

Identifying humor in stand-up comedy: A preliminary study

Justyna Wawrzyniuk
University of Białystok, Poland

Abstract

This paper describes a preliminary study examining how the audience of stand-up comedy approach humor analysis. By expanding the scope of the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo 2001), it was possible to use the framework to aid and systematize the interpretation process, resulting in shifting the theory's focus from humor production to humor perception.

The first part of the paper introduces the main premise of stand-up comedy. The second part is devoted to the theoretical aspects, namely the theory of humor. The third part discusses the methodology of the preliminary study: a two-step interpretation task done by four audience members. The fourth and the fifth sections present the results of the study and discuss the implications. The outcome of the analysis gives an understanding as to what the audience may focus on during the interpretation process, which allows for identification of differences in humor perception.

Keywords: humor, stand-up comedy, General Theory of Verbal Humor

1. Introduction

Stand-up comedy is a much more complex phenomenon than the name would suggest; it has evolved into an international phenomenon with ever-growing popularity and an ever-growing audience. Bars and pubs became theatres and large venues, and radio programs changed into widely broadcasted comedy specials. The popularity of stand-up comedy is still increasing, despite its over 80-year tradition.

Today, stand-up comedy is much more than 'canned' jokes. Nowadays, the jokes take the form of a seemingly improvised (yet highly scripted) humorous narrative in which the comedian tells stories or talks about issues important to them. They expect the audience to engage with what they say, and in turn, the audience expects the comedians to be funny (Brodie 2014).

The attempts to define stand-up comedy have yielded different results based on the discipline. Nevertheless, there are certain aspects noted by every scholar researching the matter. Stand-up comedy is a form of talk, where an individual, the comedian, tells stories or jokes in

order to be funny. Some note the lack of characterization (Mintz 1998), others notice the ridicule of social issues (Bingham and Hernandez 2009, Rahman 2004). In turn, Brodie (2014) takes yet another approach to stand-up comedy and argues its certain similarity to folk tales. In a sense, there are two sides of the performance: the comedian, a storyteller, and the audience, a group of people with common characteristics or shared culture. This collective worldview, which is something that a comedian refers to or contests in their routine, becomes the central part of the story and, at the same time, the source of humor. Furthermore, the narratives are most often told from the comedian's perspective but do not necessarily have to be their own. A lot of the stories come from the comic's observations and may discuss recent political or social issues (Bingham and Hernandez 2009, Brodie 2014).

As stated before, the first and foremost aim of stand-up comedy has always been to entertain. Stand-up comedy is often described as monological, but the routines are heavily based on the audience's response to the comic's words, therefore highlighting a rather dialogic character of the show (Brodie 2014). The audience, while on the receiving end of the performances, is what distinguishes stand-up comedy from, say, stage plays or concerts. After all, comedians tell their stories to get the reaction. If the reaction is missing, then the whole premise of stand-up comedy is gone (TEDxTalk 2012, Brodie 2014). The audience's engagement and, ideally, laughter to what is said is the essence of the routine. Stand-up comedy evokes laughter by being relatable to the audience with its autobiographical and observational humor. While language and cultural context play a crucial role in interpreting jokes, the overall sense of humor is still a subjective matter. It differs from person to person regardless of their knowledge or cultural background.

When considering language, stand-up comedy is often associated with vulgarity and obscenity. While it is characteristic of many performances, it is not their key feature. One of the comics who was known for their inappropriate language was Lenny Bruce (Zoglin 2017). In his provocative narratives, he tackled some pressing issues and taboos that the United States was and is still dealing with today. What is more, his routines resulted in numerous arrests over the years, although ultimately, it was Bruce who contributed to the freedom of speech in stand-up comedy (Melton 2016). It did not come without a price, though, because nowadays stand-up comics are often associated with 'offensive' or 'shock' comedy (TEDx Talks 2012). Although stand-up comedy has eventually found its way into popular culture, the comedians' approach to social and political issues created an impression that stand-up comedy is a countercultural phenomenon (Brodie 2014); comics are dubbed the social commentators, sociologists, anthropologists, or even magicians (Bingham and Hernandez 2009; Brodie 2014; Gilbert 2004; Koziski 1984).

Given the complexity of stand-up comedy, scholars across disciplines have tried to decipher what exactly makes people laugh. The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH; Attardo and Raskin 1991, Attardo 2001, 2017) offers a coherent framework for analyzing jokes by listing a set of factors (knowledge resources) that contribute to the humorous narratives. Although the GTVH does not account for the reaction to a joke, it can give an excellent insight into where humor can be found. Arguably, with specific alterations, the theory can be used by the audience as well (Tsakona 2013).

This study follows Tsakona's (2013) argumentation and shifts the focus of the GTVH from humor production to humor reception. Enlarging the scope of the GTVH allows it to use the knowledge resources as a tool for systematizing humor analysis on a larger scale (involving, for example, audience members). The main aim of this paper is to discuss the application of the GTVH to the interpretation process of stand-up comedy narratives. Moreover, it is assumed that the components of the joke are interpreted in a specific way, which could indicate a certain order possibly aiding the humor analysis.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first one discusses the General Theory of Verbal Humor which serves as a base for this study. The second section is devoted to the methodology behind the preliminary study which includes two interpretation tasks. The final part discusses the results and limitations of the conducted research.

2. The General Theory of Verbal Humor

Most humor theories have their roots in psychology, philosophy, or neurosciences. However, there is one approach that originated in linguistics, although it also encapsulates other accounts on funniness. The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH; Attardo and Raskin 1991, Attardo 2001, 2017), and its predecessor Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH; Raskin 1979) state that humor cannot occur without what the authors call a 'script opposition.' This study follows the definition of scripts provided by Attardo (2001), which describes scripts as containers connected to the lexical meaning of the word, having all prototypical information about an entity or action. (Attardo 2001: 2–3). With that being said, the essence of a joke lies within the incompatibility of the provided information, and humor cannot exist without it; in other words, no incongruity means no amusement. Still, the GTVH goes even further and states that the discrepancy between the scripts is not the only element responsible for the funniness, since the way the scripts are opposed is as crucial as the incongruity itself. Attardo and Raskin (1991) call it a logical mechanism. Interestingly, this central premise is in line with the incongruity-resolution theories prevalent in humor research (Larkin-Galiñanes 2017).

Apart from Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism, the authors of the GTVH name other factors that contribute to humor called Knowledge Resources: situation, target, narrative strategy, and language (Attardo and Raskin 1991, Attardo 2001). Although the remaining components are not the direct conveyors of humor, they are responsible for the set-up, phrasing, and even positioning of the punchline in the joke. Knowledge resources are explained below and based on Attardo and Raskin (1991) and Attardo (2001).

Let us consider the following joke to illustrate better the humor analysis based on the GTVH:

- (1) My grandfather has the heart of a lion and a lifetime ban at the zoo (Korolkovaite 2017).

As the incongruity and its resolution are essential elements of a humorous narrative, it only makes sense to start the analysis with script opposition and logical mechanism. At first, the beginning of the joke, 'my grandfather has the heart of a lion,' does not seem funny or extraordinary. Having 'the heart of a lion' evokes the notion of bravery and courage. The

opposition of the provided information becomes apparent only with the lifetime ban at the zoo, which makes it clear that the first part of the joke is not an idiomatic expression, but a literal description of someone's possession. Therefore, the opposed script could be defined as being brave vs. killing an animal, or legal vs. illegal. It is necessary to mention that the incongruity need not be antonymic; the scripts must be merely distinguishable from each other.

The second part of the joke not only denotes the opposing script but also resolves the incongruity. The logical mechanism for this narrative becomes a garden-path situation, as it becomes obvious that the grandfather literally took out a lion's heart thus committed a crime – and now is banned from entering the zoo. In brief, logical mechanism describes the way the scripts are opposed, which may not be reasonable or logical in the usual sense, but still be “logical” in terms of the joke (Attardo 2001: 26). Or, in other words, logical mechanisms explain the joke altogether. See Attardo (2001: 27) for the list of known logical mechanisms.

While the incongruity and its resolution are vital parts of humorous narratives, other factors may significantly contribute to the interpretation as well. The situation resource provides us with additional background information. In (1) the situation resource explains that there is an older person who possesses a lion's heart, and therefore is not allowed to enter the zoo where said lion presumably lived. With the situation resource, the spectrum of the background information can be much broader, depending on the narrative.

In turn, the target resource tells us who or what is the subject of the ridicule. Interestingly, this resource relates to the superiority theory of humor, which states that a joker mocks someone or something because they feel superior to them (Larkin-Galiñanes 2017). This factor is especially apparent in stereotypical jokes that involve laughing at a group of people with shared characteristics. As opposed to the previously described resources, not every joke has to have a target. In (1), the target is the grandfather as the performer of the incongruous action.

As for the narrative strategy, (1) is a perfect example of a ‘one-liner.’ These narratives (if their length allows for describing them as such) begin and end within one sentence. In general, narrative strategy refers to the organization of the discourse. It could be a conversation, a riddle, a monolog, and many more. Stand-up comedy, as discussed in the introduction, takes the form of a talk: the audience takes part in this heavily one-sided conversation by reacting to the comedian's words. Therefore, based on the interactional aspect, it can be concluded that dialog is the dominant form in stand-up comedy (Brodie 2014), although a story or a monologue would be accurate as well.

The last knowledge resource discussed by Attardo and Raskin (1991) is language. As opposed to the narrative strategy, which manages the general structure of a joke, the language resource regulates how the narrative is told from the linguistic perspective. For example, any changes or peculiarities on the morphosyntactic or phonological level fall into the category of language. This knowledge resource also governs the punchline placement; if there is a punchline to a given joke, it will always occur at the end of the narrative. Punchlines are reflected in the joke phrasing; therefore, unskilled storytelling may result in a poorly worded ending and the lack of at least partial resolution of the incongruity. In (1) the language resource is apparent due to the ambiguity of the phrase ‘heart of a lion’. Any other expression denoting one's bravery would not have had the same humorous effect in this situation.

The GTVH explains the mechanisms underlying possible humor in a narrative. However, these mechanisms stem from humor production, and not interpretation; in other words, the GTVH will not account for the variances in reaction to the same narrative (Attardo 2001).

3. Methods

This paper aims to shift the focus of the GTVH analysis from humor production to perception. The goal is to expand the scope of the theory by using the GTVH as means to systematize humor interpretation as done by members of a stand-up comedy show audience. To achieve that, I propose a two-step method which was preliminary tested and is described below.

The first step involved the preparation of the narratives for the analysis. For this stage, seven fragments from four different stand-up comedy specials have been chosen. Two narratives per show came from *Elder Millennial* by Iliza Shlesinger (2018), *Homecoming King* by Hasan Minhaj (2017), and *Afraid of the Dark* by Trevor Noah (2017). Additionally, one narrative from Jack Whitehall's *At Large* (2017) served as a control sample. The length of all fragments varied, but they did not exceed 90 seconds. Moreover, the narratives did not refer to any prior or subsequent elements from the shows; therefore, they were understandable in isolation. They also did not contain culture-specific elements that would interfere with the joke interpretation. It was essential to choose such samples in order to ensure the undisturbed comprehension of the narratives in question.

The four respondents were chosen from the author's acquaintances who had volunteered to take part in this stage of the study. They met the requirement of a level of proficiency in English which allowed them to view the material without any disturbance. All were native speakers of Polish. The gender make-up included three females and one male. None of the respondents had had any prior experience with humor research.

The aim of the first part was to elicit interpretation without any further instructions from the researchers conducting the study. The respondents watched the narratives individually and, after each video clip, they were asked to talk about the narratives. At that point, no additional questions were asked to avoid any interference or hints. Respondents' answers were noted for further analysis, including keywords and phrases (for example, an utterance "He tells a story about his parents' first encounter" would be noted as "story, his parent's first encounter"). A critical aspect of this methodology was not to audio record the interviewees to ensure the spontaneity of the answers. The awareness of being recorded might have impeded the interpretation, as it was the case with the first respondent, who started to think about their answer before saying it out loud, thus possibly making changes to the initial recall of the joke.

Once a respondent had watched and discussed freely all six narratives, they proceeded to the second part of the study, which was a guided analysis that utilized the elements from the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH).

In this part, the respondents were instructed on the GTVH's knowledge resources and then asked to analyze a control sample from Jack Whitehall's *At Large* using said theory. First, the GTVH was presented by the researcher in a form of a talk. Next, each interviewee received a form with listed knowledge resources and their task was to note their answers on the forms. The

control sample was analyzed together with the researcher to clear any doubts that the respondents might have had during the introduction stage. The assistance included clarifying and confirming solely the definitions of knowledge resources, not the correctness of the provided analysis. When the respondents were confident that they were able to continue with the analysis, they were asked to re-watch the six fragments from the first interpretation and examine them from the GTVH perspective. Again, the respondents noted their analysis on the answer sheets which had listed all knowledge resources. Each video clip had a separate form to fill, and the interviewees could give their answers either in Polish or in English.

The final stage involved comparing the collected answers from the notes from the first interpretation and the answer sheets from the second one. Initially, the respondents' individual contributions were juxtaposed to see if they had focused on the same aspects both times. Only then the respondents' answers were contrasted collectively against each other to see if there were any similarities between the interpretations. For each narrative, a chart combining all the answers was created, which made it easier to notice the discrepancies.

4. Results

This section examines the results of the analysis. Due to space limitations, only two out of six examples will be discussed here.

Let us consider Table 1 below. In one of the *Afraid of the Dark* narratives, Trevor Noah (2017) talks about his impressions on the Russian language. He says how he is not afraid of the language itself but rather someone that speaks English with a Russian accent. Noah jokingly claims that this combination makes a person sound like a criminal until they switch to proper Russian; then, this person automatically becomes a regular immigrant in his mind. He also compares the sound of the Russian language to a sound that a DJ-ing console makes when scratching a vinyl:

'All you need is that Russian accent. The most dangerous accent in the world. And yet... yet... strangely enough... I found the Russian language does not make me fear at all. Strangest discovery I made. The Russian accent... makes me fear. The Russian language does not. Because a language is something someone else speaks. An accent is me interpreting how they're using mine. It's a completely different thing. I was walking through the streets. There was a man on the phone, Russian guy, speaking to someone in English. Sounded like he was setting up a drug deal. Then he switched into Russian. The strangest thing happened in my brain. And he was like, "Vlad. The guys got to be there at three o'clock. Tell me when you get the package. Afterwards, I got to let you know- No, Vlad. No, listen. Vlad, Vlad. Vlad, nyet, nyet, Vlad." [speaking mock Russian] That was the weirdest thing in my head. In my head, he instantly went from international criminal to immigrant instantly. I wasn't afraid anymore. It was the strangest thing. He was just a normal person in my mind because Russian doesn't frighten me. If anything, Russian just sounds like a DJ is scratching on a turntable. That's all I hear when I hear Russian, like a DJ took a turntable. They're scratching English like, "Vlad, the guys got to be there at three o'clock. You got to let me know when you get the package. Afterwards, the guy's got to call me. Don't worry about that. I'll let you know. No, Vlad. Listen, Vlad. [imitating record playing backwards as mock Russian] [imitates record scratching]'

Noah (2017)

Table 1 below presents the juxtaposed answer sheets of all respondents. The first column enumerates knowledge resources (see section 2): script opposition (SO), logical mechanism (LM), situation (SI), target (TA), narrative strategy (NS), and language (LA). The remaining four columns contain the respondent's answers as copied from the answer sheets. If the answer was given in Polish, it was later translated into English by the researcher. English answers were left intact, with no changes made to spelling or grammar. The underlined parts (e.g., 'the Russian accent vs. Russian language') indicate the repetition of answers. Italicized parts in the chart signal similarities between the free and the GTVH-based interpretations, meaning that the same respondent mentioned those aspects during both parts of the study. Letters Y/N, standing for 'yes' or 'no,' marked the interviewees' answers to the question that was asked right after they have seen the narrative: "Did you find it funny?"

Table 1: Answer chart for *Afraid of the Dark* by Trevor Noah (2017) narrative

	1 Y	2 Y	3 Y	4 Y
SO	<u>Russian accent</u> vs <u>Russian language</u>	<u>Russian language</u> vs <u>Russian accent</u> ; Stereotype vs the truth <u>Immigrant</u> vs citizen	<u>The Russian accent</u> vs <u>the Russian language</u>	<u>Russian: language</u> vs <u>accent</u> Speaking a language vs DJ-ing (?) <u>Immigrant</u> vs criminal
LM	<u>analogy</u>	faulty reasoning	<u>analogy</u>	<u>analogy</u>
SI	A description of <u>an overheard phone conversation</u> ; a man speaking first in English with a Russian accent, then in English	Trevor explains how he's not afraid of the language but the accent. He <u>overhears a phone conversation</u> .	He tells a story about an <u>overheard conversation of a Russian person with someone</u>	<u>An overheard conversation</u> of a Russian man with someone (Vlad?)
TA	The (Russian) man	<u>Russian people</u>	Trevor (the speaker)	Russian language / <u>Russian people</u>
NS	<u>A story</u>	Monologue	<u>A story</u>	<u>A story</u>
LA	Onomatopoeia: Russian accent, <u>an imitation of the Russian language</u>	<u>Imitating a Russian person (sounds)</u>	<u>An imitation of Russian language sounds</u>	<u>Sounds which are similar to Russian</u>

As it was mentioned in Section 3, the discussion of the results is based on juxtaposition of all notes (first interpretation) and answer sheets (the GTVH analysis), which were turned into separate charts for each individual narrative (see Tables 1 and 2), making it six charts in total. The analysis of the collected answers yielded some interesting tendencies when it comes to the interpretation of humorous narratives. It is important to note that any mention of an agreement or consensus in the analyses refers to the similarities in answers, and not any form of discussion between the respondents.

The second example in this paper concerns the first narrative from *Homecoming King* which depicts Hasan Minhaj talking about his parents and how they met in India in the 1980s. He tells the story of his parent's arranged marriage and compares it to online dating, especially using phone applications like *Tinder* before meeting someone in person. When talking about

his mother, Minhaj jokingly compared her to a smartphone because she owned a camera, which was something unusual back then:

‘You realize my parents physically never saw each other? Thirty years ago, in a town in India, population 990,000 — that’s a small town — my dad heard a buzz in the streets about this woman named Seema, my mom. And, like, Seema was that chick, you guys. In ’82, Seema could get... [a picture appears on the screen behind Minhaj] Look at that red langa. Killing it! She was like the iPhone 8. “Have you heard of Seema? She’s slim. Her family owns a camera.” My dad was like, “A camera?” So, he runs to my grandfather’s house and lays it on the line. “I’m going to America. I want to marry Seema. YOLO.” In ten minutes, the man married a woman he had never laid eyes on. You understand? That’s Tinder with no photos.’

Minhaj (2017)

Table 2: Answer chart for *Homecoming King* by Hasan Minhaj (2017) narrative

	1 N / ?	2 Y	3 N	4 Y
SO	<u>Tinder vs. arranged marriage</u>	India in the 80s vs. Technology Mother vs. iPhone <u>Dating back in India vs. Tinder</u>	<u>Dating today vs dating in the past</u> <u>Scrolling through pictures (Tinder) vs blind date</u>	<u>Arranged marriages in India and Tinder</u>
LM	<u>juxtaposition</u>	<u>juxtaposition/analogy</u>	<u>juxtaposition</u>	analogy
SI	<u>A story about his parents’ marriage</u>	<u>Hasan describes how his father married his mother without physically seeing her.</u>	He compared dating (arranged marriages) in India to dating using apps.	Hasan talked about his parents and their first meeting
TA	<u>People using Tinder</u>	Minhaj’s parents	Modern people	<u>People using Tinder</u>
NS	<u>A monologue, a story</u>	<u>a monologue, a story</u>	<u>A story</u>	<u>A story</u>
LA	n/d	<i>Slang: the chick, YOLO</i>	n/d	<i>Slang: YOLO</i>

First, it is essential to mention that not every respondent found this narrative funny. The first respondent mentioned that they found it rather compelling than humorous (hence the question mark next to the number in Table 2). However, this fact did not make it impossible to detect the elements of the joke. Notably, both first and third respondents commented that they understood why some people might have found the narrative humorous, but they pointed out that it was not funny to them. These comments further prove that the GTVH is a valid tool to depict differences in perceiving humor but does not (nor it intends to) account for the origins of these discrepancies. As for the GTVH analysis, all respondents identified the opposed scripts, with two people giving more than one answer. At least two out of four interviewees agreed about the logical mechanism. The results of the analysis are discussed in the section below.

5. Discussion

The first interpretation, namely the one where the respondents talked freely about the narratives they had seen, became a crucial part in understanding how the interviewees interpreted the jokes and elements that they focused on when doing so when unprompted. It allowed for an insight into the joke comprehension and its general perception. At this point in the study, the recollection of the narratives varied from person to person; although general sentiments stayed

the same, the specific phrasing was different. An agreement across all respondents throughout the two tasks was a rare occurrence. For example, it can be observed in SO from Table 1 where only one person mentioned “Russian language vs Russian accent” during both tasks, although it was stated by all respondents during the GTVH analysis. Compare that with SO from Table 2, where SO appeared, at least partially, in both tasks, even though the phrasing differed across the analyses.

As it appeared, not every knowledge resource was brought up during the interview. For example, when interpreting the narrative from Table 1, no respondent mentioned anything or anyone that, in their opinion, may have been the subject of the ridicule, and they only paid attention to the target resource once it was mentioned during the GTVH-based interpretation. This tendency occurred in most of the interpretations, therefore indicating that the respondents did not perceive the jokes as being targeted at someone. Types of logical mechanisms were not directly mentioned as well, as they are specific terms used in linguistic contexts. However, the respondents referred to them indirectly when explaining the narratives. For example, a joke based on stereotypes is akin to the logical mechanism categorized as ‘reasoning from false premises’.

The respondents’ answers to the first task were analyzed according to the GTVH, in a sense that any element of the narrative was attributed to one of the knowledge resources, if applicable. Interestingly, the way the respondents were talking about the jokes aided the analysis. Namely, they used phrases that could be potentially marked as knowledge resource signals:

- (2) S/he compared X to Y by saying...
- (3) His voice went up/down.
- (4) The joke was about...
- (5) It was a story about...

Example (2) could be attributed to script opposition and logical mechanism. The comparison of one thing to another may contrast two entities based on a particular characteristic, and the explanation of how they are compared can be equal to the explanation of the joke.

On the other hand, (4) and (5) can indicate the situation resource, because in majority of the cases, respondents continued by explaining the background information given by a comedian. Additionally, in (5), the respondents immediately signaled the narrative strategy behind the joke. (3) connects the phrase to the language resource which describes any linguistic, so morphosyntactic and phonological, abnormalities in the utterance. Other similar signals involved the other changes in the intonation, as well as onomatopoeias and puns. It is crucial to say that the sole use of such phrases does not automatically assign them to particular resources, though could be perceived as corresponding to them; the ultimate decision is still up to the analyst.

Interestingly, the way the respondents interpreted the jokes showed certain patterns in recalling the narratives. The interviewees usually started with situation (preceded by the narrative strategy resource), continued onto script opposition and logical mechanism, and then added any relevant information about the language. If any target was mentioned, it appeared

either with the situation resource or the script opposition, provided that it was a part of any of the scripts. This order was prevalent in majority of answers, which in turn can indicate a possible approach to a systematized humor interpretation.

Let us turn to the second task, which was the GTVH analysis. Above all, every respondent was able to name different elements of the narratives, which indicates no issues with understanding the stories in question. While these elements may not have been alike in all cases, the discrepancies in the analyses suggest different interpretations brought to light and presented in the GTVH terms. For example, all respondents interpreted the script opposition from Table 1 as ‘the Russian language vs. the Russian accent,’ but there was a discrepancy between the ‘immigrant vs. X’ opposition provided by two respondents: one mentioned citizens, the other criminals. As for this part of the interpretation, the respondents agreed on most of the resources (the similarities are marked as the underlined text in Tables 1 and 2), although all analyses were done individually.

There was not only a consensus about the script opposition but also about the rest of the knowledge resources. In turn, the agreement indicates a proper understanding of the definition of each knowledge resource and the jokes in the narratives. For instance, all respondents provided ‘an overheard phone conversation’ as the situation resource for the narrative from Table 2, and all attributed the sounds Noah made in the narrative to the language aspect of the joke. As mentioned earlier, it was not a perfect agreement, with some of the features varying. However, the disparate elements were, in most cases, rightfully assigned to a particular knowledge resource. This can be seen based on how the respondents were able to classify the elements of a narrative even if they did not find it funny. For example, in Table 1 there was a consensus reached among the respondents, versus Table 2, where the opinions were divided.

All in all, when all charts are considered, the GTVH analysis did not pose significant problems. The respondents focused mostly on script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, and language during this interpretation task. Narrative strategy, due to the character of stand-up comedy, varied between a story or a monologue (the respondents did not take the audience factor into account). Additionally, the target resource seemed to confuse the interviewees, who noticed that sometimes the narratives were rather general. Therefore, it was hard to name one specific subject of the ridicule. Irrespective of the reaction to the narrative, the respondents were able to name the elements of the joke. What is more, most of the time, their answers were similar to at least one other interviewee. This proves that the GTVH framework has the potential to be used as a humor analysis tool in order to organize interpretation process on a larger scale.

5.1. Limitations

This paper discusses a study done in its preliminary stage. Therefore, it is vital to recognize its constraints. These limitations should be treated as implications for further research.

The first issue involves the native language of the participants. All respondents were native speakers of Polish but were asked to interpret narratives in American English. Although the participants had sufficient knowledge of the language and did not have any problems with understanding the routines, it poses a question of whether the results would be different if the respondents were native speakers of English. The narratives chosen for this stage of the study

did not contain any elements which would be unfamiliar to the international audience or would interfere with the interpretation. Nevertheless, as American stand-up comedy is recorded and by and large catered to the American audience, intercultural competence and general understanding of the American culture may significantly improve humor appreciation.

The other issue, perhaps far more important, is the sample size. The number of participants should be much higher in the subsequent studies to reach far more valid conclusions and discuss more global tendencies regarding humor identification. However, as stated, this paper discusses a preliminary stage of this study. A small number of respondents allowed for observing the usefulness of the proposed methodology, which in turn will help to adjust the method for the subsequent stages of research.

Another limitation, or rather question for future consideration, is the choice of narratives for the analysis. This study involved seven isolated narratives from four different comedy specials; the video clips were separated from the rest of the shows, which made them partially out of context. Although all the necessary information for a given instance was provided, the examination of the same joke in the context of the entire routine could result in different analyses. However, analyzing certain narratives in the context of a whole show may cause confusion, or rather information overload, where certain aspects of the examined narrative may be missed from the interpretation altogether.

Even with the aforementioned limitations, this preliminary study has shown that while there can be numerous ways to interpret a narrative, the tools with which we have been equipped so far can be used to systematize the interpretation process.

5.2. Conclusion

In summary, this preliminary study showed the possibility of expanding the GTVH's scope and shift its focus from the humor production to humor interpretation. This echoes Tsakona's (2013) conclusions that, with certain adjustments, the GTVH can become not only a theory of the joker, but also one of the audiences', too.

Even though the study is still in its early stages, it has shown that individual members of a stand-up comedy audience tend to interpret narratives in a similar way. However, more discrepancies occurred when they were able to talk freely, as opposed to the interpretation based on the General Theory of Verbal Humor. When they used knowledge resources for their analyses, they were able to distinguish and classify elements belonging to the joke in question without any issues. Moreover, when the initial interpretation task is considered, the respondents used certain phrases which could be attributed to the knowledge resources. Not only was there a similarity in answers during both tasks but also a certain tendency in approaching the interpretation of the narrative. The GTVH framework proves to be a useful tool for humor analysis systematization and could aid humor interpretation on a larger scale.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions which significantly improved the quality of this paper.

Funding

The project is financed from the grant received from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education under the Regional Initiative of Excellence programme for the years 2019–2022, project number 009/RID/2018/19, the amount of funding 8,791,222.00 zloty.

References

- Attardo, S. 2001. *Humorous texts: A semantic and pragmatic analysis*. De Gruyter Mouton.
- Attardo, S. 2017. The general theory of verbal humor. In S. Attardo (ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and Humor*, 126–142. Routledge.
- Attardo, S., and V. Raskin. 1991. Script theory revis(it)ed: Joke similarity and joke representation model. *Humor – International Journal of Humor Research* 4(3–4): 293–347
- Bingham, S. C., and A. A. Hernandez. 2009. “Laughing matters”: The comedian as social observer, teacher, and conduit of the sociological perspective. *Teaching Sociology* 37(4): 335–352.
- Brodie, I. 2014. *A vulgar art: A new approach to stand-up comedy*. University Press of Mississippi.
- Gilbert, J. R. 2004. *Performing marginality: Humor, gender, and cultural critique*. Wayne State University Press.
- Korolkovaite, I. 2017. 52 Of the funniest two-line jokes ever. In *BoredPanda*. Retrieved December 3, 2019 from <https://www.boredpanda.com/funniest-two-line-jokes/>
- Koziski, S. 1984. The standup comedian as anthropologist: Intentional culture critic. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 18(2): 57–76.
- Larkin-Galiñanes, C. 2017. An overview of humor theory. In S. Attardo (ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and humor*, 4–16. Routledge.
- Melton, S. 2016. *A complete history of stand-up comedy in America*. Retrieved November 8, 2019 from <http://acomediandsnotebook.com/2016/11/complete-history-stand-up-comedy-america-funny/>
- Minhaj, H. (Creator). 2017. *Homecoming King*. [Video file] Retrieved from: <http://netflix.com>
- Mintz, L. E. 1998. Stand-up comedy as social and cultural mediation. In N. A. Walker (ed.), *What’s so funny?: Humor in American culture*, 193–204. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Noah, T. (Producer). 2017. *Trevor Noah: Afraid of the dark*. [Video file] Retrieved from: <http://netflix.com>
- Raskin, V. 1979. Semantic mechanisms of humor. *Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* 5: 325–335.
- Rahman, J. 2004. It’s a serious business: The linguistic construction of middle-class white characters by African American narrative comedians. Ph.D diss., Stanford University.
- Shlesinger, I. (Producer). 2018. *Iliza: Elder Millennial*. [Video file] Retrieved from: <http://netflix.com>
- TEDx Talks. 2012. *It’s only a story: Daniel Sloss at TEDxEaling*. [Video file] Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8a-UUhW7-HU>
- Tsakona, V. 2013. Okras and the metapragmatic stereotypes of humour: Towards an expansion of the GTVH. In M. Dynel (Ed.), *Developments in linguistic humour theory*, 28–48. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Whitehall, J. (Writer). 2017. *Jack Whitehall: At large*. [Video file] Retrieved from: <http://netflix.com>
- Zoglin, R. 2017. Stand-up comedy. In *Britannica*. Retrieved November 8, 2019 from <https://www.britannica.com/art/stand-up-comedy>.