

# Two Immigrant Humor Styles of Stand-up Comedy

## A Linguistic Perspective

Chunqi Li

Hebei Vocational College of Foreign Languages  
Qinhuangdao, China

**Abstract**—Two immigrant humor styles of stand-up comedy: word-play and performing are discussed in this study with reference to related linguistic theories. By a comparative analysis of two immigrant comedians' stand-ups, we conclude that figurative language is a distinctive feature in Joe's jokes to make people laugh and the paralinguistic features are preferred by Russell. According to the global popularity of the two comedians, we tentatively conclude that a stand-up with active vocal and physical strategies is more easily identified with by audience of diversified social backgrounds, and can often get immediate feedback. Whereas, although a word-play style often leaves with deeper impression and makes one laugh longer, it's hard to be taken in by all people with different cultural backgrounds.

**Keywords**—Immigrant humor style; Stand-up Comedy; Rhetorical Device; paralinguistic features

### I. INTRODUCTION

Stand-up comedy is a strange and precarious line of work, and in order to make it successful a comedian must routinely win attention, approval and laughter of a large assembly of people (McIlvenny, 1992). More often than not, the criterion for judging a successful performance is that the comedian can elicit a steady stream of laughter throughout his talk. Stand-up comedy is a performance of canned-joke cluster rather than an improvisational or impromptu act. According to Rutter (1997), stand-up comedians try to group canned jokes thematically with transition markers and adapt them to their own biographic information in order to achieve the cohesive links throughout the show. Greenbaum (1999) points that stand-up comedians must be prepared to adapt their discourse to the needs of the audience in a dialogic style. Although people like humor and jokes, only a few (Jin & Wang, 2012) have focused their study on the discourse analysis of any specific stand-up comedy. This study is an attempt to explore the ways of humor generation in two immigrant comedians' stand-ups through a comparative analysis.

### II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In a rhetorically presented stand-up comedy, rhetorical devices are represented at all levels of language: phonological, lexical, syntactic and textual. Any intentional deviation from literal statement or common usage that emphasizes, clarifies, or embellishes both written and spoken language is defined as figure of speech or trope. Generally, figures of speech consist five major categories: (1) figures of resemblance or relationship (e.g., simile, metaphor, personification, metonymy, etc.); (2) figures of

emphasis or understatement (e.g., hyperbole, rhetorical question, climax, irony, etc.); (3) figures of sound (e.g., alliteration, repetition, onomatopoeia, etc.); (4) verbal games and gymnastics (e.g., pun and anagram); and (5) errors (e.g., malapropism, spoonerism etc.). The five major categories will usually imply and reflect more than five underlying intentions of a speaker.

A better communication is also characteristic of some extra-linguistic skills in addition to verbal expressions. Paralinguistics is the study about how a speaker delivers his intentions with non-verbal device, which includes voice dynamics, facial expressions and gestures etc. Paralanguage is the non-verbal elements of communication that are used to modify meaning and convey emotions. Sometimes the definition is restricted to vocally-produced sounds, but the broad sense of paralanguage includes body language. The paralinguistic properties play an important role in human speech communication. As pointed out by Davies & Widdowson: "The principal purpose of the paralinguistic elements in speaking is to express the speaker's attitude either to what he is saying or to whom he is saying it: their function is essentially a modal one". (Longe, 1999) Paralinguistic features can assist language users to better perform the basic functions of verbal communication.

Although a person is not conscious of using exactly which of the communicative skills in a daily communication, he must be able to observe the distinctive style of a speech show. A popular comedian of a stand-up must be known as one with distinctive features or specialties for stand-up audience. So, rhetorical devices and paralinguistic languages will both account for the generation of humor.

### III. A RHETORICAL VIEW OF JOE WONG'S HUMOR

Joe Wong, a Chinese American comedian, is adept at using many rhetorical figures in his stand-up show. He has attracted a wide attention after his appearance on a TV program Late Show with David Letterman. Joe Wong's most frequently used figures include pun, irony, hyperbole, anticlimax etc.. which are often used to convey underlying ironies, emphases or even japes. Rhetorical figures with example jokes are extracted from Joe's famous show at Radio and Television Correspondents' Association Dinner (RTCAD).

#### A. Pun

Example 1:

(a) Good evening, everyone. My name is Joe Wong. But to

most people, I'm known as "who" (Hu)? [Pause] (b) Hu is actually my mother's maiden name and the answer to my credit card security question. (c) But joking aside, I just want to reassure everybody that I am invited here tonight. [Laughter] (d) I grew up in China. Who wouldn't? [Laughter]

In terms of phonetic, lexical and syntactic aspects, this example displays a homophonic pun and a homographic pun. Norrick (2003) refers to punning as a type of word play which may function either to amuse or to verbally attack." In these two examples, Joe intends reach the goal of musing. Example 1 is the opening remark of Joe's talk, in which the interrogative "who" reveals audience's doubt about Joe's identity. Joe uses this interrogative structure to mock himself for being a new comer that is probably unknown to most of the audience. But the audience may never come up with his punch line to the question "Who is he?". Inspired by the sound, Joe solves their doubts with a homophone "Hu" which, according to him, happens to be "my mother's maiden name and the answer to my credit card security question". It is not necessarily real in such a joking environment. It's simply obvious that the comedian wants to convey a humorous intention and deliver a message of his identity that he is from somewhere in Asia. His use of pun not only amplifies the humorous effect but also makes an indelible impression.

### B. Hyperbole

The language of hyperbole amplifies reality by carrying us beyond the boundaries of rational thought. Sentence 1(d) in the above extract is an untypical way of creating a hyperbolic effect by means of rhetorical question.

1(d) "I grew up in China. Who wouldn't?" [Laughter]

Joe uses a rhetorical question at the end to reveal two messages in this remark, i.e., China is the place where he was born and grew up, and China is known as an overpopulated country with people all over the world. This sentence is clearly a mock for the large population of China. Meanwhile, this is also a commonly used sentence pattern in some Americans', esp. the rednecks' daily conversations, which Joe borrows to satirize their self-conceitedness. This joke arouses hearers' awareness in the interpretation of the speaker's underlying meaning. We'll consider the following example for another demonstration. See example 2:

So, I, to be honest, was really honored to be here tonight, and I have prepared for months eh, for tonight show, and I showed the White House my jokes about President Obama, and that is why he decided not to come. And he decided to talk about immigration reforms. [Laughter]

Hyperboles in this utterance are expressed to satirize President Obama, who, according to Joe, decided not to come and is about to consider immigration reforms just because an immigrant puts him as the butt of jokes. To the hearers, it is incredible that President Obama will take such actions only for reason of this. The figurative use of hyperboles creates a humorous effect by directing a satirical implication at a person who is in a superior social status. And satirical significance is embodied in the hyperbolic style of language. By using the hyperboles, the joke becomes indirect and less aggressive in attacking the target.

### C. Sarcasm and irony

Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989) argued that sarcasm and irony are similar in that both are forms of reminder; yet different in that sarcasm conveys ridicule of a specific victim whereas irony does not. See examples:

3. (a) I'm honored to eh.. meet vice president Joe Biden here tonight. (b) Erm, I actually read autobiography of you, and today I see you. (c) I think the book is much better. (Laughter)[Applause]

4. I used to be really scared about marriage.....I was like, wow, 50% percent of all marriages end up lasting forever! [Laughter]

The target of joke 3 is the U.S. vice president, who is actually authoritative and at a superior social status over the speaker. This is a typical sarcastic joke which holds a clear victim and attacking point. Mr. Biden, who comes to be the center of the joke, is implied not to be as good-looking as what has been shown in his autobiography. Sarcasm is often taken as a common and incisive device for amusing people in comedic situations, because the subjects will know that the joke is harmless and they tend to accept it gladly.

The example of joke 4 is an ironic one. It does not take anyone at the center of attack, but depend in part on the strength of the contextual cues to infer the speaker's intent on the high divorce rate in the U.S.. Fifty percent is actually a low rate for those marriages lasting forever, but Joe speaks just the opposite to satirize the instability of the American marriages.

### D. Anticlimax

Example 5:

(a) America is number one! [Laughter] (b) That's true! (c) 'Cause we won the World Series every year! [Laughter]

In example 5, Joe makes a statement first and explains later. He states that "The United States is number one", and the reason is that the U.S. baseball game wins over Canada every year, which seems to be insufficient and ridiculous. With this overstatement, he enlarges the distance between people's expectation and his explanation. Anticlimax is a way of using a sudden often funny change from something very beautiful, noble, serious, exciting, etc., to something very ordinary, foolish, unimportant or uninteresting, especially in a speech or a piece of formal writing.

### E. Other rhetoric

Examples:

6. But now we have a president who is half black half white. That just gives me a lot of hope, because I am half not black half not white. [Laughter] Two negatives make a positive.

7. Because I had always been a morose and pessimistic guy. I feel that life is a kind of like pee into the snow in a dark winter night.[laughter] You probably made a difference, but it's really hard to tell. [Laughter]

8. And I have a quick solution for global warming. I will switch from Fahrenheit to Celsius. It was 100 degrees, now it's 40! [Laughter] You are very welcome! [Laughter]

In this stand-up, Joe also uses other rhetorical tactics such as

malapropism, fallacy, apostrophe, simile and some of them will be discussed here. In example 6, malapropism is embodied when Joe describes himself as "half not black and half not white" which is deduced from the description of president Obama who is "half black and half white". He uses this deliberate verbal error to make an analogy so as to get the comic effect.

And Simile is used in example 7 by Joe to compare "life" to "pee into the snow in the dark winter night" which (the feeling) is hard to tell. This analogy is very interesting and unexpected to the live audience. In example joke 8, Joe asserts to solve the global warming problem by switching from Fahrenheit to Celsius, which sounds quite funny and unbelievable. Although there is no grammatical fault literally, the implicit meaning and effect are fallacious.

This show at RTCAD is a representative of Joe's joke style. We make a calculation for the 15-minute show, during which he got altogether 76 laughter and applause. Among all the laughter and applause, a majority of them are for his tactical use of language in telling jokes. And a small proportion is for his funny tones or facial expressions. This speech gets him recognition from the U.S. authorities and media people, which seems very incredible for an immigrant.

#### IV. A PARALINGUISTIC VIEW OF RUSSELL PETER'S HUMOR

As an Indo-Canadian comedian, Russell Peters has already spread his popularity to many countries. He is adept at impersonating different accents of people to highlight racial, ethnic, class and cultural stereotypes. Compared with Joe, Russell's vocal dynamics, facial expressions and body movements are much richer. Some typical episodes in the popular show *Beating Your Kids* are selected to illustrate his proficient use of paralinguistic skills in helping deliver humor.

##### A (a) White kid

"Kids now are growing up in a multi-cultural society. You know, you will have white kids growing up with black kids, brown kids, and Asian kids. You know what I mean. They are going to talk about the ass whop they got last night. Do you want that little white kid to feel left out? They will be sitting around, 'hey, my dad beat my ass.' 'My dad beat my ass too.' [Imitating the kids' voices]

The white kid is like 'I got sent to my room!' [an upset look]

We all go like 'What? You've got a room?' "[a rising pitch] [a theatrical expression with eyes and mouth widely open]

##### (b) Chinese father

"Hey, chop this bone! Come here, it says you got an F in school?" [A very angry voice and serious look] [Postures for Chinese Kongfu to terrify his kid]

'Oh..., no, sorry Dad.' "[With postures and sound to seem to be so terrified]

##### (c) Russell's father

"My dad's theory was 'If I get rid of one (son), I will just make another one. And I will tell the new one what an idiot the last one was.'" [Strong Indian accent and funny facial expression]

The following is a joke told by Russell about how he got a good

beat by his father after he copied the way Ryan did. Ryan is a white boy who has never got beaten by his parents.

(a) "When I was going to his house, his mom goes like:

'Ryan, go clean your room.' [Gentle woman's voice] [Gestures to show gentleness]

Ryan: 'Fuck you, bitch!' [A high pitch with an angry and furious stare]

Mom: 'what am I going to do with him?' [Gentle smile and posture]

Russell: 'You can not talk to your mom like that.' [Puzzled expression]

Ryan: 'Yes, I can. She is a jackass.' [Affirmative tone]

Russell: 'Don't say that, man. She'll hit you.'

Ryan: 'No, she won't. She is not allowed to.' [Affirmative tone]

...

Ryan: 'When next time they try it, you tell them to fuck off.' [A determined voice]

So I went home [pause], for the last time!"

(b) "...My dad goes like:

'Russell, come and do the dishes.' [Indian accent]

Russell: 'Fuck you, dad.' [Pretending to be serious, then a complacent titter and gesture]

Dad: 'What the hell did you say to me? [Frowning] Do I look like Ryan's mom? [Disdainful expression] Somebody's gonna get a hurt real bad!' [Threatening voice and posture]

That was my dad's threat right before he beat me every single time. I hate that crap, you know why? Because he always said 'somebody', he never told you it was you. I mean you knew it was you, but he gave you this hope..." [Funny tone of voice] [Stress on the bold words]

From the above episodes, we can see that Russell entertains his audience with a string of jokes and theatrical body languages. In episodes 1 and 2, Russell tells several father-kid jokes in a conversational pattern, in which Russell enlarges the comic effects by employing vocal and physical imitations. Joke (a) is an interesting one, all because of Russell's imitation in voice and gesture of Ryan's mom and the angry tone of Ryan. Even more interesting is joke (b), in which Russell impersonates his father's strong Indian accent and horrible expression, which are shown to the hearers his father's hot temper and Russell's fear. But to people's surprise, he dares to revolt against his father with curse. Then comes the punch-line — his father is not afraid of it at all and puts out his complacency by threatening to give him "a hurt real bad" which to him is a nightmare every single time. So far, his father burst his bubble of hope and confidence that Ryan has helped to build up. Russell makes a good use of narrative strategy in his stand-up which enables him to make the stand-up amusing because of his relevant and exaggerated body languages. We extract about 8-minute episodes from Russell's stand-up and find that Russell gets up to 47 rounds of applause from his audience among which 36 are for his amusing acts and vivid caricatures.

## V. CONCLUSION

Although the two prominent stand-up comedians have similarities in making people laugh, it is easy to find by comparing the different skills they use in telling jokes. We can get a general conclusion from the analysis that Joe is more adept at using rhetorical devices to generate humor while Russell works better at paralinguistic features to assist his jokes. Rhetorical verbal humor can often leave people with deeper impression and make people think further, but it requires the comedian's ability of providing a co-contextual background for the audience. Physical strategy can be easily and universally understood by the public, but it requires the comedian to make constant physical efforts.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. A. Greenbaum, Stand-up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument: An Investigation of Comic Culture, *Humor* (1999), 12: 33–46.
- [2]. S.X. Jin, B. Wang. A Relevance Theoretic-based Approach to Verbal Humor in Joe Wong's Talk Show. *International Journal of English Linguistics* (2012), 44-48.
- [3]. R.J.Kreuz, and S. Glucksberg "How to be sarcastic: the echoic reminder theory of verbal irony." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (1989), 118: 374-386.
- [4]. V.U. Longe. The linguistic realization of paralinguistic Features in administrative language. *Studies in the Linguistic Sciences*. (1999) 29(1): 113-129
- [5]. P. McIlvenny, S. Mettovaara, R. Tapio, I Really Wanna Make You Laugh: Stand-Up Comedy and Audience Response, *Linguistica: Proceedings of the Annual Finnish Linguistics Symposium*, May 1992. Tampere University Finnish and General Linguistics Department Publications 16. (1992),
- [6]. N. R. Norrick, Issues in conversational joking. *Journal of Pragmatics* (2003),35: 1333-1359.
- [7]. Russell Peters' talk show: Beating Your Kid. [http:// www. v.youku.com](http://www.v.youku.com).
- [8]. J. Rutter, Stand-up as Interaction: Performance and Audience in Comedy Venues, Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements of Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Salford (1997).
- [9]. Joe Wong's talk show: at the annual dinner hosted by the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association. [http:// www. v.youku. com](http://www.v.youku.com).