Research Paper

Perception of General Pragmatic Characteristics of Online Sarcasm among Iranian EFL/ESL Learners and English Native Speakers

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Abstract

This study sought to identify the general pragmatic characteristic of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm. In so doing, a Likert scale questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data for subsequent analysis; also, qualitative thematic analysis was done on the data collected through a semi-structured interview. The participants consisted of three groups of EFL and ESL learners as well as native English speakers (each consisting of 9 members) who were selected through snowball sampling at BA or MA degrees. The findings indicated that the total frequency uses of pragmatic characteristics were significantly different among the three groups. Moreover, the findings revealed that, among other pragmatic characteristics, Victim, Insincerity, Antecedent, and Negative Attitude, have a more statistically significant contribution to the recognition of online sarcasm. The study bears implications for policymakers, curriculum planners, material developers, EFL/ESL teachers, and researchers.

INTRODUCTION

Before the emergence of sarcasm in the late 1970s, second-language pragmatics served as an interface where pragmatic issues in SLA contexts were studied. It has primarily focused on analyzing speech acts and civility characteristics using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness model and the responses it received from its proponents and detractors. This tendency has persisted in L2 pragmatics despite being less pronounced at present (Cutrone, 2011; Halenko, 2017). Parallel to this path, there is a dearth of research on L2 impoliteness in L2 pragmatics (Félix-Brasdefer & Mugford, 2017; Halenko, 2017; Iwasaki, 2011).

As part of their education, L2 learners must master the L2 social communication scheme, which includes L2 impoliteness. In the same way that research on L2 pragmatics must examine how well learners conduct L2 civility, it must also examine how well they conduct L2 impoliteness, which represents the opposite end of the spectrum.

As part of their L2 interaction, L2 learners encounter impoliteness in the production or comprehension of the target language (Shahrokhi & Khodadada, 2023). Researchers have focused on sarcasm as a prevalent theme in rudeness (Colston, 1997; Kreuz & Roberts, 1995; Wilson & Sperling, 1992, 2012).

Sarcasm

Attardo (2000), Clark & Gerrig (1984), Culpeper (2011), Giora (1998), Leech (2014), and Wilson & Sperrig (2012) all provide various definitions of irony based on the theory and perspective they employ. As a consequence, there is no consensus among academicians

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regarding the definition of sarcasm. Some extreme viewpoints take an all-or-nothing stance toward irony. They attempt to impose the necessary and sufficient conditions without which sarcasm cannot exist (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). These attempts fall short of capturing the diversity and complexity of this pragmatic phenomenon. To avoid the pitfalls of these perspectives, it is preferable to adhere to prototype theory and define sarcasm accordingly.

As a rebuke to the strict and rigorous Aristotelian theory of categorization (classical theory), prototype theory was developed. Any category, according to Aristotle, is distinguished from others by a number of distinguishing characteristics. And, an object cannot belong to a category unless it possesses ALL of its distinguishing characteristics (see Taylor, 1995). Aristotle, for instance, contends that the Man category
has the distinguishing characteristics [+bipedal] and [+animal]. These characteristics are required for any entity to be classified as Man. In the meantime, these characteristics are adequate to classify any entity as a Man (Taylor, 1995). The inability to exhibit any of these characteristics will result in exclusion from the Man category. For this reason, the traditional theory is referred to as an all-or-nothing theory.

On the other hand, prototype theory also categorizes based on feature possession. Any category is differentiated by a set of characteristics. The entity (or entities) that possess all category characteristics is the most central and representative member of that category, also known as the category prototype. Enti-ties with fewer characteristics are still members of the category, but they are less central and representative, and the classification continues to the category's border, where the members with the fewest characteristics are located. Taylor (1995) argues that prototype categories are more adaptable than Aristotelian category because they can accommodate new, unfamiliar data. It lacks the rigidity of the classic theory and is open to the addition of new members without the need to restructure the category itself (i.e., by modifying the inclusion criteria).

Dheyaa AL-Fatlawi (2018) provides a prototype definition of sarcasm based on the aforementioned characteristics. This definition is conditions and more inclusive of sarcastic situations. It examines the relationship between characteristics and sarcasm as a direct proportion (a matter of more or less): the more characteristics available, the greater the sardonic interpretation, and vice versa. The prototypical example of sarcasm would exhibit all of the characteristics listed in the definition. The absence of a characteristic, however, would not render the case non-sardonic; rather, it would reduce the sarcastic probability of the utterance, i.e. it would be less prototypical. The following is his prototype definition of sarcasm:

Typically, sarcasm is a double-leveled pragmatic phenomenon that is a subtype of verbal irony in which the intended meaning is opposite or distinct from the literal meaning and is comprehended through implicature. It is triggered by the violation of the Cooperative Principle, typically the Quality Maxim, in order to generate a feeling of insincerity. It makes reference to either a specific (such as a previous remark) or general (such as a social norm or expectation) antecedent. It conveys primarily a hostile attitude toward a target or victim. In many instances, it uses positive language and/or hyperbolic forms to parody civility, which is then exploited to convey the negative attitude.

There are drawbacks to prototype theory that prevent it from being flawless (see Taylor, 1995 for details). The overlap between the sarcasm category and other categories is a significant drawback pertinent to my research. For instance, an allusion to a precedent can also be a characteristic of parody. However, it is believed that sarcasm cannot originate from a singular characteristic. There must be a minimum number of characteristics for sarcasm to develop. Examining what that minimum number should be and how each feature is weighted is outside the scope of the present study, but merits its own investigation. The second relevant disadvantage is that, like all prototype categories, sarcasm has ambiguous boundaries, a fact generally acknowledged by

prototype theorists (see Taylor, 1995). Consequently, peripheral instances may intersect with other comparable categories such as parody or banter.

General Pragmatic Features

This study examined the characteristics of sarcasm from pragmatic perspectives, which were categorized into seven groups. 1. Antecedent allusion: sarcasm always refers to an antecedent. This trait is derived from Sperber and Wilson's theory of echoic mention. The ante-cedent can be specific, such as someone else's previous remark, or general, such as a cultural norm or a social expectation. Contradiction is the act of stating one thing while intending the opposite. This characteristic of sarcasm is derived from the traditional and Gricean approaches to irony, which hold that verbal irony conveys the antithesis of what is said. The use of cynicism by Grice is the source of insincerity. It pertains to disobeying the CP's Quality Maxim to provoke sarcasm. When employing sarcasm, the speaker frequently makes a false statement about the target and expects the audience to infer the sardonic meaning through implicature. Occasionally, sarcasm is produced by flouting other CP maxims besides Quality, namely Quantity or Relevance. This trait is a result of the scholars' responses to Grice's approach, which sought to broaden its scope. It is evident in Leech's (1983) and Myers Roy's (1978) respective arguments for the inclusion of flouting Quantity and Relevance in irony creation. Negative attitude: It could indirectly support the notion that sarcasm is typically employed to be disrespectful and offensive by conveying a negative attitude. Nonetheless, it is clear from the sarcasm literature that some scholars disagree with the assertion that sarcasm always does so. Accordingly, there appears to be some agreement with Kim (2014) that sarcasm can be used in an amicable manner to convey a positive emotion or attitude. The conclusion that sarcasm can be used to convey a positive emotion is supported by evidence of the highest order in this study. However, additional research is required before this conclusion can be confirmed.) The sardonic

polite language is only used on the surface, and it is not intended. The main sources of parody civility (1996, 2005) are the (im)politeness approach of irony and the works of Leech (1983, 2014) and Culpeper. 7. Victim involvement: a naive and unintelligent audience that takes the satirical statement literally. These characteristics are used to determine whether native and non-native Iranians differ in their ability to recognize English online sarcasm and, if so, which char-acteristics aid them the most.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bhat et al. (2022) referred to the sarcasm detection process and approaches, as well as the comparison of results across multiple models and data sets. The term sarcasm refers to phrases that convey the opposite of the intended meaning. In recent years, Natural Language Processing (NLP) has become a topic of great interest to researchers (Bhat & Jha, 2022).

Detection of sarcasm is also part of NLP. Consequently, this paper focuses primarily on deep learning approaches to sarcasm detection. In their study, they evaluate the accuracy of various sarcasm detection methods and compare and contrast them.

Shively (2013) conducted research on the production of humor in L2 Spanish. Kyle, her second-year Spanish student, has spent her first semester abroad in Toledo, Spain. To carry out L2 humor, participants employed sarcasm in the target language, among other strategies. During the study abroad program, participants improved their ability to use L2 humor with their Nazi peers. The intimate companionship they formed with their fellow Nazis was a significant factor in the development of this skill. The intimacy of the relationship enabled Kyle to create hilarity with a close Nazi acquaintance (Shively, 2013).

Kim's (2014) study of quasi-natural data concentrates on L2 perceptions of sarcasm rather than general verbal sarcasm. Partici-pants included 28 Korean EFL students who had all studied English in Korea but had no international experience in an English-speaking nation. Her data consisted of excerpts

from the popular American sitcom Friends, a succession of sardonic videos, and written screenplays. After viewing each video segment and perusing the accompanying narrative, participants were required to complete three assignments. (1) the identification of sarcasm, (2) the comprehension of the speaker's intent, and (3) the identification of prospective sarcastic signals. To better comprehend the responses, follow-up interviews were conducted with each participant. During the [ironic] process of second-language (L2) comprehension, learners exploited particular features of the L1 schema, according to an analysis. Thus, this study confirms a negative pragmatic L1 transfer in the comprehension of her L2 sarcasm in English by Korean learners (Kim, 2014).

Peters et al. (2016) investigated the role of context and prosody in sarcasm comprehension. They contrasted the native English speaker's comprehension of irony to that of his L2 English learner (whose native language is Arabic). Using context and prosodic agreement, native English speakers are able to detect sarcasm more effectively. In such instances, native speakers used both context and prosody to determine sardonic meanings. When context and prosody conflicted, however, native speakers relied on context more than prosody to comprehend irony. On the other hand, it appeared that L2 learners relied primarily on context to comprehend sarcasm (Peters et al., 2016).

Togame (2016) examined Japanese ESL learners' perceptions of L2 irony using relevance theory explanations. This study investigates the extent to which non-native English speakers comprehend potentially sardonic statements in a manner comparable to that of native speakers. In order to accomplish this, the researcher devised and conducted two investigations on the character of written and spoken language. This study was conducted online via the SurveyMonkey website. Initial online experiments produced surprise results, indicating that Japanese speakers can respond similarly to potentially sardonic statements as native speakers. Concerning the second listening experiment, it was demonstrated that Japanese

participants can perceive English prosodic structures similarly to native speakers and are similarly affected by prosodic contours (Togame, 2016).

In conclusion, regarding what is touched on above that is to some extent related to the objectives of the current study, the researcher wishes to compare the Iranian EFL/ESL learners with the English native speakers in terms of their perceptions of online sarcasm. Detailed information regarding the design of the study, participants, instruments, data collection, and data analysis procedures is provided in the following sections.

The Study

A brief Internet search reveals that few studies have investigated sarcasm from this perspective. Therefore, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, the significance of the current study is due to the paucity of prior research. This study could contribute to eradicating rudeness by investigating second-language sarcasm, and it could enhance previous research by illuminating the voids in the literature. It utilized real data, which is genuine and natural.

This study also examined cynicism in online environments. There is a growing interest in the language of Computer-Mediated Communication (SMS) and the Internet among linguists. With the emergence of social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as the increased focus on global communication, the Internet's language has garnered more attention. However, most research on speech acts such as sarcasm is conducted on L1. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there are few investigations on online irony in L2. In addition, studies such as Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998), Kim (2014), and Schauer (2006) have focused more on comprehension than on production. Consequently, this investigation could concentrate on this divide.

In addition, this study makes reference to the Iranian context. Other research has focused on languages like Arabic (Al-Fatlawi, 2018), Chinese (Halenko, 2017), Europe (Schauer, 2009), and Japanese (Takahashi & DuFon, 1989; Togame, 2016). Iranian EFL research is uncommon in this regard. Consequently, this

research may help to address this lacuna in the literature.

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational systems cannot be ignored. The majority of governments decided to temporarily close educational institutions to prevent the spread of coronavirus. The result was a virtual learning environment (VLE) or online learning/teaching context. In addition to this, and disregarding the pros and cons that online contexts may have on educational settings, students, and instructors. It is important to note that the study was conducted in a setting in which participants and researchers were physically segregated and primarily communicated online.

Therefore, online forums were utilized and navigated to collect authentic samples. Excluding data from EFL learners, the data collection procedure was conducted online via Email, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Big Blue Button virtual environments. Several studies on sarcasm that focused on actual interaction rather than isolated sentences created in artificial and fictitious contexts were reviewed.

In conclusion, grasping the probable relation-ship between demographic characteristics and language acquisition can be enlightening in light of the fact that individuals use various methods to recognize sarcasm. Thus, once a relationship between prototypical sarcasm characteristics and sarcasm perception is identified, language could be taught and learned more precisely.

Native English speakers and English as a second/foreign language (EFL) students were evaluated in the current study.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to compare the detection and perception of sarcasm between EFL and ESL learners and native English speakers. The following research questions were, thus, developed for this purpose:

1. ***RQ1.*** *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?*

2. ***RQ2.*** *Is there any significant difference among Iranian EFL/ESL learners and English native speakers in the frequency-*use *of general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm?*

Significance of the Study

This investigation is significant for a number of reasons. First, it could contribute to the field's body of knowledge by investigating an under-researched aspect of English pragmatics, namely English online sarcasm. Second, it could contribute to illuminating findings that reveal the (potential) differences between native English speakers and EFL/ESL learners, as well as the need to take appropriate measures to reduce these potential differences. Third, the results of the present study may contribute to theorizing the crucial role of online sarcasm recognition in English pragmatic proficiency. Fourth, the results of this study may reveal the efficacy of demographic characteristics in recognizing online sarcasm. Fifthly, by employing an explanatory paradigm, this study may contribute something to the previous research on the same topic. The findings could also provide justification for ELT policymakers to develop transformative programs for designing EFL materials that emphasize sardonic knowledge. The findings may also propose new research avenues for EFL research-ers interested in sarcasm recognition as an unexplored area of study.

METHODOLOGY
Research Design

This study is a mixed method study, for this purpose, a questionnaire was developed, vali-dated, and distributed by the researcher among the participants to be filled. Also, a semi-structured interview was conducted to triangu-late the results. Moreover, a qualitative the-matic analysis design (Ary et al., 2018) was used which is an appropriate method for ex-tracting the recurrent themes and patterns in the qualitative data.

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 undergraduate

students in the English language field (different branches) who were English native speakers from Canada. The second group included Iranian ESL learners who studied in Iran a BA or MA degrees and all were Ph.D. or MA students in the English language field (different branches) at Canadian universities at the time of conducting the current study (Members of this group have lived in Canada for 1-4 years.). The third group consisted of EFL students of English language (different branches), at the

PhD or MA levels, who were studying in Iran and had never been to any English-speaking country. As can be seen in Table 1 below.

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 incentives as a reward to compensate for their cooperation.

Table 1

Participants of Study

Participants	Gender	Number of participants	Field of study
EFL	*5 Female* *4 Male*	9	Different Branches
ESL	*5 Female* *4 Male*	9	Different Branches
NELS	*5 Female* *4 Male*	9	Different Branches
Total		27	

Instruments

To collect the data, a Likert scale questionnaire, the quick placement test (QPT), and a semi-structured interview in order to triangulate the results were used and conducted with 27 participants. Although participants were fully aware of the general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm, they were provided with detailed explanations of those characteristics one more time to make sure that every feature is clear this clarification is done for EFL and ESLs in their mother tongue for more reliable results. Then, the questionnaire, consent form, and instructions to answer the questions were emailed to the participants, which takes them 1 hour to be completed. Afterward, as a second step, they were asked to participate in an interview on the predetermined time schedule. At this step, the interviewees were asked to identify the key factors with which they recognized online sarcasm and explain how they used them.

The interview was conducted online via voice call through WhatsApp and Telegram in a one-on-one format. All the interviews were audio-recorded for the purpose of data analysis. Each interview lasted about 20 minutes. The interview was organized in English. Low-

inference descriptors and member checks were used to establish the reliability of the interview data.

Data Collection Procedures

To gather the required data, the online researcher-made questionnaire was emailed to participants, and a semi-structured interview was implemented in WhatsApp and Telegram in a one-on-one format. The answers to the questionnaire were emailed to the researcher and they were scrutinized to be analyzed, then interviews were audio-recorded by the researcher 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, the first step is the familiarization step, the researcher sought to know the data and get a thorough overview of all the data that were collected before she started analyzing the data. More specifically, she tried to be familiar with the data by taking notes or looking through the data.

In the second step, which 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 which represented the content of the bold or

highlighted parts. In this step, the researcher highlighted or made bold all the sentences or phrases that were perceived as relevant. In this way, some codes were extracted which allowed the researcher to get an overview of the recur-rent points and meanings in the data. In the third step, which is generating themes, the codes were looked over to identify the recur-rent 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, which is reviewing themes, the extracted themes were reviewed by the re-searcher to ensure their accuracy and usefulness.

To this end, the researcher 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 researcher tried to make themes more useful and accurate. Also, an analysis framework was utilized in the present study which consisted of the general pragmatic characteristics proposed by Leech (1984) enumerated by a group of theoreticians in the field including Colston (2002), Culpeper (2011), Gibbs (2000), Leech (2014), Rockwell (2006), and Utsumi (2000). In regard to the general pragmatic characteristics, taking redundancies and overlaps among the characteristics

proposed by different theoreticians into account, this study was delimited to the following general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm: Contradiction, flouting quality: Insincerity, flouting quantity, flouting relevance, mock politeness, allusion to antecedent, negative attitude, and victim. In addition, it is worth mentioning that the researcher constrained this research to impoliteness theory when choosing the general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS
Quantitative Analysis

The first question of the current study aimed at exploring the general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm that English native speakers, Iranian EFL learners, and Iranian ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm. To answer the question, two analytical approaches were used. First, the study compared the frequency use of every characteristic across the three groups of participants of the study to see whether the native speakers, EFL learners, and ESL learners are significantly different from each other or not. The frequency of the pragmatic characteristics in the sarcastic sections of the 30 excerpts was estimated. The following table displays the frequency-use and percentage of the pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of sarcasm.

Table 2
*General Pragmatic Features * Language Status Crosstabulation*

			Language Status			
			Native Speaker	EFL Learner	ESL Learner	**Total**
General Pragmatic Features	Allusion to Antecedent	Count	11	9	4	24
		Expected Count	8.1	8.9	6.9	24.0
		% within General Pragmatic Features	45.8%	37.5%	16.7%	100.0%
	Contradiction	Count	4	6	3	13
		Expected Count	4.4	4.8	3.8	13.0
		% within General Pragmatic Features	30.8%	46.2%	23.1%	100.0%
	Flouting Quantity	Count	1	0	1	2
		Expected Count	.7	.7	.6	2.0
		% within General Pragmatic Features	50.0%	0.0%	50.0%	100.0%
	Flouting Relevance	Count	1	1	1	3
		Expected Count	1.0	1.1	.9	3.0
		% within General Pragmatic Features	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	100.0%
	Insincerity	Count	6	12	7	25
		Expected Count	8.5	9.3	7.2	25.0

		% within General Pragmatic Features	24.0%	48.0%	28.0%	100.0%
Mock Politeness	Count	3	1	2	6
	Expected Count	2.0	2.2	1.7	6.0
	% within General Pragmatic Features	50.0%	16.7%	33.3%	100.0%
Negative Attitude	Count	5	10	8	23
	Expected Count	7.8	8.6	6.7	23.0
	% within General Pragmatic Features	21.7%	43.5%	34.8%	100.0%
Victim	Count	10	6	9	25
	Expected Count	8.5	9.3	7.2	25.0
	% within General Pragmatic Features	40.0%	24.0%	36.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	41	45	35	121
	Expected Count	41.0	45.0	35.0	121.0
	% within General Pragmatic Features	33.9%	37.2%	28.9%	100.0%

As shown in the table above, the frequency with which English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners utilize pragmatic characteristics differs. In 24 sardonic passages, for instance, the pragmatic characteristic used to identify sarcasm was Allusion to Antecedent. Contradiction assisted participants in identifying sarcasm in 13 passages. In two cases, participants used Flouting Quantity to identify Sarcasm. In order to identify sarcasm in three excerpts, participants were observed to rely on blatant relevance. As another pragmatic characteristic, insincerity contributed to the identification of sarcasm in 25 cases. In six excerpts, Mock Politeness instructed participants on how to recognize Sarcasm. Negative Attitude and Victim were the pragmatic characteristics used by the participants in 23 and 25 cases, respectively, to identify sarcasm. A Chi-square test for independent samples could be conducted to determine whether the differences between English native speakers,

Iranian EFL learners, and Iranian ESL learners in the use of pragmatic characteristics for the recognition of sarcasm is significant. Checking the assumptions of the Chi-square test for independent samples (each category should contain more than five cases), it was discovered that more than fifty percent of the categories contain fewer than five cases, as shown in the table above. Therefore, performing the Chi-square test for independent samples was implausible because the data did not meet the test's assumption. Consequently, the second statistical procedure compared the total frequency of use of each pragmatic characteristic with other characteristics to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in the frequency of use of pragmatic characteristics regardless of the participants who used them in the recognition of Sarcasm. To this end, the cumulative frequency of use of each pragmatic characteristic employed by all study participants was calculated and displayed in the table below.

Table 3
General Pragmatic Features

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Antecedent	24	15.1	8.9
Contradiction	13	15.1	-2.1
Flouting Quantity	2	15.1	-13.1
Flouting Relevance	3	15.1	-12.1
Insincerity	25	15.1	9.9
Mock Politeness	6	15.1	-9.1
Negative Attitude	23	15.1	7.9
Victim	25	15.1	9.9
Total	121		

To make sure the different frequency uses of pragmatic characteristics employed for the recognition of Sarcasm were significant or not a Chi-square Goodness-of-fit test was run. It is worth mentioning that the Chi-square Goodness-of-fit test is a single-sample nonparametric test. It is used to determine whether the distribution of cases (e.g., pragmatic characteristics) in a single categorical variable follows a known or hypothe-sized distribution.

Table 4
Test Statistics

	General Pragmatic Features
Chi-Square	49.116[a]
Df	7
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 15.1.

A p-value less than 0.05 will indicate statistical significance. According to the above table, the Chi-square goodness-of-fit test used after verify-ing its assumptions (the sample was randomly drawn from the population; each category contained more than 5 cases) reveals statistical significance. The Chi-square goodness-of-fit test showed that the total frequency uses of pragmatic characteristics were significantly different from one another (χ^2 = 49.116; *df* = 7; *P* = .000). Therefore, it could be deduced that pragmatic characteristics such as Victim, Insincerity, Antecedent, and Negative Attitude, among other pragmatic characteristics, have a more statistically significant contribution to the recognition of Sarcasm.

Qualitative Analysis
In order to triangulate the data related to the first research question 'What are the general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm that Eng-lish native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners draw on in the recognition of online sarcasm?', the following themes were extracted from the semi-structured interview data to sup-port the functions that every general pragmatic characteristic of sarcasm has in the recognition of online sarcasm.

Allusion to Antecedent
Allusion to antecedent was identified as one of the general characteristics of online sarcasm that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners use to recognize online sarcasm, as evidenced by the following excerpt from a semi-structured interview with one of the participants.

In many of the texts I read, sarcasm followed the statement of another individual. In actuality, the speaker opposed the previous statement through derision.

P2 EFL: Sarcasm alludes to a person, an event, or anything that is the subject of the current discussion. It mocks things that occurred in the past.

When someone spoke, P3 ESL students responded with a caustic sentence. Therefore, an antecedent was required before mentioning derision. Thus, I anticipated derision in response to a previous statement.

A fleeting and indirect reference to a person, place, object, or concept of historical, cultural, literary, or political significance is a clue or indicator for participants to recognize written sarcasm, according to the participants' previous claims. These scripts demonstrate that all three groups use allusion to antecedent to identify online sarcasm.

Insincerity
Insincerity 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:

P4 ENS: I took untruthfulness as a move to the end of sarcasm. When someone is not kid-ding, as I believe, he or she speaks truthfully. Therefore, unrealistic sayings were coded by me as sarcastic.

P5 EFL: To make others laugh, people re-sort to untrue claims. It was clearly seen in the materials presented to me. However, this is different from telling a lie. It is just untruthful-ness that seeks to make you laugh.

P6 ESL: Unbelievable things that were said made me skeptical about the meaning behind them. I wondered if one can believe them. But very soon I understood that a sarcastic intention has been achieved through those sayings.

Based on what participants mentioned above the act of pretending to feel something that you do not feel, or not meaning what you say in written texts guided them to the path of sarcastic sentences. They understood that sarcastic intentions were embedded in the sayings and sentences. Also, as seen in these quotations, insincerity has been utilized by the three groups as a feature helpful in recognizing online sarcasm.

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 negative attitude. The following quotations support this:

P7 ENS: Sarcasm is a bit far from politeness. In other words, sarcasm is better conveyed through impolite language than polite one. Impolite views imply sarcasm.

P8 EFL: 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.

P9 ESL: Negative expressions smelled 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.

As participants stated in this part, they recognize impolite and offensive sentences as a suitable environment for sarcasm. Also, they claim that one way to recognize sarcasm is by saying negative explicit remarks. These sayings serve as evidence showing that negative attitude has been employed by all three groups in recognizing online sarcasm.

Victim

Victim was another 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:

P10 ENS: 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.

P11 EFL: Sarcasm targets a person whose behavior or performance has not been welcomed by the sarcasm maker. He has acted badly in one way or another from the viewpoint of the speaker.

P12 ESL: 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.

From the above-mentioned claims, it concluded that there should be something in common or someone known in the text or topic of speech that on the base of that sarcasm could be perceived and recognized. In other words, a victim is needed for sarcasm recognition. These quotations indicate that victim as a feature has helped all three groups in recognizing online sarcasm.

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 the antecedent, insincerity, negative attitude, and victim. This is in line with the results of the quantitative phase of the study.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to answer the question, "What are the general pragmalinguistic characteristics of sarcasm that English-native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners use to recognize online sarcasm?" As far as 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.

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, consistent with the findings of this study.

Evidently, the identified general pragmatic characteristics function as a type of visual input enhancement that makes online sarcasm more perceptible to participants. In support of this,

Lee and Huang's (2019) argument that visual input enhancement has the potential to make input more perceptible to L2 learners by employing enhancement techniques can be cited. The claim that visual input enhancement makes targeted form processing simpler for L2 learners can also be interpreted as a justification for the results of the current study. In addition, a more recent study found that awareness-raising is an effective method for facilitating the acquisition and learning of target English forms (Hendricks, 2010). Hendrick (2010) believed that consciousness-raising makes students aware of a neglected area of language in an interactive environment where they can recognize target forms by negotiating their meaning. The argument by Moradkhan and Sohrabian (2009) that cognizance of form aids learners in L2 acquisition states the same thing. If the input is given prominence (intentionally or unintentionally), a language learner will unconsciously recognize it (Hendricks, 2010).

To interpret this result, Grice's (1975, 1989) (Grice, 1975; Grice, 1989) and Wilson and Sperber's (1992, 2012) arguments can be consulted, according to which sarcasm requires the participation of a victim in order to be purposeful and direct. In addition, they believe that when the quality maxim is violated, sarcasm receives greater attention. Last but not least, their position is that sarcasm without an antecedent is nothing but foolishness.

Moreover, this finding can be explained by the argument that the second party does not perceive the sardonic flavor of the utterance in the absence of a burden of untruthfulness, neg-activity, opposite meaning, sarcasm receiver, or victim. The utterance is encoded as sardonic and humorous through these means. Similarly, without the use of such sarcasm-generating devices, statements are nothing more than neutral sentences that mean what they say. The denotative and connotative meanings of derision are notably distinct from one another.

Moreover, because sarcasm is intended to be understood by conversation participants, they should be favored with additives that function as a lantern whose light indicates that the uttered sentence is sardonic. In other words, these additives serve to make all parties in a given conversation aware of the sardonic intent of the aphorism.

The sardonic nature of sarcasm cannot be illustrated and communicated without utilizing such pragmatic characteristics. Due to the fact that sarcasm is rarely found without a sardonic flavor, the use of such characteristics seems inevitable, at least if we are determined to convey the sarcastic meaning of our words.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In an effort to draw a conclusion based on the results related to answering the research question, it seems reasonable to argue that English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL learners have access to some general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm, including allusion to antecedent, insincerity, contradiction, negative attitude, and victim, when attempting to recognize online sarcasm. This finding leads us to the conclusion that some general pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm are more useful for English native speakers and Iranian EFL/ESL students in recognizing online sarcasm.

First, policymakers should develop guiding programs to be utilized by EFL curriculum coordinators and material developers in the design of supplementary courses with the goal of empowering ESL/EFL students in online sarcasm recognition as a key component of pragmatic knowledge.

Second, the findings of the present study would inform the implementation of the aforementioned courses in EFL classrooms by EFL instructors. It is suggested that they do their best to implement the newly developed courses so that the significance of nativity in online sarcasm recognition is diminished and EFL/ESL learners' proficiency in online sarcasm recognition becomes more native-like.

Third, the findings confirm the need for EFL researchers to conduct more sarcasm-focused investigations as a relatively new research path in the field, with the goal of replicating the present study in a variety of native and ESL/EFL contexts to add to the validity and richness of the present study's findings and those of similar previous studies. The overall conclusion for policymakers, curriculum

planners, material developers, EFL instructors, and researchers is that the recognition of online sarcasm is influenced by the pragmatic characteristics of sarcasm in general.

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