

Chapter 12

Stand-Up Comedy and Addressivity: The Example of Joan Rivers

Akin Adetunji

Emmanuel Alayande College of Education, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This chapter highlights the linguistic value of addressivity in two Youtube downloads of Joan Rivers' stand-up comic performance, Live at the Apollo. Despite the devotion of the six articles of Comedy Studies 2(2) to analyses of the data, very little was said about the linguistic content and identity of the performance. Despite the givenness of a performer's deployment of linguistic resources in any kind of stage performance, the salience of some of the stand-up comedy-specific linguistic forms—repetition, disfluencies, formulaicity, paralanguage, timing, parenthetical expressions, figurative language, direct audience address—is foregrounded in Rivers' performance. These forms are located within and interpreted with Bakhtin's notion of 'addressivity'. It is argued that her elaborate audience interaction and thematic preoccupation with social, biographical and autobiographical issues are one macro act of addressivity, foregrounding the complex intersection of speaker (comedian), listener (present audience) and third person/superaddressee (non-present audience/previous discourses).

INTRODUCTION

Although stand-up comedy has been subjected to a limited amount of academic research, especially when compared with other performance oral genres, its linguistics has been worse off. Coming from a linguistic pragmatic perspective, this study is focused on Joan Rivers' significant deployment of linguistic features in her stand-up comic performance, with the intention of revealing how these engender and foreground comedian-audience interaction in the co-production of humour. It is argued that Rivers' act belongs in Bakhtin's notion of 'addressivity' (an utterance is always addressed to someone and anticipates a response), a framing which confirms her comic style as dialogic and conversational (see Blackburn, 2013).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0338-5.ch012

Stand-up comedy is conventionally conceptualised as an encounter between a single performer who stands in front of an audience and behaves comically and/or talks to them intentionally to amuse them or make them laugh (Double, 2014: 19; Mintz 1985: 71). But, more recently, attention has shifted to its major features. These, as outlined by Double (2014: pp. 19-20), include funniness, personality (at least a person in front of an audience), direct communication (between performer and audience) and present tense (live performance). Traditionally, stand-up comedy is realised as routines of canned jokes, which the comedian prefaces (or explicitly announces), rehearses (hears or creates before telling), and decontextualises (detaches from the context of the joke telling) (Attardo, 2001: 62). However, modern enactments have shown this type of comedy to be less structurally predictable, more dialogic, creative, contextual, spontaneous and dwelling on improvised material (Furukawa 2011; Gilbert 2004; Limon, 2000; Schwarz, 2010). As a type of performance, stand-up comedy subsists on certain conventions and presuppositions. These include, but are not limited to, solo performance, comic content, direct address, spontaneity in comedian-audience interaction, comedian's proximity to audience, audience's expectation of to be amused and shocked, and audience's constant feedback (smile, nod, laughter, heckling, silence, clap) (Double, 2014; Furukawa, 2011; Gilbert, 2004; Peacock, 2011; Rutter, 1997; Yus, 2002).

Of these, comic content and audience feedback are probably the most salient. Linking both features as the major determinants of the success of a stand-up comic performance, Limon (2000) posits three theorems (which deictically locate 'you' as a second-person plural, the audience) as generic constituents of stand-up comedy: '[1] If you think something is funny, it is. [2] A joke is funny if and only if you laugh at it. [3] Your laughter is the single end of stand up' (pp. 11-12). Expatiating on Limon's postulations, the first theorem claims that the funniness of a joke is determined not by individual assessments but through the reaction of the majority of the audience, the second theorem holds that a joke can only be regarded as funny when and if the audience reacts to it with laughter, and the third theorem, that audience's laughter minimally marks the end of a joke. Apart from foregrounding the value of the audience in stand-up comedy, two of the theorems specify the salience of laughter. And as noted by Rutter (1997), laughter is quintessential to comedian-audience interaction, not as a response to a humorous stimulus, but rather as interactive and ordered. The audience (and its reaction) as such, crucially defines stand-up comedy, since it has to 'cooperate' with the comedian to make a joke funny. So, following Limon (2000), comedians and their audiences are hardly distinguishable, since it is the audience that makes a joke one. In sum, stand-up comedy greatly affords both comedian and audience the opportunity to respond to and engage each other in the mood and energy of performance in real time. One of the stand-up comedians who has (or had) a global reputation for deep-seated audience engagement is Joan Rivers.

Joan Rivers (real name, Joan Alexandra Molinsky) (1933-2014) was a famous American stand-up comedian, actress, writer, producer, and television host whose popularity and comedic persona are often traced to her 1965 guest role in the American talk show, *The Tonight Show*. Although she earned global recognition for her identity as an outstanding stand-up comedian during a career which spanned about fifty years, it was her book, *Diary of a Mad Diva* (2014) that earned her a posthumous Grammy Award in 2015. Rivers' comedy has been interpreted, variously, as being too personal, too gossipy, biographical (Blackburn, 2013) and autobiographical (Gray, 1994). As well she has been read as sometimes blurring the boundaries between the serious and the not-serious, for instance by making serious historical incidents, such as the Holocaust and the Gaza conflict, part of her comic material (Khan, 2014). Being a female comedian in an (originally) androcentric comic world, she bridged the gap between self deprecatory jokesters and the liberated women comics (Zoglin 2008), displaying a bit of the traits of both types of comedians, such that she was classified both as a 'whiner' and a 'bitch' (Gilbert 2004). Rivers'

19 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/stand-up-comedy-and-addressivity/156886

Related Content

E-Mentoring: An Extended Practice, an Emerging Discipline

Angélica Rísquez (2008). *Handbook of Research on Computer Mediated Communication* (pp. 656-677).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/mentoring-extended-practice-emerging-discipline/19778

Usage-Based Theory of Language and Usage-Based Instruction

Serafima Gettys (2016). *International Journal of Information Communication Technologies and Human Development* (pp. 1-15).

www.irma-international.org/article/usage-based-theory-of-language-and-usage-based-instruction/157375

Virtual Collaboration in Immersive and Non-Immersive Virtual Environments

Rosanna M. Guadagno and Katrin E. Allmendinger (2008). *Handbook of Research on Computer Mediated Communication* (pp. 401-410).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/virtual-collaboration-immersive-non-immersive/19761

Open Business Intelligence for Better Decision-Making

Jorge Bernardino (2013). *International Journal of Information Communication Technologies and Human Development* (pp. 20-36).

www.irma-international.org/article/open-business-intelligence-better-decision/77865

Facebook Photographic Images: Political Tools of Self-Presentation during the 2014 European Parliament Elections in Romania

Camelia Cmeci (2016). *(R)evolutionizing Political Communication through Social Media* (pp. 229-252).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/facebook-photographic-images/145988