



AN ANALYSIS OF SARCASM IN THE LAST WEEK TONIGHT WITH JOHN OLIVER TALK SHOW

Yulia Ssa'addah¹, Dian Purnama Sari^{2*}

^{1,2}Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing Prayoga, Padang 25157, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the types and functions of sarcasm in Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, a talk show that blends humor and political commentary. Sarcasm is a rhetorical strategy often used to express irony, ridicule, and criticism, allowing speakers to indirectly highlight contradictions while engaging audiences through humor. Despite its frequent use in media discourse, few studies have systematically analyzed sarcasm in international political talk shows. Therefore, this research aims to examine the types and functions of sarcasm in John Oliver's program. The study employed a qualitative descriptive method with an intralingual approach. Data were collected from five purposively selected episodes aired between May 2024 and May 2025. The episodes were transcribed, and sarcastic utterances were identified, coded, and classified using Camp's (2011) theory of sarcasm types and Keraf's (2008) framework of functions. The findings reveal 44 sarcastic utterances, dominated by propositional and illocutionary types, with comparison as the most frequent function. These results suggest that sarcasm in Last Week Tonight serves a dual role: entertaining viewers while functioning as a rhetorical device to criticize social and political issues.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a medium of communication but also a tool for expressing attitudes, emotions, and evaluations to the world (Thomas, 1995). Among the many rhetorical strategies in language, sarcasm plays a significant role because it conveys meanings opposite to the literal expressions, often used for criticism, humor, or irony. Sarcasm is a form of verbal irony in which the intended meaning of an utterance is opposite to its literal meaning, often used to mock, criticize, or convey contempt (Gibbs, 2000). Sarcasm is often treated as a subtype of verbal irony in which the speaker's evaluative stance is particularly negative or critical (Wilson & Sperber, 2012).

Sarcasm is common in daily communication, but it also becomes prominent in mass media. Especially in political talk shows, sarcasm is used to entertain while indirectly criticizing social and political issues. In contemporary political discourse, sarcasm is frequently employed, particularly in talk show programs. A talk show is a program featuring one or more individuals discussing a specific topic, guided by a host (Morissan in Susanto, 2024). Popular political talk shows are known for their use of satire and sarcasm to critique political and social institutions while simultaneously entertaining mass audiences (Baym, 2005, Tsakona & Popa, 2011). These programs stand out for their sharp and witty commentary on current events, making them an intriguing subject for linguistic analysis. Sarcasm as a form of communication that contains double meanings that must be inferred by listeners (Grice, 1975). It is often utilized to convey

criticism in a subtle yet incisive manner (Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995). In this context, sarcasm serves as a tool to explore and express dissatisfaction with certain policies or actions without directly stating it (Haiman, 1998). Sarcasm allows the speaker to deliver a more complex message and emotional nuances that may not be easily articulated through more straightforward language. It allows speakers to voice criticism indirectly, creating plausible deniability while still conveying strong evaluative judgments (Dyner, 2014)

Moreover, the use of sarcasm in politics can create a distance between the speaker and the audience, enabling the speaker to evade direct responsibility for the statements made. Thus, sarcasm functions not only as a means to attract attention but also as a clever communication strategy to influence public opinion and shape the desired narrative. Consequently, a deep understanding of sarcasm and its contextual usage is crucial for researchers and analysts in comprehending the complex dynamics of political communication. This understanding can enhance the analysis of how language shapes political discourse and public perception, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced interpretation of contemporary political interactions (Susanto, 2014).

Previous scholars have attempted to classify sarcasm and its functions in communication. Camp (2011) identifies four types of sarcasm propositional, lexical, like-prefixed, and illocutionary each representing a distinct way sarcasm can be expressed. First is Propositional Sarcasm, which occurs when a statement appears to be true on the surface but is intended to convey the opposite meaning. This form of sarcasm involves a clear contradiction between the literal meaning of the words and the intended meaning, which is usually critical or mocking. The purpose of this sarcasm is to highlight a discrepancy between what is said and what is actually happening in reality. For example, when a politician says, "Oh, of course, our government is very fast in handling disasters," while in reality, the government is slow to respond, the speaker is using propositional sarcasm to criticize the inefficiency in government action. The listener must infer the sarcasm based on the situation, making it a direct, though sometimes exaggerated, form of irony (Fadilah & Wijayanto, 2024).

Second is Lexical Sarcasm which is rooted in the choice of specific words that convey a meaning opposite to the speaker's true intention. The sarcasm lies in the diction used, which seems to be positive or neutral on the surface but carries an ironic or critical undertone when analyzed in context. The selected words or phrases are meant to highlight the absurdity or failure of a situation. For example, saying, "Brilliant decision to raise taxes during a recession!" uses the word "brilliant" ironically to emphasize the poor judgment or inconsistency in the decision. Lexical sarcasm often hinges on word choice that is incongruent with the reality being discussed, making it a subtle yet effective tool for mockery or criticism.

Third is "Like" Prefixed Sarcasm, which is a type of sarcasm that employs the word "like" to express disbelief, mockery, or dismissal. The use of "like" here is not to convey comparison but to emphasize the absurdity or lack of credibility in a statement or situation. This form of sarcasm often reflects a casual, conversational tone and is commonly used in everyday speech. For example, saying, "Like the new education

reform is going to solve anything,” conveys a sense of doubt or cynicism about the effectiveness of the reform. The speaker uses “like” to mock the idea, showing that they do not believe the reform will have any positive impact, which adds a layer of sarcastic irony to the statement.

Lastly is Illocutionary Sarcasm which involves using an entire speech act such as a statement or exclamation to convey sarcasm through tone and context. This type of sarcasm is often delivered with a mocking or cynical tone, making it clear to the listener that the speaker’s true intent is the opposite of the literal meaning of the words. For example, saying, “Many thanks to the parliament for their truly outstanding hard work!” in a sarcastic tone implies the opposite, criticizing the parliament for their lack of action or poor performance. Illocutionary sarcasm is highly reliant on tone and delivery, making it an effective but sometimes subtle way to convey scorn or criticism. It is often used in situations where the speaker wants to express disapproval or highlight incompetence indirectly.

Sarcasm serves multiple communicative functions, including expressing rejection, issuing commands, strengthening criticism, and reinforcing social relationships (Keraf, 2008). It can function as a nuanced rhetorical device to express criticism, authority, or even solidarity, depending on the context and delivery. Keraf (2008) outlines ten primary functions of sarcasm in communication First, expression of rejection is used to express disagreement or disapproval sarcastically, as in the statement, “Oh, of course, raising taxes without improving public services is a brilliant idea!” which actually criticizes the policy. Second, delivering prohibitions conveys prohibitions through sarcastic expressions, such as “Go ahead and keep playing on your phone during the meeting that must be the new way to show professionalism,” which actually discourages such behavior.

Third, giving commands is used to indirectly instruct someone, as seen in “Sure, keep working lazily, after all, our targets don’t really matter, right?” which urges someone to work more seriously. Fourth, conveying information delivers facts in a sarcastic tone, such as “Did you know that being late every day is now considered a form of loyalty?” which criticizes a normalized bad habit. Fifth, making affirmations is employed to emphasize something sarcastically, as in “Of course, you’re the best member of the team you never work but always get the credit,” which ironically highlights injustice. Sixth, posing questions involves rhetorical questions used to criticize, such as “Do you seriously think that’s a smart idea?” which implies the opposite. Seventh, making comparisons sarcastically compares two things in an exaggerated way, such as “Your work is like a tired snail,” which criticizes slow performance.

Eighth, expressing similarities points out ironic similarities, for example, “You and laziness go so well together, like twins,” which mocks a person’s laziness. Ninth, delivering opinions communicates one’s viewpoint sarcastically, as in “If everyone worked as carelessly as you, the company would definitely thrive... into bankruptcy,” which mocks a poor work ethic. Lastly, addressing others uses sarcastic greetings, such

as “Oh look, the king of lateness has arrived,” which ridicules someone’s habit of being late. All these forms reflect sarcasm’s function as an expressive tool that conveys meaning in opposition to its literal sense, aiming to deliver sharp and often painful social or personal critique.

Sarcasm functions as a multifunctional linguistic tool that allows speakers to communicate complex meanings ranging from criticism to command while also engaging listeners on a more interpretive level. It is a form of expression where the literal meaning differs from the intended meaning, often creating an ironic contrast. This complexity enables speakers to convey subtle messages that might be difficult to express directly. Understanding sarcasm requires sensitivity to contextual cues such as intonation, facial expression, and shared background knowledge between speaker and hearer (Attardo, 2000). Because of this, sarcasm requires listeners to be attentive and interpret these signals to fully understand the message. Additionally, sarcasm can be used to build rapport, demonstrate wit, or soften harsh criticism. However, sarcasm can also risk offending others if misunderstood or perceived as insincere. Overall, sarcasm is a powerful communication tool that adds richness and depth to everyday language.

Sarcastic expressions in political discourse play a crucial role in shaping public opinion by framing political actors and events through ridicule and irony (Kreuz & Roberts, 2019). Several more recent studies have analyzed sarcasm in online discourse, especially in social media platforms, where sarcastic utterances shape public opinion (Kreuz & Roberts, 2019; González-Ibáñez et al., 2011). Sarcasm is strategically used to ridicule political actors and policies while keeping audiences engaged. Last Week Tonight with John Oliver talk show, which blends humor and political criticism, offers a rich site for such analysis. Despite extensive research on sarcasm in everyday and online communication, its systematic use in televised political satire remains underexplored (Dyner, 2016)

In the study of pragmatic linguistics, sarcasm is a complex form of communication that is often used to convey criticism indirectly. The popularity of political programs such as Last Week Tonight with John Oliver demonstrates how sarcasm has become a powerful medium for delivering political commentary to global audiences (Gray et al, 2009). Therefore, this study seeks to analyze sarcasm in Last Week Tonight with John Oliver by identifying the types and the functions. By addressing these objectives, the study aims to enrich the understanding of sarcasm as both a rhetorical and communicative strategy in media discourse, showing how it operates as a tool of entertainment as well as political critique.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, as it aimed to describe and analyze the use of sarcasm in Last Week Tonight with John Oliver. The study was conducted within the framework of linguistic analysis, focusing specifically on the identification and classification of sarcastic utterances according to their types and functions. The data of this research consisted of sarcastic utterances found in selected

episodes of Last Week Tonight with John Oliver aired between May 2024 and May 2025. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, in which the episodes were chosen based on their relevance to the research objectives and the presence of rich sarcastic discourse. The population of this study is all episodes of the program, while the sample is restricted to the selected five episodes.

The research instrument was the researcher themselves as the key instrument, supported by documentation sheets for categorizing and analyzing sarcastic utterances. The data collection procedure involved several steps: (1) downloading and watching the selected episodes; (2) transcribing the spoken utterances from the episodes into textual form; (3) identifying sarcastic utterances by applying linguistic cues and contextual interpretation; and (4) classifying the utterances into types and functions based on the adopted theories.

For data analysis, this study applied an intralingual matching method. The analysis was guided by Camp's (2011) theory to identify the types of sarcasm, namely propositional, lexical, like-prefixed, and illocutionary. In addition, Keraf's framework (2008) was employed to identify the communicative functions of sarcasm, including rejection, affirmation, comparison, and command. The analytical process included categorizing the utterances, counting their occurrences, and interpreting their roles in the context of the talk show. The methodological steps were conducted systematically to ensure reliability and allow replication in future studies.

3. RESULTS

From five episodes of Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, 44 sarcastic utterances were found, with propositional sarcasm being the most frequent type, followed by illocutionary, lexical, and like-prefixed as the least. In terms of functions, sarcasm was most dominantly used to make comparisons, while other functions included criticizing, affirming, ridiculing, rejecting, mocking, persuading, giving commands, and expressing similarities. These findings indicate that sarcasm in the show functions not only as entertainment but also as a rhetorical strategy to deliver social and political criticism in an entertaining way.

3.1. Types of Sarcasm

"From the observed data, 44 sarcastic utterances were identified in five episodes of Last Week Tonight with John Oliver. Based on Camp's (2011) framework, four types of sarcasm were found: propositional, illocutionary, lexical, and like-prefixed, with propositional sarcasm as the most dominant type. In terms of functions, following Keraf's (2008) classification, ten pragmatic functions were observed, in which making comparisons and delivering opinions occurred most frequently. These findings indicate that sarcasm in the show is strategically employed to criticize social and political issues while maintaining a humorous and engaging delivery."

3.1.1. Propositional Sarcasm

Propositional sarcasm refers to utterances that appear literal but actually convey the opposite meaning. The sarcastic meaning emerges through the context in which the

utterance is used. This study found 19 data of propositional sarcasm, but only five data are explained because several utterances were repeated. However, these utterances are categorized as in the following examples.

“That is a bat signal for this show: something so boring it is genuinely kind of hot.”

The data presents an example that occurs after John Oliver explains the complex litigation process in opioid settlements. The statement illustrates propositional sarcasm, in which a literal compliment actually conveys criticism. By calling a tedious legal issue “hot,” Oliver ironically mocks the dull nature of the topic while reinforcing the show’s characteristic style of blending social critique with irony and humor.

3.1.2. Lexical Sarcasm

Lexical sarcasm is expressed through word choices that appear positive or neutral but are used sarcastically in context. The sarcasm emerges from vocabulary that contrasts with the situation described. This study found 7 data of lexical sarcasm, but only 3 data are explained because some utterances were repeated. However, these utterances are categorized as in the following examples.

“That might be the first time I’ve heard of political corruption having an aesthetic that screams No worries if not.”

The data presents an example of lexical sarcasm, where casual and mismatched vocabulary is deliberately used to ridicule a serious issue. The phrase “an aesthetic that screams ‘No worries if not’” applies a lighthearted expression to the context of political corruption, creating irony. This diction highlights the contrast between the severity of the crime and the trivial way it is presented, reinforcing the sarcastic effect.

3.1.3. Like-prefix Sarcasm

Sarcasm with the prefix “like” is marked by the use of “like” at the beginning of a sentence to express disbelief, doubt, or ridicule. This type commonly appears in spoken discourse to reject or mock an idea. The study found 3 data of like-prefix sarcasm, but only 2 data are explained because of repetition. However, these utterances are categorized as in the following examples.

“It is like an insanely dark remake of The Music Man.”

The data presents an example of like-prefixed sarcasm, where the word “like” introduces an exaggerated and ironic comparison. Oliver mocks the misuse of opioid settlement funds by comparing it to a “dark remake” of *The Music Man*, highlighting the absurdity of exploiting a public health crisis for profit. This sarcasm emphasizes the contrast between expected recovery efforts and the reality of cynical profiteering.

3.1.4. Illocutionary Sarcasm

Illocutionary sarcasm refers to sarcasm that operates at the level of speech acts, where the entire utterance, along with its intonation and expression, conveys a sarcastic meaning. This type typically appears in the form of compliments, commands, or

statements delivered sarcastically and is identified through context and prosodic features. In this study, the author identified 15 instances, including prefix sarcasm, which are explained through five different video titles presented in the appendix.

"We have arrived at our final destination, and that is the destination of tobacco justice."

John Oliver's statement about a supposed victory over the tobacco industry appears to be a positive announcement, yet it is laden with sarcasm. He mocks the 1998 Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement, which was celebrated as a success, but in reality, much of the settlement funds were misused to cover deficits or unrelated projects rather than supporting public health initiatives. Through a declarative speech act delivered with ironic seriousness, Oliver conveys sharp criticism of governmental failure, making his utterance a clear example of illocutionary sarcasm.

3.2. Functions of Sarcasm

This section examines the functions of sarcasm in the Last Week Tonight with John Oliver transcripts, following Keraf's (2008) classification, which includes five main functions: rejection, prohibition, command, information delivery, and affirmation, each illustrated with examples from the data.

3.2.1. Expression of Rejection

Expression of Rejection is a form of sarcasm used to express disagreement with ideas, policies, or behaviors. This study identified four utterances in this category, mainly targeting government policies, corporate actions, or media representations. Of these, two utterances are discussed in this section, originating from different video titles.

"Oh was that today? I'm sorry it slipped my mind. Thanks so much for trekking through that lion infested jungle for me though."

This data illustrates sarcasm as a form of rejection toward a promise or obligation. The utterance "Oh was that today? I'm sorry it slipped my mind" appears to be an apology but is delivered with ridicule and insincerity. Meanwhile, the phrase "Thanks so much for trekking through that lion infested jungle for me though" employs hyperbole to downplay the other person's effort, which was in fact trivial. Both utterances reinforce the function of sarcasm as an expression of rejection.

3.2.2. Delivering Prohibitions

Delivering Prohibitions refers to the use of sarcasm to indirectly forbid or warn against an action, not through explicit prohibitions but through ridicule or mockery that highlights the action as absurd or dangerous. In this study, two utterances were identified with this function.

"That is not what this money is for."

This data falls under the sarcastic function of delivering prohibitions because it indirectly forbids the misuse of opioid settlement funds. The utterance appears as a criticism of the government and local officials who diverted the funds for other purposes instead of supporting opioid crisis victims. Although not expressed as a direct prohibition,

the utterance implies disapproval and sarcastically emphasizes the inappropriateness of such actions, thereby functioning as an implicit form of prohibition.

3.2.3. Giving Commands

Giving Commands is the use of sarcasm as an indirect way to give orders or instructions. The command is conveyed in a mocking or ironic tone rather than in a direct imperative form. In this study, one utterance with this function was identified, which is discussed in this section and originates from the video titled Hawaii.

“You either be a raisin or you be a grape. I have no patience for your fruit puberty.”

This data falls under the function of sarcasm as Giving Commands because it indirectly instructs the audience or subject to make a firm decision. Through humorous metaphors such as “You either be a raisin or you be a grape” and the term “fruit puberty,” John Oliver mocks indecisiveness and conveys his impatience, which implicitly functions as a command to take a clear stance.

3.2.4. Conveying Information

The function of conveying information uses sarcasm to indirectly deliver facts while expressing criticism or disapproval. In this study, 5 utterances were identified, with examples presented and discussed from different video titles.

“It’s always nice to say sorry for things, you know, whether it’s for running late or making your pretend wedding to a cabbage nicer than your actual wedding with your human wife or violent imperialism.”

Although the statement explicitly appears to emphasize the importance of apologizing, John Oliver’s use of hyperbolic examples indicates that it functions as sarcasm. Rather than genuinely promoting an apologizing culture, he critiques those who attempt to cover up serious mistakes with a simple “sorry”. Thus, criticism of wrongdoing or injustice is implicitly conveyed through a sarcastic communicative strategy.

3.2.5. Making Affirmations

Sarcasm in the form of affirmation appears as reinforcement or agreement, but is actually used to express rejection or disagreement. This function serves to criticize, mock, or highlight certain realities.

“We have arrived at our final destination, and that is the destination of tobacco justice.”

The statement initially appears to celebrate a victory in the tobacco industry case; however, John Oliver employs it sarcastically to criticize the ineffectiveness of the legal settlement. The settlement funds were largely directed to cover local government budgets rather than to mitigate the harms of smoking. Thus, the utterance functions as a false affirmation that implicitly satirizes the legal system’s failure to deliver justice for the victims of the tobacco industry.

3.2.6. Posing Questions

Sarcastic questions are not intended to elicit answers, but rather to express doubt, criticism, or ridicule toward a given condition. This form is commonly employed to highlight the illogical behavior of certain political figures or institutions.

“Does he cut it first or eat it with the stone still in?”

The question was not intended to obtain an answer, but rather to satirize the media’s focus on trivial issues, such as Modi’s way of eating mangoes, instead of addressing more substantial matters. This use of sarcasm underscores the failure of media institutions to fulfill their journalistic functions responsibly.

3.2.7. Making Comparisons

The function of making comparisons in sarcasm is employed to highlight inequality, folly, or inaccuracy through exaggerated, humorous, or ironic contrasts. The absurdity of such comparisons enhances their effectiveness in criticizing figures, policies, or situations. In this study, twelve utterances were identified under this function, making it the most dominant.

“Trump as president was sort of like a hamster in an attack helicopter... he wants to bathe the world in blood and terror... but luckily he doesn’t know what buttons to press.”

The hyperbolic comparison portrays Donald Trump as a small and incompetent creature (a hamster) placed in a deadly military vehicle (an attack helicopter). While humorous in tone, this comparison serves to criticize Trump’s lack of preparedness and incapacity to wield power, while simultaneously expressing serious concern over an unfit leader holding significant authority.

3.2.8. Expressing Similarities

The function of expressing similarities in sarcasm highlights resemblances between two elements that are not conventionally considered alike, with the purpose of mocking or criticizing the subject under discussion. These similarities are often conveyed ironically or hyperbolically, producing a comic and sarcasm effect.

“Opposite snakes are just arms and legs, no face or tail, but basically four legs with fingers on the end and a butt in the middle covered with hair.”

John Oliver sarcastically describes the term “opposite snakes,” an unscientific concept that equates humans with “snakes with legs.” The absurdity of this explanation illustrates the sarcasm, as it exaggerates the comparison between complex human beings and simplified animal structures under a seemingly logical frame.

3.2.9. Delivering Opinions

The function of expressing an opinion in sarcasm conveys attitudes or viewpoints indirectly, yet with sharp and meaningful effect. This form is often employed to mock government policies, political figures’ statements, or public behaviors considered unethical or unreasonable.

“26 billion is exactly how much you pay when you are not guilty of anything. Who among us has not surrendered the entire GDP of Iceland just cause?”

The data criticizes pharmaceutical companies that pay massive compensation for the opioid crisis while continuing to deny responsibility. This sarcasm conveys the opinion that paying \$26 billion while claiming innocence reflects hypocrisy or the absurdity of the legal system.

3.2.10. Addressing Other

The function of addressing others involves sarcasm directed at specific individuals or groups through greetings, expressions of gratitude, or seemingly friendly comments that actually contain sharp criticism. In this study, four utterances were identified under this function.

“Big Mahalo to Oprah for giving Maui County access to your private road”

The data appears to be an expression of gratitude, yet in context it functions as sarcasm criticizing public reliance on celebrity personal access. By expressing excessive gratitude, John Oliver satirizes the inequality of access and power that public figures should not possess in emergency situations.

6. CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the types and functions of sarcasm in the talk show Last Week Tonight with John Oliver using Camp's (2011) theory and Keraf's (2008) theory through a qualitative descriptive method applied to five selected episodes. The findings revealed that all types of sarcasm were identified, with propositional sarcasm being the most dominant (19 data). This indicates that John Oliver frequently uses statements that appear literal or positive but actually carry the opposite meaning, as a form of sharp critique or satire toward political and social issues. In terms of functions, ten categories were found, with making comparisons as the most frequent (12 data). These results indicate that John Oliver employs sarcasm not only as entertainment but also as a rhetorical tool to deliver indirect political and social criticism.

Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets generated and/or analysed in the study are available in https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=john+oliver+last+week+tonight

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Authors' Contribution

Yulia Ssa'addah worked the project and the main conceptual ideas, wrote the manuscript.

Dian Purnama Sari contributed ideas and provided critical feedback and revisions that enhanced the quality of this research article

Authors' Information

Yulia Ssa'addah is an alumna of the English Literature Study Program at Prayoga School of Foreign Language. Email: yuliassaaddah02@gmail.com

Dian Purnama Sari is a lecturer in the English Literature Study Program at Prayoga School of Foreign Language. Email: dian@stba-prayoga.ac.id

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