Linguistic Analysis of Verbal Humour in Algerian Stand-up Comedy

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ABSTRACT

Being a universal trait of human language behaviour, verbal humour has ultimately been a recognized field of research in linguistics. Such subject of study infuses different forms of distraction such as stand-up comedy where laughter thrives. This response is considerably noticed in the shows of Abdelkader Secteur, an Algerian comedian. On the basis of such reaction, this paper aims to disclose the linguistic reasons behind the comedian's verbal humour which lead to laughter. The question that arises "what makes the stand-up comedian's discourse humorous?" suggests that the comedian uses a figurative language embodied in a chunk of opposite scripts which mark his performance. To check the proposed hypothesis, an empirical study is given based on a selection of the humorist's two performances derived from You Tube downloads given to a to an sample of thirty-two Algerian participants be watched then analyzed through the general theory of verbal humour (hereafter, GTVH).

1. Introduction

The innovative and artful use of language can be detected in human beings' aptitude to produce verbal humour. Being a universal trait of human language behaviour, verbal humour permeates into different social contexts. For instance, it pervades in many types of interaction and discourse, and insinuates a lot of forms of entertainments such stand-up comedy. This latter refers to a spontaneous performance held by a comedian in which s/he presents a humorous discourse in front of a live audience. Stand up comedy has become a popular form of entertainment all around the word during the last few decades. Thus, it intrigues large masses of viewers, and it becomes the fieldwork of study among scholars in different disciplines as well. Therefore, the main question has been put forward: can stand-up comedy be a locus of socio-linguistic investigation by giving credit to the analysis of the stand-up comedian's humoristic discourse?

On the basis of such premise, this current paper intends to provide a novel insight to the analysis of verbal humour of an Algerian stand-up comedian, who is considered as a new figure in the globe of Algerian stand-up comedy called Abdelkader Secteur. Thus, the subject of scrutiny will be emphasis on performance data of the humorist's language in use through which he triggers humour. To put it differently, the objective of the paper is to attempt an analysis of the orator-comedian's language in use which constructs his/her discourse to function humorously. Thus, to make the research reliable, the pertinent question "What makes the stand- up comedian's discourse funny and humorous?" provides the assumption which suggests that the comedian uses figurative language embodied in a chunk of opposite scripts which mark his performances. The proposed hypothesis leads to an authentic analysis of verbal humour by providing some preliminaries definitions of the main concepts, pursued by an empirical study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Humour

Although verbal humour is a prevalent feature in human's language behavior, it was often considered as unimportant, as Oring (2003: x) claims "humor is often considered to be trivial, and it seems that serious talk about humor is regarded as participating in that triviality". Yet, this perspective of humour has altered towards new viewpoints vis-à-vis its extensive presence in ones' lives. Hence, it has turned out to be a fertile subject of study to be probed from diverse disciplines. It gains many definitions due to the expansion of its terminology. Previously, it was correspondingly used as term comic (a hybrid medium of provoking laugh and amusement) to express only sympathy and benevolence as a response to the perception of incongruity; as declared by Ruch (1998:6) "Humour is simply one element of the comic [...] and basically denotes a smiling attitude toward life and its imperfections: an understanding of the incongruities of existence".

Actually, humour has been used as a cover term to designate a variety of nomenclatures such as joke, mockery, ridicule, satire, etc. It carries both positive and negative connotations. In this respect, Rush (1998:6) says that "Humour replaced the comic and was treated as a neutral term; i.e. not restricted to positive meanings". Generally, "the definition of what humour is, ultimately depends on the purpose for which it is used" (Attrado, 1994:4). Therefore, humour can be defined in terms of its effect and response. In other words, humour can

be inferred from its effect, i.e., intended (laugh) or unintended (no reaction), as Vandaele (2002:155) adds "humour is whatever has a humorous effect".

Indeed, the term humour receives various theories. The most conventional ones are:

1. **The superiority theory,** with hypothesis to reveal that laughter is generated by humiliating and laughing at the misfortunes of others to reflect ones' superiority. Plato, for instance conceives humour as "a kind of malice toward people that are considered relatively powerless"(as cited in Morreall, 1987:10).

2. **The incongruity theory** (Raskin, 1985), perceived as the most influential approach to humour, since it considers incongruity, ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance, and inappropriateness the causes which provoke laughter. Thus, humour is an intellectual or cognitive response to something that is unexpected, illogical or inappropriate.

These theories conceive humour from a sociological or a psychological perspective. Linguists too have been interested in humour and have attempted to construct a linguistic theory of humour by taking into account its verbalized form such as the GTVH (Raskin and Attardo, 1991): It is a semantic-base approach which encompasses six knowledge resources out of which five will be explained in the practical part.

2.2 Stand-up Comedy

It a comedic and theatrical genre described by Attardo (2001) as "a highly artificial, scripted genre" (P.162). It refers to, according to Sankey (1998), "a particular kind of performance, often given while standing on a stage in front of a microphone, during which a performer tells a scripted series of fictitious accounts in such a way as to suggest that they are unscripted, in an attempt to make audience laugh"(P.3). To put it another way, stand-up comedy is an impulsive show held by a comedian in which s/he presents a humorous discourse in front of a live audience. It has become a fashionable sort of entertainment all around the world during the last few decades since it intrigues large crowd of spectators. It also transcends such level as it turns out to be the fieldwork of research among scholars in different disciplines with divergent purposes.

2.3 Figurative Language Used in Stan-up Comedy

It has been noticed that figurative language constitutes the vehicle of comedic performances through which comedians express their aggressive or benevolent intentions in an implicit way. It could be:

2.3.1 Hyperbole

It implies an exaggeration in saying something. It is defined by Cuddon (1977:310) as "a figure of speech which contains an exaggeration for emphasis".

2.3.2 Puns

It is a form of wordplay (verbal wit based on meanings and ambiguities of words) which refers to use of words that sounds alike but possess different or double meaning (literal and metaphorical sense), for humorous or rhetorical effect. It involves an intentional use or an abuse of homographs (words with similar spellings but different meanings) or homophones (words with identical pronunciation but with different meanings).

2.3.3 Allusion

It is another figure of speech which refers to a situation, a place, a person, etc without straightly saying it. In this respect, Freud (1905/1960:89) demonstrates that allusion means "something is suggested that is not said straight out".

3. Methodology

The most suitable method to process an empirical study is to harvest authentic data. It derives from the downloaded videos of the humorist's sketches in live stand-up comedy. Although the humorist's sketches are available in the commercially produced digital video discs (DVD), the comedian's shows were extracted from YouTube's recordings using Real Player software, which contains a cutting tool that helps trim the video. It also captures the humorist's verbatim to be transcribed and studied qualitatively. The video jokes considered as the quintessence data were taken from his solo performances dating recently, i.e., 2011-2012- 2013, and ranging from one to five minutes. They were shown to watch by a sample of participants who played the role of the comedian's audience. Their response were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively, through extensive use of ears and eyes, i.e., observation.

3.1 Sampling Presentation

As the comedian performs his show in front of his audience, he has the potential to index its multiple reactions, such as laughter. Therefore, the audience response plays a significant role in the ongoing show, and such response should not be missed within the analytical study of any stand-up comedy. But as attending live shows is impossible for some personal reasons, another way is done to highlight their significance. Therefore, in this study, the selected excerpts were given to a sample of thirty- two participants to watch and then interpret for the apparent aims to observe the punch line of the joke which provides an incongruous ending leading to participants' laughter by means of observation.

The participants who took part in this study were family members and friends of the researcher from Tlemcen. They possessed mutual background knowledge of the norms and expectations concerning the use of language in the humorist's discourse. Their auxiliary partake is demonstrated in the subsequent charts:

Joke: 1

Figure: 1 Participants' laughter for video joke 1
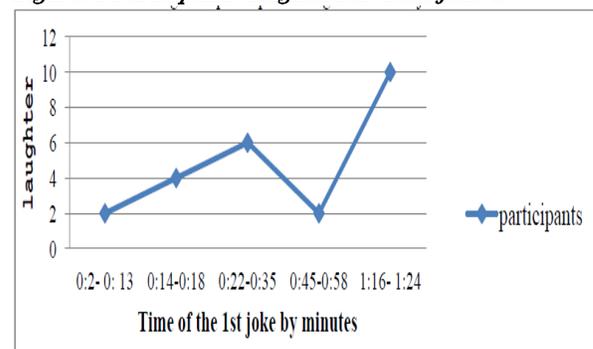
When switching-on the video media player to this first joke to the participants, their smiles come into view, maybe because the comedian per se is the subject of humour, already known by the partakers. Indeed, their inevitable reaction when watching the joke was laughter, which largely emanated at the end of it (merely from 1:16 to 1:24 min).

Joke: 2

Figure: 2 Participants' laughter for video joke 2
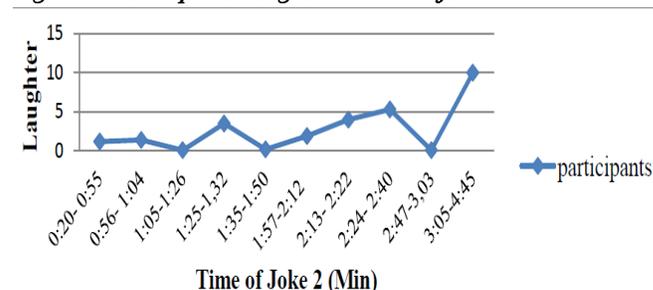
In the same vein, almost all the samples were more attracted by the end of the joke (3:05-4:45 Min) due to the fact that their guffaws was highly perceived at this moment.
Besides, at the middle of the joke (2:24-2:40) participants' laughter was noticeable maybe because this transition is warm up of a new idea.

4. Linguistic Analysis of Data, Findings and Discussion

4.1 Analysis of the Data and Findings

It can be inferred from the above findings that laughter is generally stimulated at the end of the jokes, but there should be an explanation about this fact. Is it due to the reason that some participants were grouped when giving them the selected video-jokes? This question is asked because grouping the participants makes them more attracted by the joke, and thus, their response is generally alike (laughter); but if it is so, why did the other participants who were given the jokes apart react in the same way? Therefore, it can be deduced that although the grouping of the audience plays a role in the generation of this noticeable humorous reaction, it is not merely responsible, and thus, there are other factors more significant to elucidate such response. As Goodwin (1986) observes that "an audience is shaped by the talk it is attending" (P. 311). So participants' reaction is tightly linked with the stand-up comedian's verbal performance, which is itself humorous in its kind. Such verbal production is a linguistic construct before all. It requires a linguistic scrutiny to explain why it is humorous and funny. The GTVH could be a good theory to explicate the selected jokes from a linguistic and discourse analysis perspectives and "intends to incorporate aspects of conventional approaches as well" (Walte, 2007:20) as will be explained in the following section of interpretations of results.

4.2 Interpretation of Findings

The above findings are predictable given that the hubs of the jokes are their incongruous perception between two ideas, for instance:

➢ The first joke's main ideas were: (1) when a docker awakes his colleagues that the boat's workers are Americans and thus, they should ask them (throw the rope) in English, and (2) when this docker starts talking with Americans in English and finished by asking in AA.

➢ The second joke is contingent with these two ideas which stem from (1). The comedian's description of the educated woman whose voice is recorded in the onboard computer of the car made by the French, especially when saying (let me listen to their education) and (2) his description of recorded speech of bearded man in the onboard computer of a car made by Maghrebans.

This concept of incongruity can be better understood with the GTVH, a theory which attempts to bring a linear analysis of the joke, in terms of capturing its different phases of development and delivery. Yet, it shouldn't be missed that the comedian's jokes are primarily textualized before being articulated verbally. Hence, a linguistic analysis is to be anticipated especially because the notion of incongruity is conceptually semantic. Therefore, in the above jokes, the two aforementioned ideas are considered as the two opposite scripts bearing text. The first script is the set up which precedes the opposite script: it is the beginning of the joke. This set up is easy to get to and matches well with the experience and knowledge of the hearer, thanks to his/her background knowledge. It is not funny because it is obvious and apparent in interpretation, although some smiles were perceived, due to extra-linguistic features such as the way the comedian reports the joke using gestures, facial expressions and intonation. The 'script–switch' is a continuing narration of the first script that causes the passing from the first script until the influx of the punch line provoking incongruous outcome leading to laughter. In this respect, Semino (1997) argues that "jokes commonly achieve their effect, by leading interpreters to achieve a particular script and then, forcing them to

switch to another, often leading to absurdity" (P.137. Such process involves, at the first stance, adequate discern of scripts which derive either lexically, sententially, or inferentially, as a by-product of common-sense reasoning, thanks to individuals' background knowledge; then, a shift to an opposite script, which possesses an incongruity. For a better elucidation of the script-opposition which leads to incongruity, the table below can evoke the set of ostensibly opposed scripts bearing text in each joke:

Table: 1 Scripts Opposition in Each Joke

Category	The first script	The second script		
Jokes	The set up	The script-switch	The punch line	The supposed ending
1	When the American boat reaches the shore and the dockers didn't know which language they should speak with the sailors.	The second script refers to the docker's speech with the Americans.	The docker greets the American sailor in English.	It is the failure of the docker when saying 'through the cord'.
2	When the comedian describes his arrival to France and the car he was in.	the comedian's imagination of Algerians or Morrocans making a car with an onboard computer.	the bearded man frustrating way of speaking and behaving.	The satisfying and enjoyable behaviour and orders of the bearded man.

This table demonstrates that the above jokes are funny because their intrinsic texts are compatible with two or more opposite scripts. Such criteria correspond perfectly with the conditions of the semantic script-opposition. Yet, it should be pointed out that the above scripts are basically semantic grasped from the lexical handle or the chunk of lexemes of the text to be internalized within the cognitive structure of hearers. For instance, in the first joke, the lexical items '*port*, bobor, *dockers, costa*, lahbel' denote the conceptual meaning of an American ship reaching the port. But such meaning is insufficient if the interpretation relies only on the literal meaning of words, because genuine interpretation of jokes depends also on the communicative intention of the stand-up comedian. Hence, the understanding of the joke arises from a nuanced spectrum of semantic and pragmatic concerns. In this vein, the stream of GTVH proceeds by tackling the remaining four knowledge recourses which are the target, the situation, the narrative strategy and the language.

The Target: It is a modular element of the GTVH which considers the butt of the joke, including the persons, communities, groups or individuals with humorous stereotypes attached to them. Such fact takes into consideration the aggressive side of humour as done in the conventional superiority theory. In the first joke, the targets of jokes are the dockers, while in the second joke, Algerians or Moroccans- bearded are the subjects of laughter.

The situation: It refers to the people, objects, activities involved in the joke, as will be illustrated in the selected humorous excerpts:

Table: 2 The knowledge resource situation in each joke

Jokes	People Involved	Objects	Activities
1	Dockers and the American sailor	The boat, The cord,	The joke is about throwing the rope.
2	The comedian, unknown character who drives him from the airport, the	Car with its board computer, door, radio,	The joke is about making a car with an onboard computed in which the voice

bearded man and audience.	seat belt.	of the bearded man is recorded.

The Narrative Strategy: It refers to the genre of the joke, for example, all the jokes are narrative in origin, but a deep inspection reveals that there are instances of conversation held between the comedian and some unknown character as occurs in the second joke. The first joke includes a mini-dialogue done by the characters of the story.

The language: It is undeniably recognized that the stand-up comedian's humorous discourse is fundamentally a communicative event in which language plays a prominent role, although gestures and other theatrical devices like movements and miming amply contribute to his performances. Yet, the message transformed in such performance is not just a concatenation of clauses; it forms a unified and coherent whole via the use of cohesive devices in order to allow the hearers to construct a coherent mental representation of scripts on the basis of their background knowledge, social interaction, context, setting, etc. On the basis of this view, the GTVH has promoted this modular knowledge recourse (Language) for a descriptive analysis of all the pertinent information of the verbalization of the jokes to easily specify the peculiarities of text at the cohesive level as has been illustrated, though not in an exhaustive manner.

It is extensively noticed that the humorist often makes use of reference devices in his humoristic discourse, in which he refers to a person, an object or a thing without directly mentioning it for abbreviation and to avoid repetitions. These references are marked through the use of linked pronouns like / hum, ha, t/ (them, her, me) when saying for instance / lmekhyer fi**hum/** (the best of them) in the first joke to refer to the dockers by this pronoun, or /tlat, rkab**t**, tlagi**t**/ (I went, I set in, I

met) as instantiated in the second joke, where the humorist speaks about himself.

The comedian also uses separate pronouns as /ntuma,ana,huwa,hna/ (you, me, him, we) which occur in his humoristic discourse to avoid repetition of the same nouns as in /**nta** tsog/ (**you** drive) to denote the addressed hearer in the second joke, /**ana** Kader?/ (**me**, kader?) to refer to himself in the second joke , or /**hna** ndiro *loto*/ (**we** make a car) to refer to Algerians and Moroccans. Moreover, demonstrative pronouns are also applied in his discourse like /hada, hadi, hadouk/ (this, that, those) as in /**haduk** *les dockers*/ (**those** dockers) that occurs in the first joke, or / **hadi** l'ordinateur de bord/ (**this** is the on board computer).

Another ostensible cohesive tie, which has the connotation of relating adjacent discourse segments, is conjunctions. This latter is amply used by the humorist and by any speaker in a communicative event. It refers to words such as 'and', 'however', 'finally' and 'in conclusion' that join phrases, clauses or sections of a text in such a way that they express the 'logical-semantic' relationship between them" (Paltridge, 2006: 139). Thus, the selected jokes possess masses of conjunctions ranging from coordinate like but, additive such as 'and or 'also', to subordinate conjunctions, like because, until, etc. In addition to the use of above cohesive connectors which are basically grammatical-driven, the comedian attains his compact text through extra cohesive devices like lexical cohesion. This latter is "resulting from the selective use of vocabulary" (Donnelly, 1994:97) by inferring to the same item by other wording in order to avoid redundancy. This task is achieved either by the accretion of synonyms, generalization or bringing

lexical items belonging to the same semantic areas, for example:

In the first joke, the dockers called the American man by /bnadam/ (Adam's son), a term which is usually used when calling an unknown person, whereas the supposedly intellectual docker calls him using "sir". In this case, the two lexical items fall squarely within the category of 'human being' hyponym. It is also noticed that in this joke, the humorist refers to the dockers using the term /msaken/ (poor), a homonym with two meanings: either to show their financial poverty (literal meaning) or their deficient linguistic knowledge (metaphorical meaning), and thus it can be considered as a pun for its humorous effect.

In the second joke, the humorist also uses a hyponym when addressing the audience using /khuti/ (siblings), or when using the terms 'radio' and 'poste' to refer to electronic device designated to receive electric-radio waves. But for the sake of exaggeration (hyperbole), the comedian reports the bearded man's speech in which he refers to the driver by the insult word/tnah/ (imbecile). Furthermore, it is largely perceived that the comedian makes use of some discourse markers as noticed in the second joke, in which he employs swearing expressions like /uqsim billah, wallah/ when addressing his audience to have a humorous effect through the use of hyperbole, as stated / lgani fel *You Tube*-uqsim billah/ (he found me in You Tube- I swear), or /wəllah ja khuti/ (I swear my brothers). Such swearing words as also included as part of the characters' speech as spotted in the second joke, in which the old men says / wallah naref elli dmarni matefra/ (I swear if I knew who pushes me, I would come into blows with him) to insist on the

gravity of the situation. Another discourse marker is perceived in the second joke which is /nchallah/ to have a humorous effect on the audience. Such markers are parcel of the comedian's religious status and his socio-cultural milieu.

An extra feature, characterising the verbalization of the stand-up comedian's humoristic discourse, is the use of repetition. Although the jokes are originally textual and scripted, they are transmitted orally by the humorist, and repetition is a common feature of any spoken discourse. For example, in the second joke, the humorist repeated the term /mziya/ (fortunately) twice.

5. Conclusion

After analyzing the comedian's verbal humour from a linguistic perspective, the answer of the principle question of this paper has been fairly identified. In effect, the scrutiny, carried out in this practical part lead to the corollary that the stand-up comedian's discourse is funny because the crux of his jokes is their incongruous perception between two ideas (scripts). This incongruity is conceptually semantics; it involves basically adequate discern of scripts which derive from the literal and conceptual meaning of words. Such semantic inference is, in fact, deficient, if a deep pragmatic scrutiny is missed. Therefore, further analysis is required which should take into consideration speech act theory in order to deduce what the comedian does with his words. In addition to this, hearers will use other cues in order to successfully infer the target message. This is by dint of their cultural sensitive character, by-product of common-sense reasoning and background knowledge.

on the Basis of US Sitcoms 'Friends'. Universitate Hanover: Gring Publisher.

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