

# Multimodality in Stand-up Comedy: A Case of Gestural Triggers and Intonational Cues

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Humor, as a field of research, is a complex and intricate phenomenon that undertakes a cognitive process. This premise can be investigated through two cognitive theories: Clark's (1996) Layering Model and Fauconnier's (1997) Mental Spaces. Clark (1996) explains that the speaker exploits two layers for the "nonserious" discourse to occur, where layer 1 is "the base or foundation" and layer 2 is "like a theatrical stage created on top of it". In other words, humor is conveyed when two (or more) mental spaces clash, which creates incongruity that generates amusement and laughter (See also Giora 1991; Brône 2008; Brône et al. 2015; Tabacaru & Lemmens 2014; Tabacaru 2019). However, this "nonserious" discourse can be conveyed in a more complex way, exploiting both the linguistic and the non-linguistic properties of the language.

Furthermore, research has shown that language as we know it is only a tip of the iceberg. Other invisible or subtle areas include different domains that construct meaning either via linguistic manifestations (discourse, prosody) or via non-linguistic manifestations (facial expressions, gestures). Drawing from previous findings, Tabacaru (2019) and Tabacaru & Lemmens (2014) have looked at multimodality in humor, exploring the linguistic and non-linguistic elements that create humor. Their findings show that certain facial expressions (e.g., raised eyebrows) help the listener understand the humorous message and guide them to shift from a serious layer to a non-serious one. Many others have investigated prosody and have chosen sarcasm as a research subject in humorous discourse. For instance, Bryant and Gibbs (2015) found that, in sarcastic instances, the speaker either lowers or raises their pitch, or slows down when uttering their punchline. This suggests that multimodality as a non-linguistic element of conversation is exploited in humorous interactions.

In order to investigate the multimodal aspect of humor, the present study combines the verbal and the non-verbal elements of language. For such an analysis, the corpus chosen is Trevor Noah's Netflix Special "Son of Patricia." This study tries to unravel the subtle properties of how humor is conveyed, therefore, the central question is: How do multimodal cues work in favor to convey humor in the context of stand-up comedy? Since multimodality is a means to show the intention of the speaker, this study tries to investigate whether facial expressions and prosody co-occur in discourse, or if the presence of either facial expressions or prosody is sufficient for conveying humor. Therefore, we try to connect these non-verbal triggers to humor so as to examine the subtle aspects of humor.

The hour long special was analyzed by using ELAN in order to have a closer look at both facial expressions and gestures. These annotations were then analyzed on PRAAT in order to examine the prosodic markers of humor. Results show that there were no signs of prosody alone, i.e., without either facial expressions or gestures. However, there were instances where either facial expressions or gestures alone generated humor.

The aim for this research is to combine all these variables to investigate the cognitive aspects of humor.

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