed that consciousness-raising makes learners aware of a neglected area of

language in an interactive setting where they are able to recognize target forms by negotiating meaning. The argument put forth by Moradkhan and Sohrabian (2009) that awareness of form helps learners in L2 learning also says the same thing. Last but not least, another related issue that can be resorted to in justifying the findings is that if the input is given prominence (intentionally or incidentally) a language learner will naturally recognize it on a conscious level (Ellis et al., 2021).

As far as the second research question 'What are the general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm?' is concerned, allusion to antecedent, insincerity, contradiction, negative attitude, and victim were the characteristics used by English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners in the recognition of online sarcasm.

In line with this study, AL-Fatlawi (2018), Shively et al. (2008), Taguchi (2011), and Togame (2016) found the same general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm used by the participants in the recognition of online sarcasm. To interpret this finding, Grice's (1975, 1989) and Wilson and Sperber's (1992, 2012) arguments can be referred to according to which sarcasm involves involvement of a victim to be purposeful and to the point. Moreover, they believe that when the maxim of quality is violated, the attention is more directed towards sarcasm. Last but not least, their stance is that without alluding to an antecedent, sarcasm is nothing but just nonsense.

Moreover, this finding can be interpreted by the argument that in the absence of a load of untruthfulness, negativity, opposite meaning, sarcasm receiver, or victim on the saying, the second party does not take the sarcastic taste of the utterance. It is through such means that the utterance is encoded as sarcastic and humorous. In the same vein, without utilizing such sarcasm-making tools, utterances are nothing more than neutral sentences that mean what they say. This is while in sarcasm, there is a remarkable difference between the denotative and connotative meanings.

Furthermore, since sarcasm is intended to be understood by conversation parties, it should be flavored with some additives that act like a lantern whose light depicts that the uttered sentence is sarcastic. That is, these additives play a conscious-raising role in making all parties of a given conversation aware of the sarcastic purpose of the saying.

Finally, it can be stated that the ironic nature of sarcasm cannot be illustrated and conveyed without taking advantage of such pragmatic characteristics. With a view to the fact that you can rarely find sarcasm without an ironic taste, exertion of such features seems inevitable, at least

as far as we are decisive in conveying the sarcastic meaning of our utterance.

5. Conclusion

This research seeks to address the multifaceted challenges surrounding the perception of online sarcasm among English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly those in Iranian contexts, in comparison to Canadian English native speakers. The overarching objectives of this study can be categorized into several interconnected domains, each contributing to our understanding of sarcasm comprehension in second language acquisition. Through the design and execution of research involving both native English speakers and EFL/ESL learners, this research aims to conduct a comparative analysis of sarcasm perception. It seeks to identify significant differences in the abilities of these two groups to recognize and understand online sarcasm. The findings will have implications for language instruction and materials development to enhance pragmatic competence in EFL/ESL contexts. This study will critically assess the reliability of self-reported perceptions of language use, comparing them with actual performance in sarcasm recognition tasks. Lastly, this research aspires to contribute to the broader understanding of EFL/ESL learners' perceptions of sarcasm in online communication. It aims to elucidate specific pragmalinguistic features and general pragmatic points that present challenges in recognizing sarcasm. Ultimately, it seeks to inform pedagogical practices by offering recommendations to improve pragmatic competence, particularly in the realm of sarcasm, among EFL/ESL learners. These interconnected objectives collectively form the foundation for this comprehensive study, addressing critical gaps in the literature and shedding light on the intricate process of sarcasm perception in second language acquisition contexts. The findings indicated that some demographic information such as English language proficiency had the potential to impact English native speakers' and Iranian EFL/ESL learners' ability to recognize online sarcasm; also, the total frequency uses of pragmatic characteristics were significantly different among the three groups. Furthermore, the results revealed that, among other pragmatic characteristics, Victim, Insincerity, Antecedent, and Negative Attitude, have a more significant contribution to the recognition of online sarcasm among other pragmatic characteristics. Moreover, it could be concluded that none of the pragmalinguistic characteristics was different from others in its contribution to the recognition of sarcasm, although in the interview some participants confirmed that they took advantage of those

characteristics. All in all, the study bears implications for policymakers, to develop guiding programs to be used by EFL curriculum planners and material developers to empower ESL/EFL learners regarding online sarcasm recognition. The findings would also inform the practice of EFL/ESL teachers in operationalizing the above-mentioned courses in EFL/ESL classes.

All in all, the implication of the findings for policymakers, curriculum planners, material developers, EFL teachers, and researchers is that recognition of online sarcasm does not occur in a vacuum but it is under the influence of some general pragmatic and pragmalinguistic characteristics of sarcasm. Therefore, policymakers are expected to take appropriate measures that pave the way for curriculum planners and material developers to incorporate these features more in planning future EFL curricula. In this way, EFL teachers can maneuver on them more in English classes.

Taking into account the limitations of the present study, the instruments used in the present study were limited to a one-on-one semi-structured interview. Future studies can benefit from other instruments such as focus group interviews, reflective journals, diaries, and so on. Furthermore, variables such as cultural background, birth place, etc. were not explored in this study. Future studies can investigate the potential mediating role of these variables in the results. Besides, the findings in this study were based on the data collected from the learners. To add to the richness of the findings, it is recommended that future studies collect teachers' data as well. Also, this study took Canadian English speaker participants as representative native English speakers. Future research can use different countries such as the USA for this purpose. As it can be seen the basic problem in this study was the selection of the participants. In other words, to include enough participants belonging to English native speakers and ESL groups, one does not have simple access to a very large homogeneous population and this is the reason for the low number of participants. Next, the population from whom the Iranian participants of the study were selected were upper-intermediate learners. The results obtained in this study, thus, might not be generalized to other learners but cautiously. As another important limitation, in comparison with artificial data that researchers themselves might produce for their research, access to online and natural data could be difficult, and that makes it hard to collect sufficient data. Finally, this study was just concerned with sarcasm. Future studies can deal with politeness, request, apology, refusal, etc.

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