

Degrading Sarcasm in Verbal Bullying : A Speech Act Study on Junior High School Students in Surakarta, Indonesia

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Abstract. *Sarcasm is a form of verbal bullying that often occurs unconsciously by the speaker. This study aims to examine the phenomenon of sarcasm-based verbal bullying in the school environment, focusing on degrading speech acts directed at junior high school (SMP) students in Surakarta, Indonesia. Through interviews with students who have been victims of sarcasm, this research analyzes the forms and impacts of sarcastic remarks they have experienced. The findings reveal that sarcasm is frequently used as a form of mockery or insult aimed at highlighting the victim's shortcomings, whether in academic, physical, or social aspects. Each sarcastic utterance is analyzed using the theories of locution, illocution, and perlocution, showing that while the utterance may appear as a compliment on a literal level, it contextually demeans the victim. The perlocutionary effect includes feelings of shame, inferiority, and loss of self-confidence in the victim. These findings indicate that sarcasm as verbal bullying has the potential to damage students' mental health and disrupt their social relationships. This study emphasizes the need for a school environment that supports positive communication, free from speech acts that have the potential to demean others.*

Keywords: Verbal Bullying; Sarcasm; Speech Acts; Junior High School Students; Surakarta

1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a phenomenon that has become a serious concern in the field of education (Hayati & Yusri, 2023). It does not only occur physically; bullying also often manifests through words or verbally. One common form of verbal bullying encountered in the school environment is the use of sarcasm to demean others (Azmi et al., 2021). Sarcasm, which is often perceived as humor or a way of conveying criticism indirectly, actually has great potential to hurt someone's feelings, especially when used in the wrong context (Ihsan & Syazali, 2024). For junior high school (SMP) students, who are at a crucial stage of emotional and social development, demeaning sarcasm can negatively impact their mental and emotional growth.

Sarcasm is essentially a form of indirect communication that implies a meaning opposite to what is actually spoken. For example, when someone says, "You're so smart!" to a person who has just made a mistake, the statement carries the opposite meaning of praise; it becomes a mockery or a form of demeaning (Sitanggang et al., 2024). In everyday interactions, sarcasm is often considered normal, even humorous, especially within the realm of friendships. However, when sarcasm is used with the intention to demean, particularly in a repetitive manner, it can be categorized as a form of verbal bullying (Cahyo et al., 2020).

In the context of junior high schools, students' social interactions are highly dynamic. They are in a transitional phase from childhood to adolescence, where self-identity and acceptance from peers become extremely important (Shidiq & Raharjo, 2018). During this period, students are also more vulnerable to external influences, including negative communication styles such as demeaning sarcasm. In an effort to fit into their social environment, students may use sarcasm as a way to show strength or superiority, often without realizing the psychological impact it can have on their peers (Sary, 2017).

Speech acts in the context of demeaning sarcasm are often difficult for outsiders, such as teachers or parents, to identify because the delivery is indirect and often hidden behind humor (Farmida et al., 2021). However, for the victims, the impact of sarcastic speech acts can be very real. Students who become targets of demeaning sarcasm may experience low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and, in more extreme cases, psychological trauma. Furthermore, continuous verbal bullying can also hinder students' academic performance and damage their social relationships with peers (Nur et al., 2024).

From a pragmatic perspective, demeaning sarcastic speech acts are interesting to study because they involve complex aspects of communication. On one hand, sarcasm can be seen as a form of freedom of expression. However, on the other hand, when used with the intention to hurt or demean, sarcasm becomes a form of harmful verbal violence (Marliadi, 2018). Examining demeaning sarcastic speech acts among junior high school (SMP) students can help us understand how this form of communication is used and its impact on the social and emotional dynamics among students. Furthermore, it is important to understand how students respond to demeaning sarcastic speech acts. Some students may perceive them as jokes and are not significantly affected, while others may experience significant psychological impacts. These differences depend on various factors, including the student's personality, their social relationship with the perpetrator, and their level of self-confidence. However, even though individual responses to sarcasm may vary, it is undeniable that demeaning sarcasm can cause deep emotional wounds, especially when used repeatedly in a bullying context (Putri et al., 2020).

Research on verbal bullying in the form of demeaning sarcasm among SMP students is crucial. Verbal bullying is often perceived as less severe compared to physical bullying, even though its psychological impact can be the same, or even worse, as the scars left are not always physically visible (Maalikh et al., 2024). Students who experience verbal bullying may not report it immediately because sarcasm is often seen as trivial or

merely a joke. However, if ignored, verbal bullying can affect students' mental well-being in the long term.

This study is expected to provide deeper insights to educators, parents, and students regarding the dangers of demeaning sarcasm as a form of verbal bullying. With a better understanding of the dynamics of sarcastic speech acts among SMP students, we hope to create a more positive and supportive school environment. One important step that needs to be taken is to teach students the importance of communicating well and respecting others' feelings. Additionally, schools need to provide effective bullying prevention programs and offer support to students who become victims of verbal bullying.

In conclusion, demeaning sarcasm is a form of verbal bullying that requires more attention in pragmatic and educational studies. Research on sarcastic speech acts among SMP students is not only important for understanding the forms of verbal bullying but also for identifying strategies that can be used to prevent and address bullying in schools. This study is expected to make a meaningful contribution to efforts in creating a safer, more inclusive, and supportive school environment for the optimal development of students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Verbal Bullying

Verbal bullying is a form of intimidation carried out through speech with the aim of demeaning or hurting others. Various forms of verbal bullying have been identified by Ariobimo (2008), which include: (1) verbal harassment (insults), involving the use of harsh or demeaning words to hurt someone's feelings; (2) verbal threats, which encompass threats of physical or psychological harm; (3) name-calling, which involves addressing someone with demeaning labels; (4) gossiping, which refers to spreading false or demeaning information about someone; (5) sarcastic remarks, using sarcasm or irony to demean others; (6) character assassination, an attempt to damage someone's reputation with false or misleading information; and (7) social exclusion, meaning the act of ostracizing or rejecting someone from a group or community.

Sarcasm is a form of verbal bullying that is often disguised as humor or a joke, but it has the potential to cause psychological harm. It is characterized by the use of words that seem to be complimentary but actually convey mockery or put-downs (Irawati et al., 2023). In the context of bullying, sarcasm is used to humiliate, belittle, or harass the victim, either in public or in interpersonal situations. This can impact the victim's self-confidence, create an uncomfortable atmosphere, and instill feelings of inferiority (Sari et al., 2023).

Although sarcasm is often perceived as a clever or entertaining form of communication, when used in the context of bullying, it has psychological effects similar to other forms of verbal bullying, such as direct insults or ridicule. The main difference lies in its subtle packaging, but its effects remain equally damaging, especially when consistently used in social interactions (Oktaviani et al., 2024).

Speech Act

Speech acts are one of the main focuses in this study. According to Yule (1996), speech acts are various actions displayed through utterances. Additionally, Rodearni et al. (2019) provide their perspective on speech acts, defining it as a theory that examines the meaning of language based on the relationship between utterances and the actions performed by the speaker towards the listener during communication. Fatihah and Utomo (2020) describe speech acts as a form of actions or activities that humans carry out using speech tools. The theory of speech acts offers a framework for understanding the phenomenon of verbal bullying through speech. This theory explains that utterances can be used to perform various actions, such as stating facts, giving commands, or making threats (Osisanwo, 2003). Austin (1962) identifies three principles within speech act theory: locutionary acts (the act of speaking), perlocutionary acts (the effect of the speech on the listener), and illocutionary acts (the intention or force behind the speech). Searle (1969) adds that the meaning of an utterance involves social factors and the speaker's intention.

3. METHODS

This research is a case study using a qualitative approach. A case study is an empirical approach that delves into and analyzes cases within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). The study was conducted at a junior high school (Sekolah Menengah Pertama) in Surakarta City, Central Java Province, Indonesia. The participants were 8th-grade students from junior high schools in Surakarta, Central Java Province, Indonesia. Eighth-grade students were chosen as participants in this study on verbal bullying because they are at a crucial stage of psychosocial development, where social interactions and peer influence begin to have a significant impact on their lives. At the age of 13-15 years, 8th-grade students are mature enough to recognize and understand social dynamics in the school environment, including bullying behavior. Based on data from the Surakarta City Education and Culture Office, junior high schools are classified into three categories:

public junior high schools, sports-oriented junior high schools, and private junior high schools. Therefore, the sample selection was carried out using purposive sampling techniques.

Data collection in this study on verbal bullying among adolescents, focusing on the perceptions of 8th-grade students in Surakarta, was conducted through interviews. Structured interviews were carried out with selected students to gain deeper qualitative insights into their experiences and perceptions of verbal bullying, both as victims and witnesses. To complement the data, participant observation was also conducted in the school environment, where the researcher directly observed students' social interactions to capture the dynamics of verbal bullying in everyday contexts. Additional data were obtained through documentation techniques, involving the collection of information from existing bullying case records at the school, as well as anti-bullying policies and programs implemented. The combination of these techniques aims to provide a comprehensive and in-depth view of junior high school students' perceptions in Surakarta regarding the phenomenon of verbal bullying.

Qualitative data analysis was performed using an interactive analysis model involving three main activities: data reduction, data presentation, and result verification, all of which were conducted interactively, including during the data collection process (Hennink et al., 2020).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This research was conducted through interviews with students who have experienced verbal bullying, particularly sarcasm. The interview results indicate that although sarcasm is present in the school environment, most students feel uncomfortable with its use. They also tend not to use sarcasm frequently as a way to respond to conflicts or mock others. The high level of disagreement with several questions suggests that students prefer non-sarcastic interactions in their social relationships. This finding is supported by the interview responses from several students, as shown below.

"Wow, you're really smart; you managed to get all the questions wrong!"

(Students from the State School)

"Wah, pintar banget deh kamu, bisa salah jawab semua soal!"

(*Siswa Sekolah Negeri*)

The locution of statement data 1 is a compliment suggesting that the interlocutor is 'smart' or '*pintar*' for managing to get all the questions wrong. Literally, this statement appears to be a compliment, but in the context of failure, its true meaning is an insult. The illocution of this statement indicates that the speaker intends to belittle or embarrass the interlocutor for their mistake. By using sarcasm, the speaker aims to emphasize that the interlocutor is very incompetent in the exam, as if they have failed entirely. The perlocution of this statement likely results in feelings of shame, low self-esteem, or frustration for the interlocutor. The person targeted by this sarcasm may feel mocked due to their shortcomings, especially in the academically sensitive context for middle school students. Examples of demeaning sarcasm can also be found in the following interview.

"Wow, you must be the world champion of slow running; that's impressive!"

(Students of Sports School)

"Wah, kamu pasti juara dunia lari lambat deh, hebat banget!"

(*Siswa Sekolah Keolahragaan*)

The locution of the statement above is a compliment suggesting that the interlocutor is great for being considered the world champion in 'slow running' or '*lari lambat*.' At first glance, this statement appears to be an award, but it is actually sarcastic. The illocution of this statement is to mock the interlocutor's physical ability, particularly in running. The speaker uses sarcasm to embarrass or criticize the interlocutor for being very slow, which is far from the expectation of being fast. The perlocution of this statement may cause the interlocutor to feel mocked or belittled regarding their athletic abilities. This statement can induce feelings of shame or lack of confidence in physical activities, especially in front of peers. Other examples of demeaning sarcasm were found by the researcher as follows.

"Wow, you managed to be the only one who didn't understand today's lesson."

(Students of Private School)

"Hebat, kamu berhasil jadi satu-satunya yang nggak ngerti pelajaran hari ini."

(*Siswa Sekolah Swasta*)

The statement above indicates the locution that the interlocutor is 'great' for being the only one who does not understand the lesson that day. This remark implies praise but carries irony, as this lack of understanding is not a positive attribute. The illocution of this statement is that the speaker intends to mock or belittle the interlocutor's learning abilities. Through this sarcasm, the speaker aims to highlight the interlocutor's academic weaknesses and embarrass them for failing to keep up with the lesson. The perlocution of this statement may result in feelings of incompetence or shame due to academic inability. The interlocutor may feel belittled in front of their peers and could lose confidence in the learning process.

"Wow, your singing voice makes everyone want to cover their ears; that's amazing!"

(Students from the State School)

"Wow, suara nyanyimu bikin semua orang jadi mau tutup telinga, luar biasa banget!"

(Siswa Sekolah Negeri)

The locution of the statement above is that the interlocutor's singing voice is so 'extraordinary' or '*luar biasa*' that it makes people want to cover their ears. This statement appears to be a compliment, but in its context, it is clearly a negative remark. The illocution of this statement is intended to insult the interlocutor's singing ability. The speaker wants to embarrass the interlocutor by indicating that their voice is very unpleasant to hear, using sarcastic praise as a form of insult. The perlocution of this statement may lead to feelings of shame or lack of confidence regarding singing abilities. This remark can make the interlocutor feel mocked in front of others and may reduce their interest or courage to sing again. The demeaning sarcasm does not end with this example, as the researcher has encountered the following.

"You are really an inspiration; you can sleep in class and not care at all."

(Students of Private School)

"Kamu tuh bener-bener inspirasi, bisa tidur di kelas dan nggak peduli sama sekali."

Siswa Sekolah Swasta

The analysis of the statement above indicates that the locution expresses that the interlocutor is an 'inspiration' or '*inspirasi*' for being able to sleep in class and not caring. This remark appears to be a compliment but is clearly sarcastic. The illocution of this

statement is that the speaker intends to criticize or embarrass the interlocutor for their laziness or lack of concern for the lesson. The speaker uses sarcasm to emphasize that sleeping in class is not behavior to be emulated. The perlocution of this statement likely results in feelings of shame or an awareness that their actions are viewed negatively. This remark may trigger feelings of guilt or make the interlocutor aware of their behavioral mistakes, although it can also evoke feelings of frustration or anger.

In each of the sarcastic statements above, the locution appears to be a compliment or a positive assertion literally, but the actual illocution is to belittle or embarrass the interlocutor. Sarcasm in this context is used to mock someone's weaknesses, failures, or incompetence in various aspects, whether academic, physical, or social. The perlocution resulting from these statements usually involves feelings of shame, low self-esteem, or even anger towards oneself or the person making the sarcastic comment. This demeaning sarcasm, especially among adolescents, has the potential to damage self-esteem and worsen social relationships, as although it may seem 'humorous' or 'humor' its emotional effects on the victim are often negative and long-lasting.

5. DISCUSSION

The discussion of this study reveals that sarcasm is often used as a form of verbal bullying in the school environment. Sarcastic remarks, which initially appear as compliments or positive comments, in reality, carry the opposite meaning—demeaning or mocking the weaknesses of others (Ihsan & Syazali, 2024). In several instances, it is clear that sarcasm is aimed at highlighting the victim's shortcomings, such as academic inability, physical weaknesses, or lack of skills in certain areas, causing the victim to feel embarrassed, lose confidence, or even become angry (Irawati et al., 2023).

The interview results show that the effects of sarcasm go beyond mere "jokes" or "banter." The perlocutionary effects of these remarks indicate that victims often experience psychological pressure, which may affect their self-esteem and hinder their social abilities. Data from examples 1 to 5 illustrate instances of demeaning sarcastic remarks, with each case consistently showing that sarcasm is used as a tool to subtly yet sharply mock or shame the victim's weaknesses. Student responses indicate that although such forms of sarcasm may sometimes seem mild or be perceived as humor by some, the emotional impact on the victim is actually negative (Cahyo et al., 2020).

Students' reluctance to use sarcasm as a mode of communication also indicates their preference for healthy, non-confrontational social interactions (Firmansyah & Solihati, 2022). This shows an awareness among students that sarcasm has the potential to create conflicts and strain social relationships. These findings suggest that sarcasm in the school environment is not merely a socially acceptable communication strategy but more often a form of mockery that can disrupt social dynamics and the psychological well-being of students. Overall, the data emphasize the importance of a school environment that supports positive interactions, free from demeaning forms of communication like sarcasm (Sari et al., 2023).

The use of sarcasm in the school environment is an intriguing phenomenon due to its impact on social interactions among students (Cahyanti, 2020). Based on the findings, most students feel uncomfortable with the use of sarcasm. This discomfort arises from sarcasm's potential to cause misunderstandings or even escalate conflicts, particularly in situations where open and clear communication is necessary. Although sarcasm is often perceived as a subtle form of humor, the data show that students prefer direct and non-sarcastic responses when resolving conflicts or expressing their dislikes (Oktaviani et al., 2024). The high level of disapproval towards the use of sarcasm in social relationships also suggests that students tend to avoid this communication style, viewing it as less constructive and detrimental to the quality of their interpersonal relationships (Idah et al., 2024). Thus, sarcasm does not appear to be a preferred communication strategy for students in social interactions, as they favor more transparent approaches that are less likely to hurt others' feelings. These findings indicate that, within the school social context, sarcasm is more often associated with negative effects than benefits, leading most students to choose not to use it.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the use of sarcasm in the school environment tends to have negative effects on students, particularly those who become victims. Although sarcasm is often disguised as humor, students generally feel uncomfortable with its use, and most do not adopt it as a means of interaction in conflicts or mockery. Sarcasm is frequently employed as a form of ridicule or insult aimed at highlighting the victim's shortcomings, whether in academic, physical, or social aspects. Each sarcastic remark was analyzed using the theories of locution, illocution, and perlocution, showing that while the utterance may appear as praise on a literal level, it

contextually demeans the victim. The perlocutionary effects include feelings of shame, inferiority, and loss of self-confidence for the victims. These findings suggest that sarcasm as a form of verbal bullying has the potential to damage students' mental health and disrupt their social relationships. This study emphasizes the need for a school environment that supports positive communication, free from speech acts that have the potential to demean others.

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