FROM PUNCH LINE TO PERSUASION: EXPLORING THE USE OF STYLISTIC FEATURES IN COMEDIC LINGUISTICS

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Abstract

Inevitably, it is hard to grasp a witty joke in second language when the first language of the target audience is different one. For sure, the comedians needs extra effort to bring the desired and prerequisite response to carry on their witty jokes. This paper examines the realm of humor within the context of stand-up comedy focusing on the performances of Indian comedian Kanan Gill (in English). Through multimodal analysis, the study reveals the intricate delicacies that converge the creation of humor where language, laughter and rhetoric intersect. It analyses the effective use of stylistic devices, linguistic and extra-linguistic features in verbal comedy. This research employs a theoretical framework of Berger's (1993) rhetorical devices and Keraf's (2006) language concepts in speech dynamics. The findings highlight Gill's use of stylistic devices in humor to explore the contextual awareness in social interactions. His comedic repertoire flawlessly blends rhetoric devices and linguistic and paralinguistic techniques, resulting in entertaining and thought-provoking comedy. The results mirror the deeper insights of humor and its capacity to serve as a medium for reflection, resistance, and cultural expression.

Key words: Rhetoric devices, Comedic Linguistics, style, verbal humor, Paralinguistic features.

1. Introduction

This exploration delves into the compelling world of stand-up comedy, examining the linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms that underlie its persuasive power. Humor is a social phenomenon that involves the production, perception, and response to stimuli that are perceived as funny, resulting in laughter or amusement (Fatima, 2023). Stand-up comedy is an art that not only entertains but also influences, challenges, and unites audience through the strategic use of language and rhetoric. Skilled comedians wield words like craftsmen, construct persuasive narratives, subvert expectations, and navigate complex social dynamics. By analyzing the language, structure, and delivery of stand-up routines, this study explores the linguistic choices and the non-verbal strategies comedians employ to shape perceptions, challenge beliefs, and forge connections with their audience. The intricate relationship between language, rhetoric, and persuasion is explained to analyze and explain Kanan Gills' speeches in stand-up comedy. The reason to choose Kanan is that he differentiates himself with a casual, storytelling approach rather than outright satire or dark humor and especially for the taste of his literary jokes. His episodes are available on Netflix and few are on YouTube to reach diverse audience thus expands his speech efforts through social media platforms. Audience feedback (live reactions, online comments, reviews) helps him to bring more twists in

his performances. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms of comic effects of Kanan Gill's performances. It sheds light on various strategies employed by Gill to evoke laughter and entertain audiences. The main objectives of the study is not only to investigate the persuasive elements but also to highlight the linguistic and paralinguistic features in the selected speeches to enhance comedic effects in Gill's performances that create a separate genre of study as Comedic Linguistics; which analyses and unpacks the discourse of comedy. The study answers the following questions,

➢ What are the main rhetorical devices in Gill's speeches to create persuasive humor?

➢ Which actions and paralinguistic features are prominent in his selected speeches to create laughter among audience?

So the key features of this study include:

1) **Rhetoric of persuasive language**: Ethos, Pathos and logos

2) **Language and style**: Exploring the distinct linguistic features, tone, and voice used in stand-up comedy.

3) **Narrative structure**: Examining the ways comedians craft compelling narratives and storytelling techniques.

4) **Use of rhetorical devices**: Identifying and analyzing the use of metaphor, irony, satire, and other rhetorical tools.

5) **Audience engagement**: Investigating how comedians establish connections and manage audience dynamics.

6) **Social commentary and critique**: Discussing how comedians use language and rhetoric to address social issues and challenge norms.

2. Review of Literature

Rhetoric, as an art of persuasion, is a critical element in stand-up comedy performances. Scholars such as Aristotle (4th century BCE) identified ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic) as key rhetorical appeals that comedians often use (Meyer, 2000). Comedians blend these appeals with humor to create an effective performance. According to Attardo (2001), humor relies on incongruity, exaggeration, and irony, which are also fundamental rhetorical devices. The strategic use of rhetoric devices enhances the comedic effect while engaging the audience in critical thought (Double, 2014).

Tamkeen Fatime (2024) in her thesis dissertation highlighted the use of rhetoric and the importance of figurative language in comedy shows and its impact on the audience through text transcription method and qualitative approach. The findings showed that comedians use not only their cultural, personal and social aspects in creating and framing reference items (figures of speech) but also they raise the emotional feel and a thought provoking idea as they end their speech as a quality of persuasive speech.

Several linguistic studies have analyzed comedians' speech styles, including code-switching, dialect variation, and speech rhythm. For instance, Chiaro (1992) found that comedians often manipulate phonetics and prosody to emphasize punch lines and create comedic timing, which is a very prominent feature of Gill's speech on the stage. In sociolinguistic studies, Bell (2011) demonstrated how comedians employ audience design principles, adjusting their speech based on the audience's background and expectations. This aligns with the concept of accommodation theory (Giles & Ogay, 2007), where comedians modify their language use to connect with different social groups. This study fills the gap to

analyze the effective use of verbal and non-verbal signs used by the comedians in their speeches that ultimate create humor and witty opinion for the target audience. The reason to choose this specific comedian was his use of witty humor and excellent use of punch lines for amusing his audience which proves to be a really challenging task especially when it applies to Asian countries where English language is still in between the realms of Official/Second language for bearing its real status.

3. Figurative Language and Wordplay in Comedy: A Theoretical Perspective

Figurative language plays a crucial role in comedy, where comedians frequently apply stylistic features in their speech like metaphors, puns, satire and irony accompanied by their funny non-verbal cues. Nash (1985) demonstrates the use of pun to create humor which have their own phonetic appeal and semantic implications. Similarly, Keraf (1979) categorized figurative speech into similes, metaphors, personification, and hyperbole, all of which are prevalent in comedic discourse.

Multimodality refers to the interplay between different representational modes of images and spoken words. Multimodal representations mediate the sociocultural ways in which these modes are combined in the communication process (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Multimodal texts are communications that use more than one semiotic system, or mode, to convey a message. These modes can include written language, visual imagery, audio, spatial arrangements and gestures. The integration of these different modes allow for a more complex and enriched communication experience. Gee's and Huckin's work expanded on Berger's model for rhetorical devices, but an overview of Berger's original model and its application to rhetorical devices is furnished to provide the theoretical stance. The present research is unique in its content as a very little work has been done to interpret and explain the verbal and non-verbal features of comedic speeches in Pakistan so it would be significant for future researchers to explore more stylistic and discursive features of verbal repertoire.

Berger's Model (1977): Peter Berger has made significant contributions to the theories of the social construction of religious worlds and secularization theory. The role of humor in Berger's overarching framework demonstrates its consistency over a thirty-six year period in his writings from *The Precarious Vision* (1961) to *Redeeming Laughter* (1997). Many typologies exist for humor but the most extensive humor typology was originally put forth by Berger in 1976. His typology comprises of four basic categories — language (verbal humor), logic (ideational humor), identity (existential humor) and action (physical or non-verbal humor) where Gill's performances contain more effects of language and action in his stand-up comedy style. Each category has its further individual components to have a deeper insight.
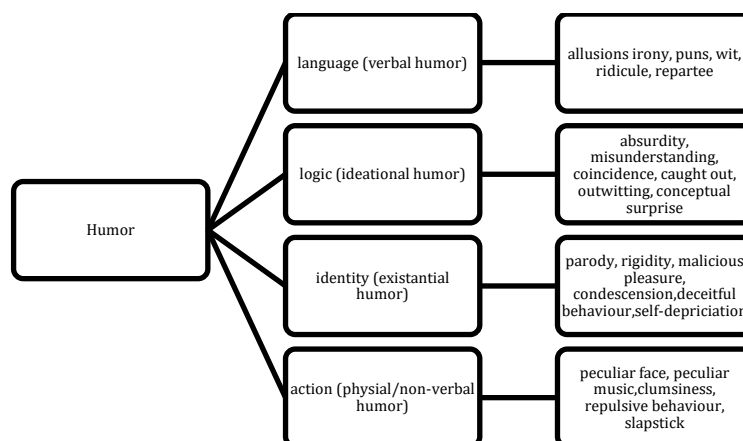
While Berger's model provides a useful framework, it has its limitations which Oversimplifies complex rhetorical devices and doesn't account for context, audience, and purpose. For including that aspect, Keraf's model is aligned with Berger's theoretical percepts to identify not only its linguistic but also non-linguistic features. These two models describe the Gill's selected speeches to explore their stylistic features.

Gorys Keraf's Model (1995): Gorys Keraf (1936–1997) was an influential Indonesian linguist, writer, and professor who is widely known for his contributions to the study of language, rhetoric, and literary style. The proposed model not only integrates semantic and pragmatic aspects but also distinguishes between **tropes** (meaning) and **schemes** (form) of speech organization. It also includes **ideophones**, emphasizing sound and emotional feel in verbal speeches. His ideas provide a systematic and detailed framework for understanding figurative language.
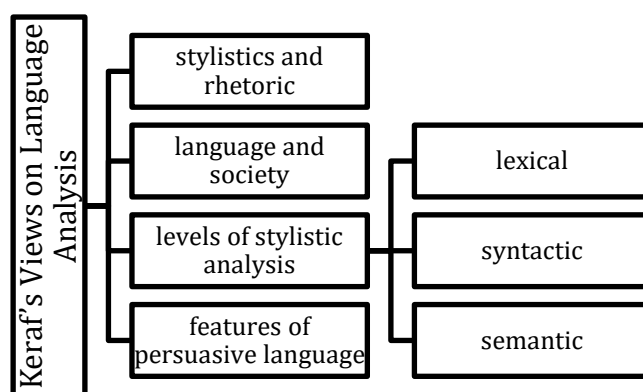
4. Textual Analysis

The analysis plan is divided into three main sections:

i. Linguistic features (Use of Rhetoric devices- Berger's stance)
ii. Language in action (paralinguistic features- Berger's stance)
iii. Technique of persuasive language (tropes/schemes/ideophones- Keraf's stance)

1. **Use of Rhetoric Devices:** Few examples are provided here along with their interpretations on stylistic grounds.

i. **Use of metaphors:** In the line, "***I was in North America getting a coffee, which is the national*** sport (Yours Sincerely)" By humorously comparing getting a coffee in North America to a national sport, Gill employs a metaphor to emphasize the commonness and significance of coffee consumption in that region. Because in western culture they like to drink coffee but in Eastern culture tea is preferred. The metaphor playfully exaggerates the cultural metaphor as coffee, which automatically draws attention towards its popularity. Gill continues to employ metaphors in the line,

> "*And it's a whole. When you walk in, you have to first say hi. How are you? I'm good, thanks. How are you? I'm good as well. Hot outside, isn't it? It is hot. Then you can begin speaking. In this much time, the population of India has doubled.* (Yours Sincerely)"

In these lines, the metaphors emphasizes how small conversation is viewed as being time-consuming in that meantime the population of India has increased. Gill humorously emphasizes the contrast and exaggerates the long-winded nature of initiating conversations. When discussing the famous line from

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the Shakespearean play, "*Et tu, Brute?*" Gill refers to it as a metaphorical representation of Caesar's shock and disbelief upon realizing that even his trusted friend Brutus is involved in flapping the plot against him. The metaphor signifies the deep sense of betrayal Caesar feels in that moment. The metaphorical expression, **"Which means if you get stabbed, you have to quickly make a choice,"** suggests that getting stabbed in the context of the play serves as a metaphor for encountering a significant or life-altering choice. It implies that facing a sudden and unexpected event, such as betrayal, prompts individuals to make crucial decisions quickly. Gill uses the phrase **"So it's best to die in a dead language. So Latin is good, Otherwise, Sanskrit if you know."** Trying to say that leaving a lasting legacy or being remembered is more impactful if one's words or actions are expressed in a language that holds historical or cultural significance.

ii.   Use of Hyperbole: Moreover, the speaker humorously explores the concept of '**time pass**' in India versus the notion of "pastime" in the West. They playfully contrast the connotations of the two terms, suggesting that "**pastime**" is similar to a hobby or activity done to pass time, while 'time pass' refers to people themselves as the speaker's pastime. As the speaker expresses,

> "*And the west, they don't have time pass. They have pastime. Whole different thing. Pastime is like a hobby. It's something you do to pass time. People are like my past time. It's writing, actually. And we're like, well, we read your writing and it's time pass* (Time Pass)."

This playful irony humorously underscores the contrasting perspectives between the speaker and the readers, highlighting the comical disparity in interpretation. Additionally, the speaker amusingly discusses the use of a blackboard to capture the attention of Indian people. They playfully suggest that the presence of a blackboard is necessary for Indian audiences to pay attention, implying that without it, they would be engrossed in texting. As the speaker humorously remarks, *"You're probably wondering why I have this blackboard here. I keep this blackboard here so Indian people will pay attention. Before, no blackboard. Everyone's texting."* This ironic statement humorously emphasizes the perceived lack of attention and presents an exaggerated solution in the form of a blackboard.

Keraf's stylistic approach highlights the main features of Gill's comedy, which can be defined through various levels of stylistic analysis as observed:

- **Lexical Level:** Kanan uses casual, everyday language, often mixed with slang and pop culture references to create humor, for example, children, road incidents, letter, society, .
- **Syntactic Level:** He prefers storytelling with varied sentence lengths, combining short punchlines with long, detailed anecdotes.
- **Semantic Level:** His humor relies on irony, hyperbole, and contrast (e.g., exaggerating childhood experiences to show their absurdity).
- **Rhetorical Strategies:** He engages audiences through rhetorical questions, analogies, and relatable situations to **build a strong connection**.

2.   Action (Non-linguistic features in Gill's performances; Few glimpses)

Hancher (2009) in his work, "How To Play Games with Words: Speech-act Jokes" narrates that the essence of all jokes, of all comedy, seems to be an honest or well-intended halfness; a non-performance of what is pretended to be performed, at the same time that one is giving loud pledges of performance. The balking of the intellect, the frustrated expectation, the break of continuity in the intellect, is comedy.

Picture 1: Looking at the audience for response

In the given shot, the speaker intends to respond his statement (This is an Indian concept of time pass) in a funny gesture through eye moments where the concept is provided with a huge laugh by an audience. His eye contact affirms the comic scene on the stage. The ironical taunt 'Indian Concept of time pass' accompanies with a satirical tone.

Picture 2: After audience laughter

This picture explains his continuity of speech and control on the situation when audience laughs. He tries to do it calmly and with a serious tone of voice which automatically due to its contextual effects turns into huge laughter.

Picture 3: Mimicry of a character through emphasized gesture

Here, he is emphasizing his point of view with louder voice, open eye gestures and wider mouth opening. The mimicry style itself creates humor among the audience especially when they are familiar with the name/person. It's a common technique of stand by comedians as they have to create an imaginary character in front of them to talk about or like them to create funny situations.

Picture 4: Aligning the gestures, posture and voice

It seems like the climax of drama when he talks about an unknown person but this unknown is known by everyone in the audience as the man is so realistically posed that it show cases everyone's condition in that specific situation (provided that it is common to all).

Picture 5: Announcement

This is also just an ironical situation when he announces the context but poses just opposite to it like (hiding his verbal gestures and putting his hand on his mouth). The way he announces while copying the speaker leaves a huge laugh after his words.

Picture 6: Facial expressions at the time of Punch line

Such a beautiful and outstanding climax part of his joke when he non-verbally points out something else but refers another one. At this point, his words create verbal irony. It is a statement in which the speaker's words are incongruous with the speaker's intent. A speaker says one thing while meaning another, resulting in an ironic clash between their intended meaning and their literal meaning. Since the visual sense is dominant for most people, eye contact is an especially important type of nonverbal communication which is superficially adopted by Gill. The way someone looks at someone can communicate many things, including interest, affection, hostility, or attraction.

3. Techniques of persuasive language
Following are the elements of persuasive use of language with analysis:

a) **Use of tropes:** Gill masterfully employs **tropes**—figurative language and rhetorical devices—to enhance his humor, storytelling, and observational comedy. His performances use metaphors, irony, hyperbole, and other tropes to create relativity and amplify comedic impact.

Table1: Use of Tropes

Selected Episodes	Trope Used	Example & Context
Keep It Real	**Hyperbole**	"My dad is an *Excel sheet*." (Exaggerates his father's strictness using a metaphor.)
	Irony	Talking about motivational speakers, he says, "You're ALREADY successful… at talking about success!" (Pointing out the contradiction in self-help gurus.)
	Metaphor	"School was like a prison where the only escape was *homework*." (Compares school to prison to enhance humor.)
Yours Sincerely	**Self-Deprecation**	Jokes about how his childhood self wrote unrealistic goals in a letter: "I thought I'd be a genius by now… turns out, I'm just *me*."
	Juxtaposition	Comparing his childhood ambitions with his current reality for comedic contrast.
Driving School & Cows	**Onomatopoeia** (Trope + Ideophone)	"*Dhhonkk!*—that's the sound of my confidence hitting the curb." (Using sound effects for exaggerated effect.)
	Anecdotal Humor	Dramatic retelling of his driving test disaster with exaggerated details.
Found Letter	**Dramatic Irony**	The audience knows his childhood ambitions were unrealistic before he reads them.

b) **Use of Schemes:** Kanan Gill skillfully employs **schemes**—rhetorical devices that manipulate sentence structure, word order, and patterns—to enhance the rhythm and comedic effect of his storytelling. Few **schemes** used in his performances across different episodes are exemplified in the tabular form:

Table2: Use of Schemes in the selected speeches

Selected Episodes	Scheme Used	Example & Context
Keep It Real	**Parallelism**	"The teachers hate you, the students hate you, and even the furniture hates you." (Repetition of structure for emphasis and humor.)
	Alliteration	"Maths made me miserable." (Enhances rhythm and makes the phrase catchy.)
Yours Sincerely	**Antithesis**	"Back then, I had big dreams. Now, I just dream about sleeping longer." (Contrasts childhood aspirations with adult reality.)

Selected Episodes	Scheme Used	Example & Context
	Epistrophe	"You write a letter, you seal the letter, you lose the letter." (Repetition at the end of phrases for emphasis.)
	Polysyndeton	"I thought I would be rich, and famous, and successful, and everything would be great." (Exaggerates with excessive conjunctions for comedic effect.)
Driving School & Cows	**Asyndeton**	"Driving school was terrifying, nerve-wracking, exhausting, soul-crushing." (Removes conjunctions for dramatic impact.)
	Onomatopoeia (Scheme + Ideophone)	"And then, BAM!—I failed." (Uses sound effect to punch line a joke.)
	Climax	**"First, I learned to start the car. Then, I learned to move the car. Then, I learned… I should never drive again." (Builds up expectations and subverts them.)**
Found Letter	**Hyperbaton** (Unusual word order)	"That letter, I should have burned." (Altering sentence order for comedic drama.)
	Ellipsis	"I thought I'd be a millionaire by now… well." (Leaving out words to let the audience fill in the humor.)
	Repetition	"The letter. The ambitions. The reality. Oh boy." (Short, repeated phrases for dramatic and comedic effect.)

c) **Use of ideophones:** Kanan Gill, known for his observational humor and witty storytelling, often uses **ideophones** (sound-symbolic words) in his performances to enhance comedic effect. These ideophones contribute to the **rhythm, imagery, and exaggeration** in his delivery. Here's a breakdown of some notable uses across his specials:

Table3: Use of Ideophones in his speeches

Selected Episodes	Use of Ideophones	Context & Effect
Keep It Real	*Dhhik!* (impact sound)	Used when mimicking sudden realizations or actions, adding comic exaggeration.
	Tak-tak-tak (repetitive sound)	Mimicking someone doing something quickly or rhythmically, such as using a typewriter.
	Psshhh (spray/swoosh sound)	Used in exaggerated sound effects while describing actions.
Yours Sincerely	*Thunk!* (dull impact sound)	Used when describing awkward or embarrassing incidents, making them funnier.
	Beeeeep (censor sound)	Humorously imitating bleeping when mimicking someone swearing or making mistakes.
	Ding! (lightbulb moment)	Used to emphasize sudden realizations or epiphanies.

Selected Episodes	Use of Ideophones	Context & Effect
Driving School & Cows	*Bruuuuummm* (car engine revving)	Mimicking the sound of a struggling car, adding realism to the story.

Conclusion: Brooks and warren (1970) stated that rhetoric is the art of using language effectively. As a result, early rhetoric is an acquired speaking skill based on talent and technical ability. Rhetoric is an art rather to consider three devices in speech as ethos, pathos, and logos. Gill's comedy relies more on audience expectations, cultural shifts and personal experiences where the style is purely adapted as a story-teller to entertain and to convince his audience. His objective is to create relatable content, to develop understanding even while communicating in his non-native language. He integrates trending topics like relationships, children's behavior, experiences, and social media while avoiding highly controversial areas to maintain a broad audience appeal.

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