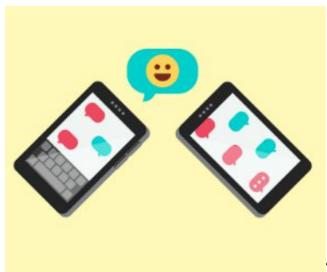# You're Joking: Detecting Sarcasm in Emails Isn't Easy

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 "Well, that meeting was a really fantastic use of my time."

You may want to think twice before hitting send on that email with a sarcastic joke – regardless of whether your boss or your work buddies are on the receiving end.

New research investigating how we determine the emotional content of text is showing that people have a very hard time catching on to sarcasm in emails and texts. This means that written communications aren't the best medium for making a well-meaning joke; people often interpret a friendly riff as being overtly negative, or they don't catch the sarcastic tone at all and assume a caustic jibe is actually praise.

Across three studies, Chatham University psychological scientists Monica Riordan and Lauren Trichtinger measured people's accuracy at gauging the emotional tone of emails sent by both friends and complete strangers. Their results: We're terrible at it – even when we're corresponding with our friends.

In one study, participants were assigned to write an email that would evoke one particular emotion, such as disappointment after trying a new restaurant or happiness about getting asked out on a date. Participants then sent these emails to both friends and strangers also enrolled in the study. Both friends and strangers rated the emails for the presence of eight basic emotions, and then sent their own response emails. Additionally, everyone rated how confident they felt in their ability to accurately identify the intended emotional tone of the email.

Although participants were highly confident in their interpretations, especially when communicating with a friend, this confidence had no relationship with accuracy.

"It is clear from this study that readers can determine that we are angry, but cannot determine HOW

angry," said Riordan. "The loss of this subtlety could lead to consequences in many forms– especially in our relationships, where the difference between annoyance and rage can be vast, and a simple misinterpretation of an intended emotion can lead to a drastic alteration in that emotion."

Research from a team led by Adam D. Galinsky (Northwestern University) finds that when people are in a position of power they're even worse at accurately predicting how others will interpret a sarcastic comment.

In one experiment, 42 college students read a scenario in which they went to a fancy restaurant recommended by a colleague's friend, but had a particularly bad dining experience. The next day, an email was sent to the friend who made the recommendation stating only, "About the restaurant, it was marvelous, just marvelous." Participants then used a 6-point scale to indicate how they thought the friend would interpret the comment, ranging from very sarcastic to very sincere.

Before reading the restaurant scenario, participants were randomly assigned to a high-power or a low-power condition. High-power participants were instructed to recall and write about a personal incident in which they had power over individuals. Participants assigned to the low-power condition were instructed to write about a personal incident in which someone else had power over them.

The results showed that those assigned to the high-power group were much more likely to assume, perhaps mistakenly, that the friend would think the email was clearly sarcastic.

"These findings support our prediction that power leads individuals to anchor too heavily on their own vantage point, insufficiently adjusting to other individuals' perspectives," Galinsky and colleagues write in *Psychological Science*.

If it's so easy to misinterpret a written message, what can people do to help make their intentions clear? University of Nottingham psychological scientists Dominic Thompson and Ruth Filik found that the use of an expressive smiley face emoticon (such as **:)** or **^.^**) can provide a helpful cue for when messages are meant sarcastically.

Participants were shown a list of short text message conversations and asked how they would make it clear that a response text was to be taken either literally or sarcastically.

You: So how was the interview?

Friend: I really can't tell…

You: Well, you didn't look confident

In this example, participants would be prompted to modify the wording of the final response in the exchange in such a way as to clearly communicate either sarcasm or a straightforward response. There was no specific mention of emoticons or images.

The results showed that people were "significantly more likely to use emoticons to aid understanding in sarcastic comments than literal ones." Emoticons were also more likely to occur in texts articulating

praise rather than criticism.

Specifically, Thompson and Filik found that the tongue out (**:p**) and wink (**;)**) emoticons were the most closely linked with marking sarcasm, and almost never appeared in any condition except for marking sarcasm.

"Importantly, this suggests emoticons may actually be more efficient than 'standard' language for marking sarcastic intent," Thompson and Filik conclude. "That is, the intention can be communicated more quickly via an emoticon than via additional words or phrases, in a way somewhat similar to nonverbal cues in speech."

References

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