An Introduction into the Mechanisms of Offensive Humor. A Pragmatic Approach to Offensive Stand-Up Comedy Humor

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Summary:

The present study attempts to explore and illustrate the most essential mechanisms that maneuver utterances into being perceived as humorous and/or offensive based on a corpus collected from George Carlin's, Jimmy Carr's and Jim Jefferies' stand-up comedy performances.

Stand-up comedians are the standard-bearers of the progress in humor since they are the ones who push at the boundaries in order to joke about issues that would have generated no humor before. Offensive stand-up comedians, who are responsible for broadening the range of subjects covered in stand-up routines, maintain originality and freshness in comedy as well as assume the risk to take their audience closer to the dividing line between humor and offense. The closer the audience feel to the edge, the more humor they seem to perceive. However, once the elusive line is crossed, humor perception decreases and the sense of feeling offended emerges. The dividing line is highly subjective, and it varies from person to person. Some people find absolutely no humor in edgy stand-up comedy, some others feel outraged to see certain subjects and situations being joked about, yet another group of people take offense at certain issues but laugh at others, and some other people find offensive humor hilarious as it is. There are people who take offense very easily, and some others are hard to offend. Most of us, however, tend to be selective as to what issues we find laughable. This study attempts to find out what lies behind the different perceptions by revealing the intriguing complexity behind the utterances performed onstage by the above-mentioned three comedians.

In order to understand audience response to different kinds of offensive jokes, there are several areas this study needed to investigate first. The paper gives an introduction to each of these areas, and elaborates on the basic and necessary concepts that are essential for the analysis and comprehension of the inner mechanisms that lie beneath the process that starts with the utterance and ends with an effect on the audience. Each chapter describes, explains and

exemplifies the theories and phenomena within a range of necessity for the purpose of this study, and does not pretend to be exhaustive in the areas it covers. Each discussed concept directly connects to aspects of the collected corpus, and therefore, the examples that illustrate the introduced concepts are taken directly from the corpus. Concepts and theories that are less relevant or prove to be insignificant for the purpose of this study remain unattended.

The first chapter revolves around the concept of humor, and introduces theories that strive to explain why humor is perceived in certain situations. Apart from cognitive-perceptual, socio-behavioral and psychoanalytical approaches, the semantic script-based theory and the general theory of verbal humor are also closely viewed, where humor is treated from a structural viewpoint. The most common structural paradigm is ambiguity-based. Therefore, ambiguity is introduced from lexical, phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic viewpoints. Most importantly, offensive humor theories are presented, among which Thomas Veatch's "violation of the subjective moral principle" theory proves to be a central and recurrent element of this study.

As far as humor theories are concerned, it has been found that the discussed theories are fully applicable to the corpus entries, which often take action in the brain simultaneously. Hostility or superiority theory tells us about how the sense of feeling superior to the butt (target) of the joke provokes a humorous perception in an audience. People have often found others' misery laughable and amusing. Whether it is slipping on a banana peel (and other such gags) or being verbally ridiculed, it has generally the same effect, it increases the sense of superiority in the perceiver. When misogynistic jokes are told, men tend to feel superior to women, which is one factor from the many why such jokes can be (but not necessarily are) funny to men. A sense of morality may prevent someone from laughing out loud in an everyday context, but the first reflex that occurs when the element of superiority is suddenly felt has been observed to be laughter. In stand-up comedy such sense of superiority is permitted without feeling inhibited or being labeled as rude. This is exactly when release theory can be applied. Surprising incidents, exaggerated hostility, taboo subjects and profanity all raise tension, which has to be released. In stand-up comedy the means to relieve the tension is primarily laughter. In offensive stand-up comedy both hostility and tension are prevalent, which concludes that a bigger amount of energy created requires a more intense reaction. This reaction, apart from louder or longer laughter, can be clapping, cheering, whistling or, if certain boundaries are crossed and the joke is deemed offensive rather than humorous, the audience may relieve tension by groaning and booing.

The semantic script-based theory and the incongruity theory provide explanation for humor that is based on types of ambiguity. Merely being hostile to a target group may not be enough to generate humor. The desired effect is achieved by different factors, especially when they occur at the same time. It has been noticed that the more stimuli one is subjected to, the more humor is created, provided the complexity of channels through which humor is transmitted can be understood. By studying the mechanism of puns, more can be revealed about the complexity of certain jokes, and analysis becomes possible. Jokes based on puns are predestined to humor. It has been stated and demonstrated that the incongruity caused by the sudden appearance of the second script with the help of a script-switch trigger calls for a restoration of order in the perceiver's mind. Rebuilding the isotopy of the text by working out the new meaning of the signifiant requires an effort on the part of the audience, and as soon as the puzzle is solved, the absurdity is revealed, humor perception becomes available, and laughter restores order. On the other hand, humor develops, and people's minds are well conditioned to look for puns in language, especially in the context of stand-up comedy, and therefore, puns can become predictable. However, offensive stand-up comedy is still something of a novelty, and considered edgy, which is why puns are rooted in taboos. Immoral puns are hostile (hostility theory), create tension (release theory), and are based on ambiguity (script-based / incongruity theory), which is why humor is perceived on many levels. Moreover, they are mostly unexpected, and therefore, unpredictable. The element of surprise is one of the key conditions of humor perception.

The second chapter provides an insight into the conventions of stand-up comedy, where humor occurs in a very specific context, the understanding of which is prerequisite for analyzing pragmatic factors that surround the jokes. The chapter sums up significant aspects of the setting, the character of the comedian, and the audience. The venue and the time of a performance predispose the audience for an event, which has a crucial influence on audience response. The charisma and the personality of the comedian play roles of utmost importance, surrounded by a myriad of other small, albeit influential components that are assembled together with meticulous care. The composition of the audience is just as important as other factors since no two audiences are the same. Concepts such as "group dynamics" and "willing suspension of disbelief" have an impact on the recorded audience response. Beside the genre's conventions, one of the most often debated issues in offensive stand-up comedy is what comedians can joke about, and whether there are subjects that are off-limits in stand-up comedy. Finally, the significance of the concept

of observational comedy, self-deprecation, and canned jokes is pointed out since these strategies largely occur in stand-up comedy, and each represent an *a priori* humorous fundament based on which the offensive layer is built.

Having been introduced to the context and having understood indispensible facets of humor and stand-up comedy, we are directed toward the pragmatic means by which the complexity of mechanisms can be revealed. Pragmatics is the central scientific field of this study, and analysis is made with the help of pragmatic tools. The chapter introduces a variety of pragmatic denotations and theories, which pinpoint and explain the inner workings of human communication. The study of speech acts, implicatures, the concepts of politeness and impoliteness, deixis, markedness, content and relationship, the concept of object vs. metalanguage, the difference between digital and analogic communication, and several other concepts that belong to these subchapters establishes a theoretical base upon which processes can be identified, named and explained. Understanding how human communication works and what pragmatic elements make up meaning proves to be paramount for the present study. It is the rules of communication that jokes violate, so rules must be clearly determined and illustrated so that violations can be recognized and analyzed. The relevance of each introduced concept is demonstrated on corpus entries, followed by detailed explanation as to how the discussed phenomenon functions and how it contributes to humor perception. Utterances have been analyzed in context and have become transparent in that they have revealed the elements that affect meaning. Utterances have illocutionary and perlocutionary force and perlocutionary effect. Comedians play with that force so that they attain the desired effect. Primarily, jokes inherently have to violate certain rules of human communication, and it turns out that offensive comedy, as opposed to innocent jokes, violates a series of rules at the same time. As said before, the more stimuli are given to the perceiver, the more channels open up through which humorous force can be transmitted. The mind strives to disambiguate the elements of an utterance by selecting the meanings that are most appropriate and plausible in the given context. On the other hand, jokes insert a violation into this logic so that new isotopies can be created, the comprehension of which requires an effort. The perceiver has to understand the rules of communication within the context of the joke, and has to seek the logic of the utterance that results in humor. A deictic term in everyday interaction must have a clear reference in order to be understood, and the reference has to respect other rules of communication (such as maxims of all sorts) for it to make sense.

However, deictic terms that are used in jokes for humor purposes will refer to the unexpected element. Utterances in everyday interactions state one thing but may implicate something else, which makes sense in the given context. Implicatures in jokes are more complex, unexpected and they require a bigger effort to be understood. When a series of stimuli have been processed by the brain and the intended meaning has been understood, the perceiver tends to signal the end of the process by reacting to the performed utterance. This reaction is laughter if the joke results in humor perception. Laughter does not only signal comprehension, but also functions as a reward for the comedian and for the self for having been able to deduce the intended meaning and having found humor. If the stimulus is weak, too obvious, or if it does not require an effort, the reaction will also be weak with reduced or no humor perception. If the complexity of the processes has not resulted in detecting the violation (of any aspect of communication) in the joke, the perceiver will fail to see humor in it. Offensive stand-up comedy humor strives to maximize the amount of stimuli that reach the perceiver's mind, yet at the same time tries to stay within the audience's comprehension level. The offensive layer cannot be built on a weak stimulus in a joke because the force carried by the joke's offensiveness will be bigger than the humorous force. The strength and the complexity of the stimuli are highly affected by the performance of the comedian, who is fully aware of the conventions of the situation. Comedians use different strategies to increase the humorous effect of their acts. Timing is one such crucial component, and the effect of the stage persona's charisma can also be detected when analyzing an extract. Group dynamics in the audience, the status of the comedian in the public eye will also influence the perception of jokes. Comedians, however, tend to push at the boundaries, and often cross the line. These boundaries are extremely elusive and only become visible when they have been crossed.

The concepts of offensiveness and immorality are contrasted and elaborated in the next chapter, which offers a more philosophical and psychological approach to the study. The possible effects of taboo subjects and taboo words on an audience are delineated, and the concept of disgust is examined. Offensiveness is also approached from an entirely psychological perspective in the form of a recorded private communication with a psychotherapist. The psychological viewpoint illustrates the problem from the angle of self-esteem, and concludes that people react according to the programs implemented in them (e. g. moral codes) and the "harm" done by these programs (affective moral principles). The bigger the "harm" (i.e. the more

sensitive someone is to an issue), the lower one's self-esteem tends to be, and the more likely it is that the person will take offense. However, if the attack perceived in the joke triggers no program, it is a signal for high self-esteem and the perceiver of the joke is more likely to break down the situation into humorous interpretations. The psychological explanations support the "moral principle" theory, and the empirical research also tends to show results along these lines. The theory has been applied and exemplified during corpus analysis, building up the qualitative results of the study, where all components have been pinpointed, the totality of which comprise the perlocutionary effect of the jokes.

Chapters five, six, and seven introduce one stand-up comedian each, focusing on information that sheds light on the comedian's image, style, and delivery, all of which are directly connected to how the comedian's jokes are received. The comedians' stage persona as well as their real-life personality is contrasted, their assets and skills are discussed, and their status in the public eye is detailed, which includes press and media views, and criticism directed to them, all of which affect the audience directly or indirectly. The extent to which the audience is willing to tolerate, accept, or embrace offensiveness is partly due to such factors. Each of these chapters presents and analyzes the comedians' most typical onstage strategy with the help of a corpus entry with the purpose to reflect on the processes that result in the recorded audience response.

The study contains an empirical research carried out with the involvement of one hundred young adults, which examines the relationship between the extent of the offense taken by the subjects and the extent of their perception of humor, all based on watched stand-up comedy extracts. The results are presented through certain filters that contrast a violation of some kind perceived in the joke with the subject's moral commitment to the violated principle. The results are compared with the discussed theories and the analyzed corpus entries. They serve to complement the theoretical assumptions and the qualitative analysis of the exploratory research with quantitative data.

The study is completed with a qualitative analysis of the corpus entries. Corpus analysis is repeatedly carried out throughout the study, but each such description focuses on the demonstration of one specific phenomenon. The function of a more extensive corpus analysis is to approach entries from all possible viewpoints introduced earlier in the study in order to reveal all the processes and mechanisms in action behind the patterns of stand-up routines recorded in

the corpus. By revealing the complexity of constituents in each extract and by applying the presented theories and demonstrations to them, a better understanding is gained as to how humor perception works in the context of offensive stand-up comedy. The corpus entries are transcribed according to conventions explained in the next chapter, and QR codes are provided to make the video entries available.

The title of the study suggests that the subject being discussed in the paper is viewed as an introduction to the mechanisms that revolve around offensive humor. This means that an overview of the touched areas is provided to brief and guide the reader into the essential concepts, theories, conventions and rules that enable full comprehension of the analysis. Overall, the study has offered a pragmatic insight into the conditions that make offensive humor work within the context of current stand-up comedy, which has been done by gathering together, illustrating and exemplifying the essential concepts regarding humor, stand-up comedy, pragmatics and offense, analyzing empirical results, and creating qualitative corpus analysis.