

PERFORMING STAND-UP COMEDY: A GENRE ANALYSIS OF UMAR SHARIF'S COMEDY THROUGH SPEECH ACT THEORY

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Abstract

A genre analysis of standup comedy examines the structural and communicative elements that define this form of performance art. It explores how standup comedians use language, humor, and performance techniques to engage audiences, focusing on the genre's conventions, such as joke structures, timing, and delivery. This analysis also considers the social and cultural dimensions of standup comedy, including how comedians address sensitive topics like politics, identity, and societal norms. This research highlights the standup comedy by using the Speech act theory and studying the elements of this theory. Genre analysis reveals how standup comedy operates as both entertainment and a form of social commentary, blending humor to provoke thought and reflection. The primary focus of this paper is to apply speech theory to standup comedy. Umar Sharif's comedy combines entertainment, social critique, and cultural reflection within the framework of speech act theory. This work also explains that use of word to show the emotions in any direction to get attention of people is possible through speech act theory.

Keywords: standup, comedy, speech act theory, humor

Introduction

Life presents challenges and ease to everyone, regardless of factors like gender, race, or religion. However, individual experiences vary significantly based on how each person responds to life's tests and challenges. From birth onward, we face numerous trials that shape our journey, highlighting the importance of our reactions and coping strategies. Research has indicated that having a sense of humor can enhance your physical and mental well-being, increase your attractiveness, and strengthen your leadership abilities (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013). Humor is a vital yet often underestimated aspect of life that can greatly enhance our experiences. While some people may naturally possess this skill, others can learn to incorporate humor into their lives, making their journeys more enjoyable. Humor is the spontaneous laughter we find in everyday situations, while comedy is a structured form of entertainment designed specifically to elicit laughs (Martin, 2007). If comedy fails to make us laugh, it loses its essence and becomes uncomfortable. Humor often emerges unexpectedly; for example, a serene moment becomes humorous when something unexpected, like a trip and fall, occurs. In that way, humor transforms ordinary life into something amusing. Addition to the entertainment, Stand-up comedy is a live performance where a comedian delivers humorous monologues to an audience, often incorporating physical comedy and engaging with the crowd (Aladhmi, 2024). While performances usually follow rehearsed scripts, they can vary in spontaneity. It means genre is the reflection of ideas including one-liners, storytelling, observations, and various comedic techniques like props, music, impressions, and ventriloquism. By this a standup comedian shows its speaking structure with emotions, acts and attitude towards audience. Comedians may be referred to as standup comedians, standup comics, or, in the case of women, standup comediennes. Standup shows can occur in diverse venues such as comedy clubs, bars, colleges, and theaters. Standup comedy involves more than just telling jokes; the delivery and presentation are crucial to a

successful performance. The way a comedian engages with the audience and presents their material can significantly impact the effectiveness of their humor (DeCamp, 2015).

Review of Literature

Aarons and Mierowsky (2017) likely explore the significance of context in delivering jokes. The situational and cultural contexts can significantly affect how a joke is received. Research in humor studies often highlights that the same joke can yield different responses depending on the audience's background, expectations, and the comedian's delivery. The concept of speech acts, introduced by philosophers like J.L. Austin and further developed by John Searle, emphasizes the idea that language is not merely a vehicle for conveying information but also a form of action. In comedy, jokes function as performative utterances that can provoke laughter, challenge norms, or convey social commentary. The study of speech acts in standup comedy, as articulated by Aarons and Mierowsky, contributes to a deeper understanding of humor as a dynamic and multifaceted form of communication. Sintia Dona Nurpadilah and Rahayu Ningsih (2024) in their work discuss expressive speech acts, as defined in the pragmatics of language, are utterances that convey the speaker's emotional state or attitude towards a particular situation. In the realm of stand-up comedy, these acts play a critical role in how comedians connect with their audience, using humor to express feelings ranging from joy and frustration to irony and sarcasm. The effectiveness of expressive speech acts in comedy is influenced by contextual factors, including audience demographics, cultural background, and situational context. Nurpadilah and Ningsih likely emphasize the need for comedians to tailor their material to fit the expectations and sensibilities of their audience, as context can significantly impact the reception of humor. Rappaport and Quilty-Dunn (2024) in this article examine how audience expectations influence a comedian's performance. They argue that audiences often seek authenticity, which can pressure comedians to conform to certain narratives about their identities. This dynamic raises questions about the authenticity of the comedian's voice versus the authenticity perceived by the audience. The paper examines how comedians construct their identities through humor, establishing a connection with the audience. The use of local dialects and references fosters a sense of community, making the performances more impactful and resonant.

Research methodology

A qualitative research methodology is the most suitable approach to analyze Umar Sharif's stand comedy in terms of speech act theory and genre analysis. By adopting the case study approach, we can closely analyze individual performances, specific themes, and the cultural significance. In this research, speech act theory is used to analyze the linguistic functions in Sharif's comedy.

What is Comedy?

Comedy is an art form primarily aimed at entertaining and amusing audiences. It stands in contrast to tragedy, which deals with serious themes and often evokes sorrow. Additionally, comedy differs from farce and burlesque, which are more exaggerated and slapstick forms of humor. Overall, comedy seeks to provide laughter and enjoyment through its storytelling and character interactions. It transcends age, gender, profession, and geography, bringing joy to everyone. Comedy plays a crucial role in literature and theater by entertaining audiences while addressing serious social and personal issues, such as corruption (Head, 2019). Through techniques like satire and parody, comedy highlights human flaws and exposes societal problems in a more approachable way. While the styles of comedy can differ across cultures, humor remains a universal tool for storytelling. Beyond just eliciting laughter, comedy raises awareness about important truths and ideas, making it a powerful medium for reflection and critique.

Standup comedy

Standup comedy is a comedic performance where a comedian speaks directly to an audience, usually delivering a series of humorous anecdotes, observations, and one-liners. It often involves personal experiences, social commentary, and clever wordplay. Comedians typically perform in clubs, theaters, or festivals, using their unique style and perspective to entertain and provoke laughter. The format allows for improvisation and interaction with the audience, making each performance unique (Kawalec, 2020). The history of standup comedy dates back centuries, but it began to take its modern form in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Early Roots of comedic storytelling has existed since ancient times, with performers like jesters and troubadours entertaining audiences in various cultures (lens, 2023). In the U.S., vaudeville acts in the late 1800s featured comedians who told jokes and performed skits. The rise of radio and television in the early to mid-20th century helped popularize standup. Comedians like Bob Hope and Jack Benny became household names, blending storytelling with humor (Gionis, 2023).

In 1960s–70s, the counterculture movement led to a new wave of comedians, such as George Carlin and Richard Pryor, who pushed boundaries and tackled social issues. Comedy clubs began to emerge, providing a space for standup acts (HandWiki, 2022). In 1980s, Comedy became mainstream, with shows like "Saturday Night Live" and HBO specials showcasing standup talent. Comedians like Eddie Murphy and Billy Crystal gained widespread popularity. In 1990s–2000s, the rise of cable television and the internet opened new platforms for comedians. Standup specials became popular, and shows like "Comedy Central Presents" highlighted a diverse range of voices (Whalley, 2010). In today's world, Standup continues to evolve, with comedians using social media and streaming platforms to reach audiences. Issues like identity, mental health, and politics are common themes, reflecting the changing social landscape. Standup comedy remains a vibrant and vital form of entertainment, constantly adapting to cultural shifts and audience tastes.

StandUp Comedy: Quick Laughs for Busy Lives

Standup comedy is an ideal choice for busy people looking for quick entertainment. Here are a few reasons why it's often preferred:

Shorter Format: Sets usually last 20 minutes to an hour, fitting easily into a packed schedule.

Immediate Humor: Comedians deliver fast punch lines and relatable stories, providing instant laughs without lengthy buildup.

Flexible Viewing: Streaming specials allow viewers to watch at their convenience, making it easy to incorporate comedy into their day.

Live Experience: Attending a live show can be a spontaneous outing, offering enjoyment without much planning.

Reliability: Standup often focuses on everyday life, helping audiences connect with the material and providing a fun distraction from routine. In a fast paced world, standup comedy is a fun, accessible way to unwind and enjoy a good laugh.

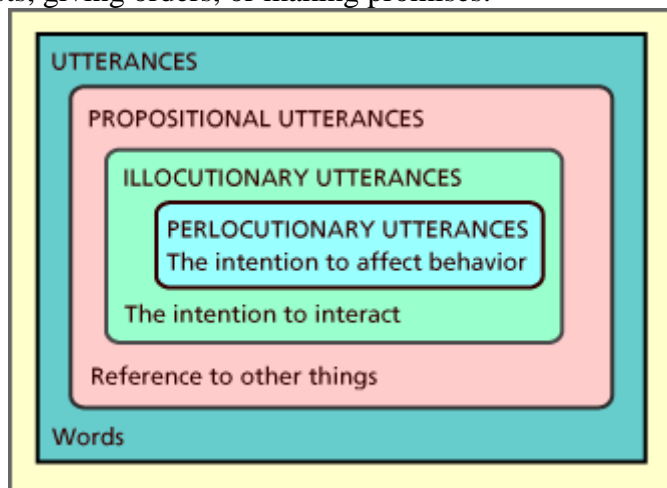
Genre Analysis

Genre, in ordinary conversation, is the way we categorize literature, music, and other forms of art or entertainment. Genre are designations based on stylistic criteria and are formed by conventions that change over time as new genres are invented and the use of old ones are discontinued or reborn (Conversation and discourse analysis, 2024). Genre analysis involves studying how language is used in a specific context, combining research from various disciplines like stylistic and discourse analysis. Genre analysis is especially useful in advanced English teaching as it expands beyond language knowledge and course books. In another way, genres are how things get done and how language is used to achieve its purpose. By defining genre like this, we discover an equal number of genre types as there are recognizable social activity types in our culture. Genres in language use can vary from

literary forms like poems, novels, and dramas to nonliterary types like lectures, recipes, and news reports (Cao & Guo, 2015).

Speech Act Theory

This theory, proposed by philosophers like J.L. Austin and John Searle, focuses on how language performs actions. Speech act theory was introduced by J.L. Austin in his work "How to Do Things with Words" and further developed by John Searle (Mabaquiao, 2018). The theory distinguishes between three types of acts: locutionary acts (the act of saying something), illocutionary acts (the intended meaning or function behind the statement), and perlocutionary acts (the effects of the statement on the listener). In standup comedy, comedians use language not just to convey information but to perform actions such as making promises, issuing challenges, or creating humor through their speech acts. Analyzing jokes through this lens can reveal how they operate beyond mere words. Speech act theory is a branch of pragmatics that examines how language is used to perform actions, not just to convey information (Wulandary, 2022). It explores how utterances can accomplish things, such as making requests, giving orders, or making promises.



Application of Speech Act theory on Standup Comedy

In standup comedy, Speech Act Theory illustrates how comedians use language to perform actions beyond mere description. Comedians often make performative statements, like declaring a joke to be the funniest ever, which actively engages the audience. For example, when a comedian promises that the audience will laugh hard by the end of their set, they set expectations and create anticipation. Context plays a crucial role in comedy; the meaning of a joke can shift based on the situation and delivery. Comedians craft setups that lead to punchlines, often twisting everyday experiences into absurdity. For instance, a story about visiting the doctor might build up to an unexpected humorous twist.

Comedians also utilize illocutionary acts, where a seemingly straightforward statement carries deeper meaning, often using sarcasm or irony to critique societal norms. An example is a comment about drivers, which critiques self-perception through humor. Audience engagement is key, with comedians directly addressing their audience and prompting responses.

Genre Analysis of Stand-up Comedy through Speech Act Theory

Stand-up comedy through speech act theory provides an insightful framework for understanding the genre's complex interaction between the comedian and audience. Speech act theory, developed by philosophers like J.L. Austin and furthered by John Searle, suggests that language is not merely used to convey information but also to perform actions. In standup, comedians use language strategically, not just for laughs but to provoke thought,

convey critiques, and establish social connections. Here’s how speech act categories apply to standup comedy:

1. Locutionary Acts (What is said)

In standup, comedians’ locutionary acts are the literal jokes, anecdotes, and stories told on stage. These contain the actual words or lines, often crafted to sound spontaneous but are meticulously chosen for timing, rhythm, and impact. For example, a comedian’s phrasing of a punch line is carefully tailored to maximize surprise and laughter, while seemingly maintaining a casual tone.

2. Illocutionary Acts (What is meant or done by Saying It)

Standup comedy heavily relies on illocutionary acts, where the comedian performs functions like entertaining, criticizing, satirizing, or even educating the audience. It has four directions to express the acts.

Directions	Way of Act or Express views by using Stand-up comedy platform
Assertive	These are statements where the comedian may make observations or analysis society, norms, or behaviors. This is common in observational comedy, where the comedian draws attention to shared societal quirks.
Expressive	These acts reveal the comedian's emotions, attitudes, or experiences, creating intimacy and reliability. Comedians use expressive to share personal struggles or opinions, offering authenticity.
Directives	Although elusive, comedians sometimes prompt audiences to react or think in a certain way, either through rhetorical questions or implied calls to action.
Declarations	Rare but present in comedy, declarations occur when a comedian “names” something, such as calling out injustices, labeling stereotypes, or declaring certain behaviors as laughable.

3. Perlocutionary Acts (Effects on the Audience)

The primary goal in standup is to produce laughter, but the per-locutionary acts often extend beyond humor. Comedians can provoke audiences to reflect on personal biases, societal norms, or political stances.

Persuasion: A comedian might influence an audience's perspective, especially if discussing social issues. Through humor, they can make controversial topics more accessible or less confrontational

Relief: Comedy often serves as a social catharsis, offering audiences relief from societal tensions and personal anxieties. This aligns with the psychological relief theory of humor.

Connection: Through humor, comedians can forge a bond with the audience, establishing a sense of unity or shared experience, a key element in standup as a dialogic performance

4. Graciousness in Comedy and Audience Response

Standup often plays with politeness theory by intentionally breaching social norms to create humor. For example, comedians frequently engage in “face threatening acts,” openly

mocking conventions and taboos. This is particularly effective in boundary pushing or political comedy, where the violation of norms itself becomes the source of humor. Standup comedy depends on the context in which speech acts are interpreted. A joke's success often hinges on audience members sharing a cultural or contextual understanding, allowing them to get the humor. Context affects how speech acts are perceived and how effectively they resonate with the audience.

Case study of Umar Sharif, a legendary Pakistani comedian

Umar Sharif, a renowned Pakistani comedian, is widely recognized as the trailblazer of modern standup comedy in South Asia, specifically in Pakistan. Renowned as the “King of Comedy” in Pakistan, his work serves as a compelling example of using humor to address significant social, political, and cultural themes in a captivating and impactful way. Born in 1955 in Karachi, Umar Sharif (originally Muhammad Umer) rose to prominence in the 1980s. His early career centered on stage plays, where he showcased his comedic talent through skits. *Bakra Qiston Pay*, his breakthrough play, became a massive hit, with its unique mix of satire, slapstick, and social commentary shaping his career. Umar Sharif’s comedy attracted a diverse range of viewers, thanks to its incorporation of local cultural references and relatable portrayals of everyday Pakistani life. This relatability set him apart from other comedians and established him as a household name.

Genre and Style

Satirical Commentary: Umar Sharif’s comedy often centered on satirizing political figures, societal norms, and bureaucratic ineptitudes. He used satire as a vehicle to address pressing social issues, sometimes pushing boundaries in ways that were novel for the Pakistani audience. Much of his humor, Observational based, drew from everyday situations, presenting them in a way that felt accessible and real. He took common situations—relationships, family dynamics, and economic struggles—and highlighted the absurdity within them.

Use of Language and Wordplay

His performances often involved a mix of Urdu, Punjabi, and regional dialects, enhancing his relatability. Umar Sharif’s clever wordplay and mastery of multiple languages enabled him to create humor that resonated deeply with diverse audiences.

Analysis Using Speech Act Theory

Locutionary Acts	His use of punchlines and specific language choices catered directly to local vernacular, often amplifying the humor through nuanced delivery and timing. The way he structured jokes and anecdotes allowed him to shift between formal and informal speech seamlessly.
Illocutionary Acts:	<p>Assertives: Umar Sharif would make statements about social issues in Pakistan, particularly class disparities and corruption. His critiques often felt lighthearted but contained a strong message.</p> <p>Expressives: His style was deeply expressive, with exaggerated gestures and facial expressions. He conveyed emotions ranging from frustration to delight, helping his audience connect emotionally with his performance.</p> <p>Directives: Sharif sometimes indirectly prompted his audience to reflect on their own behaviors and societal norms. For example, in sketches about family life, he would poke fun at traditional roles, nudging audiences to think about these norms.</p>

Perlocutionary Acts:	The effect on the audience was multifaceted—while laughter was the primary response, audiences often left his performances with a deeper awareness of the issues he addressed, ranging from inflation to societal hypocrisy.
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Themes and Societal Impact

Economic Hardships and Class Tensions: Many of Sharif’s jokes revolved around economic struggles, highlighting issues like inflation, unemployment, and the wealth gap. He used humor to give a voice to those experiencing hardship, creating a space for empathy and camaraderie among audiences. Sharif frequently explored themes like gender roles, family dynamics, and generational divides. His comedy often questioned the rigidity of traditional expectations, using humor to challenge social norms without direct confrontation. Sharif would subtly criticize political leaders and government policies, particularly in a time when open criticism could lead to censorship or backlash. His humor was often indirect, allowing him to navigate censorship while still making powerful points about governance and accountability.

Legacy and Influence

Umar Sharif’s impact on Pakistani comedy remains profound. He inspired generations of comedians in South Asia, proving that humor could be a medium for social change and cultural reflection. By tackling taboo topics with finesse, he demonstrated how standup could be both entertaining and meaningful. His influence extended beyond borders, impacting comedians across South Asia, where his unique blend of observational and satirical humor has inspired successors.

Conclusion

Speech Act Theory enriches our understanding of how comedians leverage language to create shared experiences, challenge societal norms, and actively engage with their audiences, showcasing the artistry involved in making people laugh. Applying Speech Act Theory to standup comedy uncovers the intricate ways comedians use language to entertain and engage audiences. By analyzing performative utterances, illocutionary acts, context, audience interaction, and perlocutionary effects. Speech act theory allows us to see standup comedy as a form of performative language, where the comedian skillfully uses words not just to make statements but to perform actions that entertain, critique, and sometimes challenge social norms. This genre becomes a dynamic mix of assertive, expressive, and occasional declarations, creating interplay between the comedian’s intent and the audience’s response, making each performance unique and contextually rich.

Umar Sharif’s standup performances provide a rich example of how comedians use humor not only to entertain but to question, critique, and reflect on society. His use of culturally specific language, satire, and observational humor made his work relatable and influential, allowing him to address complex societal issues with skill and nuance. Through speech act theory, we can see how Sharif’s comedy was a dynamic combination of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, creating an interplay that kept audiences engaged while prompting them to think critically about the world around them.

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