
THE ANALYSIS OF SARCASM AS A POLITICAL CRITICISM IN COMMENTS ON DONALD TRUMP'S INSTAGRAM POST

Olivia Permana

Institut Prima Bangsa

oliviaprmna2003@gmail.com

Article History:

Accepted 03 October 2025;

Revised 29 December 2025;

Approved 06 January 2026.

Abstract:

This study investigates sarcasm as a form of political criticism in the comments section of Donald Trump's Instagram account. The study contributes to digital pragmatics by showing how irony serves as a rhetorical tool of resistance in online political discourse. The research employs Lee and Katz's (1998) typology of sarcasm propositional, illocutionary, and perlocutionary and Gibbs, Kreuz, & Glucksberg's (2000) framework on pragmatic functions, including ridicule, humor, solidarity, indirect criticism, and social criticism. Data were collected from 50 comments on Trump's posts between June 1–5, 2025. The qualitative descriptive method was used to classify sarcasm types and analyze their functions. The findings reveal that propositional sarcasm is the most dominant type (34 cases), followed by illocutionary sarcasm (12) and perlocutionary sarcasm (4). Sarcasm functions primarily as ridicule and attack, but also as humor, solidarity, indirect, and social criticism. The results highlight the role of sarcasm as both a rhetorical and pragmatic strategy in digital political discourse, reflecting how netizens employ irony to criticize authority while fostering group identity.

Keywords: digital discourse, political criticism, pragmatics, sarcasm, social media

INTRODUCTION

In pragmatic studies, sarcasm represents a complex communicative act that conveys criticism through indirectness and irony. In the digital era, social media has transformed the landscape of political communication by providing direct channels for interaction between

political figures and the public. Unlike traditional media, which typically filters political messages through editorial processes, platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook allow for unmediated communication. This shift has created a more participatory environment in which citizens not only consume information but also actively respond to it. The comment sections of social media posts, in particular, have become vital arenas of public discourse where support, criticism, and resistance are voiced in real time.

One political figure whose online presence has consistently attracted global attention is Donald J. Trump, the 45th President of the United States. Known for his unconventional political style, controversial statements, and frequent use of social media, Trump embodies a new form of digital populism. While his posts often served as tools for political messaging, they simultaneously provoked widespread reactions from netizens around the world. Among these responses, sarcasm has emerged as a dominant rhetorical strategy. Rather than directly criticizing Trump, many users employ sarcastic remarks that reverse literal meaning to convey ridicule, irony, or humor. This indirect yet sharp form of political criticism reflects the creativity and adaptability of digital discourse.

Sarcasm has long been a subject of study in pragmatics and discourse analysis. Scholars such as Gibbs (2000) and Dynel (2014) define sarcasm as a linguistic strategy where the intended meaning is opposite to the literal expression, often carrying evaluative or derogatory force. Lee and Katz (1998) further classify sarcasm into three types: propositional, illocutionary, and perlocutionary, each operating at a different level of speech act. Propositional sarcasm works through reversal of meaning, illocutionary sarcasm manipulates the speech act function, and perlocutionary sarcasm highlights the impact on the audience. This typology underscores the multifaceted nature of sarcasm, showing that it is not a single phenomenon but a layered pragmatic strategy.

From a functional perspective, sarcasm extends beyond linguistic inversion. According to Gibbs, Kreuz, and Glucksberg (2000), sarcasm serves multiple pragmatic functions, including ridicule and attack, humor and entertainment, solidarity building, indirect criticism, and social criticism. In political contexts, these functions become particularly significant. Sarcasm allows critics to undermine authority while maintaining humor, to bond with like-minded individuals through shared ridicule, and to express dissent in ways that are memorable and rhetorically effective. As Ott (2017) notes, sarcastic memes and comments directed at Trump represent not just humor but also forms of digital political resistance.

Previous research has shown that sarcasm is prevalent in online political discourse. Azka et al. (2022) demonstrated how irony and sarcasm dominate commentary on news accounts such as @tempodotco, while Ismawatia et al. (2023) revealed how sarcasm functions as a tool of public dissatisfaction in responses to institutional Instagram accounts like DPR RI. However, studies focusing specifically on sarcastic responses to Trump's Instagram posts remain limited. Much

scholarship has analyzed Trump's own rhetoric (Ott, 2017; Mercieca, 2020), yet fewer studies have systematically examined how ordinary citizens respond to him with sarcasm on Instagram a platform often overlooked compared to Twitter.

This research seeks to fill that gap by investigating sarcastic comments directed at Trump's Instagram posts. It combines Lee and Katz's (1998) typology with Gibbs et al.'s (2000) pragmatic functions to provide a dual perspective: examining sarcasm both as a structural linguistic device and as a social act of criticism. By focusing on 50 sarcastic comments posted between June 1–5, 2025, the study captures how netizens utilize sarcasm to ridicule Trump, question his credibility, and express collective resistance.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both pragmatics and political communication. Theoretically, it extends sarcasm research into digital political discourse, highlighting how traditional pragmatic frameworks remain applicable in new online environments. Practically, it sheds light on how citizens creatively express dissent in ways that combine humor with criticism, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of digital democracy. Thus, the study not only investigates the types and functions of sarcasm but also situates them within the broader context of resistance, identity, and participation in contemporary political communication.

METHOD

This research applied a qualitative descriptive approach, which is commonly used in pragmatic studies to provide detailed interpretations of language phenomena within their natural context (Sugiyono, 2018). The goal was not to quantify sarcasm but to describe and interpret how it functions as political criticism in digital discourse.

Data Source and Sampling:

The data were drawn from the official Instagram account of Donald J. Trump (@realdonaldtrump). The sampling frame consisted of comments posted in response to Trump's uploads between June 1 and June 5, 2025. From this timeframe, six posts were selected purposively because they generated high engagement and contained politically sensitive themes, such as government policies, international relations, and election narratives. From these posts, 50 sarcastic comments were identified as the primary data for analysis.

Data Collection Technique:

Data were collected using non-participant observation. Screenshots and textual transcriptions of comments were documented to ensure accuracy. The purposive sampling technique was chosen to focus only on comments that explicitly contained sarcasm and political criticism. Criteria for inclusion were: (1) the comment had to involve linguistic inversion (literal vs. intended meaning), (2) the comment needed to be directed at Trump or his policies, and (3) the comment had to be understandable without requiring excessive external context.

Analytical Framework::

The analysis followed three stages:

Identification of Sarcasm Types

Comments were classified according to Lee and Katz's (1998) typology

- *Propositional sarcasm*, in which the literal meaning is opposite to the intended meaning.
- *Illocutionary sarcasm*, in which the sarcastic effect arises from the speech act itself.
- *Perlocutionary sarcasm*, in which the sarcastic effect is seen in the audience's response or reaction.

2. Classification of Pragmatic Functions

Using the framework of Gibbs, Kreuz, and Glucksberg (2000), each comment was analyzed to determine its pragmatic function. Categories included ridicule and attack, humor, solidarity, indirect criticism, and social criticism.

3. Interpretation and Contextualization

The results were interpreted by linking sarcasm types with their pragmatic functions, examining how these comments contribute to political criticism. Each example was interpreted in relation to Trump's political discourse and the socio-political context in which the comments were posted.

Research Procedure:

The research procedure began with data reduction, where only sarcastic comments were retained. These were then categorized into types and functions. Finally, the findings were discussed in light of previous research on digital discourse, enabling the integration of theoretical insights with empirical data.

By employing this systematic method, the study ensured both reliability in categorization and validity in interpretation, providing a nuanced understanding of how sarcasm functions as a tool of political criticism in Instagram comments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of 50 comments on Donald Trump's Instagram posts revealed three types of sarcasm: propositional, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Propositional sarcasm appeared as the most dominant type (34 cases), followed by illocutionary (12 cases) and perlocutionary (4 cases). In terms of functions, sarcasm was mostly used for ridicule and attack, but also operated as humor, solidarity, indirect criticism, and social criticism.

Types of Sarcasm

1. Propositional Sarcasm



goconow 10 ming
How's the preservation of our national parks goin'? Will they still be around when my grandkids are grown or will they have Trump hotels built on them?

Data 1

From the perspective of (Lee & Katz, 1998) type of sarcasm, this comment falls under propositional sarcasm because the sarcasm lies in the content of the sentence (proposition), not in the speech act or the effect it produces. Although it takes the form of a rhetorical question, the power of the sarcasm does not lie in the act of “asking,” but in the reversal of meaning contained in the content of the statement. The speaker does not really expect an answer from the audience; instead, he directs the reader to interpret the question as sarcasm and criticism.

Linguistically, this comment utilizes several rhetorical devices that reinforce its sarcasm. First, the use of a rhetorical question that does not require a direct answer, but rather directs the reader to a certain conclusion. Second, there is an element of contrast between two extreme future scenarios: the national park remains preserved or is turned into “Trump's hotel.” This contrast creates a hyperbolic effect that highlights the absurdity of the policy being criticized. Third, the mention of “Trump’s hotel” functions as a metonymy associating Trump’s name with the real estate business and capitalism, allowing audiences familiar with the issue to quickly grasp the implied criticism. Finally, the mention of “my grandkids” adds an emotional dimension, evoking long-term concerns about the future of the environment for future generations.

2. Illocutionary Sarcasm



car_jj15 9 ming
Thank you for new 55% (Tax) tariffs.

Data 2

The comment “Thank you for the new 55% (Tax) Tariffs” is a very clear example of sarcasm that is still effective in expressing political criticism in the digital space. On a literal level, this comment appears to be an expression of gratitude for the new tariff policy that has been implemented. However, when contextualized within the political and economic situation during Donald Trump's administration, the literal meaning turns into a sharp satire. This statement is not intended to express gratitude, but to mock and criticize the high tariff policy that is considered detrimental to the United States economy.

From the perspective of (Lee & Katz, 1998) theory, this comment falls into the category of illocutionary sarcasm, which is sarcasm rooted in the speech act itself, not

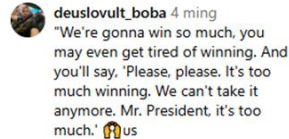
merely in its proposition. The phrase “thank you,” which conventionally expresses gratitude, is transformed into a tool of sarcasm. If this sentence were rewritten as “These tariffs are harmful to the economy,” the power of sarcasm and its rhetorical effect would be significantly reduced. This shows that the effect of sarcasm mainly comes from the reversal of the function of speech acts—where sincere gratitude is transformed into subtle but pointed criticism.

Linguistically, there are several important elements that reinforce the effect of sarcasm in this comment. First, mock gratitude is used explicitly to mock the target of the policy. Second, the mention of the specific number “55%” gives a factual and contextual impression that reinforces the tone of criticism, as the audience understands that the policy has a real economic impact, such as rising prices of imported goods and market instability. Third, the placement of the word “(Tax)” in parentheses serves to emphasize that the comment focuses on tax policy, while adding a touch of irony. Fourth, the concise and compact sentence creates a sarcastic “punchline” that is easy to understand and invites a quick response from the audience.

Furthermore, this comment shows how audience inference plays an important role in understanding sarcasm. First, readers read this comment as a literal expression. Second, they recognize the context of the controversial 55% tariff policy and its impact on the economy. Third, they grasp the discrepancy between the form of the comment (expression of gratitude) and the existing reality. Fourth, they conclude that this comment is a satire condemning the policy. This process shows that sarcasm, especially illocutionary sarcasm, can only be fully understood if the audience has shared knowledge about the current political and economic context.

This comment is also effective in building emotional resonance on social media. With just a few words, the commenter successfully combines criticism, humor, and sarcasm into a package that is easily accepted by the audience. Its concise and clever nature also allows this comment to gain wider interaction, such as replies, likes, or even reposts, thereby expanding the reach of the critical message being conveyed. Overall, the comment “Thank you for the new 55% (Tax) Tariffs” is a classic representation of illocutionary sarcasm in the context of political criticism. It exploits the contrast between polite speech and the context of harmful policies, creating sharp sarcasm that still seems “safe” in the public sphere. This comment not only serves as a tool to express individual dissatisfaction, but also as a medium to reinforce collective opinion against policies that are considered not to be in the interests of the community. In the context of this study, this comment is strong evidence of how sarcasm is used as a clever, effective communication strategy with strong rhetorical power on social media.

3. Perlocutionary Sarcasm



Data 3

Sarcasm is a multifaceted communicative strategy that operates at different levels of meaning. According to (Lee & Katz, 1998), one important way to understand sarcasm is through its perlocutionary dimension, which focuses on the *effects* an utterance has on its audience. While propositional sarcasm relies on semantic reversal and illocutionary sarcasm manipulates the force of a speech act, perlocutionary sarcasm emphasizes the emotional, social, and cognitive responses evoked in hearers. In political discourse, this dimension is especially significant because sarcasm often functions not only as commentary but also as a means of persuasion, bonding, and collective resistance.

The quotation of Donald Trump’s exaggerated campaign line “*We’re gonna win so much, you may even get tired of winning. And you’ll say, ‘Please, please. It’s too much winning.’*” provides a clear illustration of perlocutionary sarcasm. When a commenter repeats this statement in a sarcastic tone, the literal words are not meant to affirm Trump’s promise of endless victories. Instead, the sarcastic citation is strategically employed to mock the hyperbolic nature of Trump’s rhetoric and to elicit particular reactions from the audience. As Lee and Katz (1998) argue, sarcasm at the perlocutionary level is less about the structural contradiction of words and more about the social consequences it generates. Moreover, the perlocutionary force of this sarcastic citation lies in its strategic ambiguity. On the surface, it appears to be a simple repetition of Trump’s words, but its sarcastic delivery invites audiences to recognize the irony and align with the speaker’s critical stance. The effect depends on the audience’s ability to decode the sarcasm and respond appropriately. For sympathetic readers, the remark encourages laughter and solidarity; for Trump supporters, however, it might provoke defensiveness or hostility. This demonstrates the double-edged nature of perlocutionary sarcasm, where the same utterance can polarize audiences depending on their interpretive positions.

Ultimately, this example underscores (Lee & Katz, 1998) insight that sarcasm is not merely linguistic play but a performative act with tangible social and rhetorical consequences. The sarcastic quotation of Trump’s “winning” rhetoric highlights the way perlocutionary sarcasm operates as a political tool ridiculing opponents, rallying supporters, and shaping collective attitudes. In digital contexts such as comment threads, this type of sarcasm is particularly powerful because it circulates quickly, evokes shared amusement, and solidifies group cohesion through humor directed at a common adversary.

Function of Sarcasm

1. Ridicule and Attack

 **terandres90** 10 ming
Geez. GIVE IT A REST. Not even a
parrot repeats things as much as
this guy...


Data 1

Sarcasm is often employed as a rhetorical weapon to ridicule or undermine a target, a function highlighted by Gibbs, Kreuz, and Glucksberg (2000). The Instagram comment, “Geez. GIVE IT A REST. Not even a parrot repeats things as much as this guy...”, offers a clear example of ridicule-based sarcasm within political discourse. While the expression initially appears as a simple act of frustration, its deeper intention is to mock Donald Trump’s speaking style by characterizing him as repetitive and unoriginal.

The sarcastic force of the comment lies in its exaggeration and ironic contrast. The phrase “give it a rest” superficially resembles ordinary advice, yet in context it becomes a direct attack on Trump’s rhetoric. Similarly, the comparison to a parrot intensifies the ridicule, framing him as someone who repeats without meaning. This aligns with Kreuz and Glucksberg’s (1989) observation that sarcasm often operates by creating tension between literal and intended meaning.

Beyond its immediate criticism, the ridicule also performs an important social function. By mocking Trump so overtly, the commenter invites alignment from like-minded audiences who disapprove of him, thus transforming sarcasm into a tool of both aggression and solidarity. In this way, ridicule-based sarcasm simultaneously diminishes the credibility of its target and strengthens bonds within a community of critics.

2. Humor

 **chaosmoose** 10 ming
Trump uses auto pen btw. Lol

Data 2

Sarcasm is frequently employed not only as a tool of criticism but also as a form of humor and entertainment. The comment, “Trump uses auto pen btw. Lol,” offers a clear example of this function. At first, the statement seems to provide factual information about Trump’s supposed reliance on an “auto pen” for signing documents. However, the sarcastic tone, reinforced by the inclusion of “Lol,” reveals that the primary aim is amusement rather than serious accusation.

According to Gibbs (2000) and Kreuz & Glucksberg (1989), the humor in sarcasm arises from the audience’s recognition of the gap between literal and intended meaning. In this case, the trivial image of an auto pen is exaggerated into a symbol of incompetence or lack of authenticity. The playful irony turns a mundane object into a source of ridicule, but the laughter it provokes softens the aggression, keeping the focus on entertainment.

The humorous framing also has important social functions. As Gibbs (2000) observes, sarcasm presented as humor can diffuse tension and encourage solidarity. On platforms such as Instagram, where wit and brevity are rewarded, sarcastic humor sustains engagement by inviting others to laugh along. The comment thus fosters a sense of in-group bonding, while still implicitly questioning Trump’s credibility.

In conclusion, this example highlights how sarcasm can be weaponized not only for direct attack but also for amusement and collective enjoyment. By packaging criticism in humorous form, the utterance entertains, engages, and reinforces social cohesion, exemplifying the dual role of sarcasm as both critique and comic relief.

3. Indirect Criticism



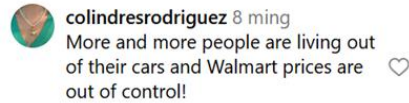
Sarcasm often operates as both a critical and entertaining device in political discourse. The remark, “247,000 people applied for unemployment in a single week thanks to your tariffs,” exemplifies this dual function. On the surface, the comment refers to an economic fact, yet its sarcastic framing transforms it into a humorous jab at Trump’s economic policies. By presenting widespread unemployment as if it were an ironic “achievement,” the commenter ridicules the failure of tariffs while simultaneously entertaining audiences.

According to Gibbs (2000), sarcasm is not limited to criticism but also functions to evoke amusement. In this example, humor arises from the incongruity between the expected benefits of tariffs—promoted as a means of protecting American jobs—and the reality of massive job losses. Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989) further argue that sarcasm relies on shared knowledge. The humor here is accessible only to those aware of the political and economic context, creating a sense of in-group bonding among critics.

Moreover, sarcasm in this form softens overt aggression. Instead of bluntly accusing Trump of economic mismanagement, the commenter frames the critique ironically, making it more palatable while still retaining its critical edge. The laughter generated by the remark does not weaken the seriousness of the criticism; rather, it strengthens its rhetorical force by engaging audiences emotionally.

In conclusion, the sarcastic comment about unemployment claims highlights how sarcasm functions simultaneously as humor and critique. It transforms criticism into a playful yet sharp rhetorical act, entertaining audiences while exposing the contradictions of tariff policies. This dual function underscores sarcasm’s effectiveness as both a communicative weapon and a social bonding tool.

4. Social Criticism



Data 4

Sarcasm in political discourse frequently extends beyond humor or ridicule to serve as a form of social criticism. The statement, *“More and more people are living out of their cars and Walmart prices are out of control!”* exemplifies this function. Instead of offering light entertainment, the remark employs irony to highlight systemic problems such as poverty, homelessness, and inflation, presenting them in a rhetorically striking manner.

According to Gibbs (2000) and Kreuz & Glucksberg (1989), sarcasm often operates as a rhetorical device for critique, allowing speakers to deliver pointed criticism without overt hostility. In this instance, the comment does not target Trump personally but draws attention to the social consequences of his economic policies. By invoking exaggerated imagery—citizens living in cars and rising consumer prices—the sarcasm dramatizes economic hardship and exposes the gap between political claims and reality.

This aligns with Kreuz and Glucksberg’s (1989) view that sarcasm reveals social truths through ironic contrast. The contrast here is between Trump’s frequent assertion of a “booming economy” and the visible evidence of financial struggle among ordinary people. By exaggerating these realities, the sarcastic remark makes the critique both memorable and rhetorically effective.

Furthermore, sarcasm in this form functions as a collective appeal. Rather than mocking individuals, it addresses systemic inequality, encouraging audiences to share in the recognition of social injustice. This collective awareness fosters solidarity and frames sarcasm as a tool of resistance and social commentary.

In conclusion, the comment illustrates how sarcasm transcends humor to function as social criticism. As suggested by Gibbs (2000) and Kreuz & Glucksberg (1989), irony exposes contradictions, amplifies awareness of inequality, and mobilizes audiences through shared recognition of injustice. Sarcasm, therefore, becomes not merely playful but a powerful rhetorical means of critique.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights sarcasm as a pragmatic strategy of dissent in digital political spaces, reinforcing the role of humor in shaping democratic participation. This study has examined sarcasm as a form of political criticism in the comments section of Donald Trump’s Instagram posts. By applying Lee and Katz’s (1998) typology and Gibbs, Kreuz,

& Glucksberg's (2000) pragmatic framework, the analysis of 50 comments revealed that sarcasm is not only a rhetorical device but also a pragmatic strategy in digital discourse. Propositional sarcasm emerged as the most dominant type, indicating that Instagram users frequently employ reversal of meaning to convey criticism. Illocutionary sarcasm appeared through ironic use of speech acts such as gratitude or praise, while perlocutionary sarcasm highlighted the effect of eliciting laughter, solidarity, or ridicule among audiences.

Functionally, sarcasm was most often used as ridicule and attack, but it also operated as humor, solidarity, indirect criticism, and social criticism. These functions demonstrate that sarcasm does not merely entertain but actively contributes to shaping public discourse, challenging authority, and reinforcing group identity. In this way, sarcasm becomes a tool of political resistance that is both effective and creative in the digital space.

The findings underline the significance of sarcasm in contemporary political communication. Theoretically, this research confirms that pragmatic frameworks of sarcasm remain relevant in analyzing online interactions. Practically, it shows how ordinary citizens employ sarcasm to criticize leaders, express dissatisfaction, and build solidarity in the public sphere. Future research may expand the scope by comparing sarcasm across different social media platforms or political figures, thereby deepening our understanding of digital political discourse.

REFERENCE

- Azka, N., et al. (2022). Sarcasm and irony in Instagram comments. *Journal of Language and Media Studies*, 15(2), 45–60.
- Gibbs, R. W. (2000). Irony in talk among friends. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 15(1-2), 5–27.
- Ismawatia, R., et al. (2023). Sarcasm as political criticism on DPR RI Instagram. *Indonesian Journal of Pragmatics*, 9(1), 34–49.
- Lee, C. J., & Katz, A. N. (1998). The differential role of ridicule in sarcasm and irony. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 13(1), 1–15.
- Ott, B. L. (2017). The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of irony. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34(1), 59–68.
- Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in Digital Culture*. MIT Press.