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Communication and Language Analysis in the Public Sphere

Chapter 23

Standing-Up to the Politics of Comedy

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the discourses of the U.S.'s 10 top-earning comedians in 2009 and 2010 through systematic textual analyses. Building from two prior case studies and working toward a communicative worldview for comedy as a pervasive mode of public communication, the results indicate that there are several generic clusters emerging across these acts involving rhetorics of optimism, uncertainty, individualism, and others. Many distinctive characteristics in the comedians' messages are also noted. Through such practices, humorists advance a language with political significance—so this essay draws several connections and implications regarding comic discourses in public culture.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who makes you laugh is always doing more than just that. -Provenza & Dion, 2010, p. xvii.

Across the spheres of entertainment, politics, and beyond, we are living in an era inundated with comedy. From sitcoms to YouTube parodies, the Internet, television, and other public forums are abuzz with comic discourses. Late-night programs like *The Daily Show* filter each day's events through a humorous lens, while paradoxically, political candidates are both mocked by and seek to appear on *Saturday Night Live*. Once a year, even U.S. presidents are expected to go beyond their State of the Union address and perform a stand-up comedy monologue to the nation.

Over the past decade, communication scholars have been at the forefront of these trends, critically analyzing the manifold dimensions and effects of humorous texts. Communication research has debated and explored the conventions and forms in mostly political comedy, including its potential to advance or undermine democratic discourses (Baym, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Day, 2011; Feldman & Young, 2008; Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009; Hariman, 2008; Hart & Hartelius, 2007; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Holbert, 2005; Jones, 2005; Lamarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009; Meddaugh, 2010; Pfau, Cho, and Chong, 2001; Shifman, 2007; Smith & Voth, 2002; Xenos & Becker, 2009; Waisanen 2009, 2011c, 2013).

Researchers have also shown how varying kinds of humor can be radical or conservative

(Christiansen and Hanson 1996; Greene 2008; Thompson 2009), and function to both limit and liberate (Atakav 2010; Lavoie 2010; Lockyer and Pickering 2009; Lynch, 2002; White 2010) or divide and unite audiences in their outlooks and appeals (Meyer 1997, 2000). A next step in these efforts is to engage comic texts with wider, more systematic approaches highlighting their common and distinctive features (Waisanen, 2011a, 2011b). Accordingly, my project seeks to expand discussions from emphases upon comedy in politics to a broader inquiry into the politics of comedy.

Many people consider comedy nothing more than lighthearted entertainment. From a communicative perspective, however, there is much more to these types of acts than passing judgments might suggest. Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) find, for example, that while comedy often privileges readings of its content as harmless, its "generic conventions and textual devices" can sometimes undermine reflective criticism and "naturalize[s] racial differences" (p. 157). All forms of public discourse are invitations to view the world in certain ways, and are thus inescapably suasive and political in focusing or deflecting various phenomena from public attention (see Black, 1970; Burke, 1969; Morris, 2002; Wander, 1984). The strategic engineering of modern comedy texts thus deserves attention that is more critical. Indeed, jokes and argument forms share many features (Conley, 2004). Fine and Wood (2010) also contend that "jokes and joke-telling serve complex political ends. . . . Humor, no longer a matter of amusement alone, becomes a topic of shared concern, a social problem" (pp. 299-300), just as stand-up comics create spaces of "social and cultural mediation" (Mintz, 1985, p. 78).

As Hart (2000) argues, "when viewed rhetorically . . . politics becomes repositioned. It no longer involves just a set of power vectors but also a relational grammar" (p. 27). He even states that "by taking campaign texts seriously and even *by taking unserious texts seriously* [emphasis added] (Jay Leno comes to mind, as

does *Politically Incorrect*)," scholars can track how language teaches, preaches, and sensitizes various audiences (Hart, 2000, pp. 8-10). These comments echo recent calls for more standardized analyses in humor research; as Hurley, Dennett, and Adams (2011) note, "it would be interesting to see if there are notable patterns discernible in the history of humor creation, like the patterns we find in musical composition, poetry, etc.," raising two questions: "what progression (or even progress!) in style of content can be charted" and "how important is structural or thematic novelty" in comedic texts (p. 277)?

As one set of authors has said, if politics is a "struggle over alternative realities, then language is the medium that reflects, advances, and interprets these alternatives" (Callaghan & Schnell, 2005, p. 2). At the same time, communication critics need to focus on structural rhetorical forms, or "certain ways of thinking, of viewing the world . . . that are not necessarily implied by the substance of the discourse" (Hahn, 2003, p. 70). As such, unlike studies of explicitly political comedy, this article argues that comedy is already political through the symbols and structures comedians employ in their performances. The organizing themes and structures of comedy urge audiences to laugh, but also to take on certain interpretive commitments. Like Day (2011), I do not attribute causality to isolated texts, but instead see the accumulation of such discourses as warranting more comprehensive investigation.

My project uses and rounds out the frameworks and concepts developed from two prior, exploratory individual case studies of Dennis Miller and Joan Rivers (see Waisanen, 2011a, 2011b) to chart a broader, more genre-focused investigation of multiple prominent comedians. My explorations of Miller and Rivers led directly to the following research question: what is common and distinctive across, and not simply within, different comedians' acts? Using *DICTION*, this study will systematically examine the converging and diverging discourses of the U.S.'s 10 richest

comedians from 2009 and 2010, asking what characteristics they exhibit as contributions to public culture. These individuals were drawn from *Forbes* magazine's 2009 and 2010 lists of America's top-earning comedians (Rose, 2009, 2010). There are many criteria by which the comedians might have been selected, but I have chosen to use income as at least a partial indicator of these comedians' popularity or public prominence—that is, starting from the vantage point of those who could be considered “at the top of their game.” Transcripts were typed of every word spoken in the last stand-up comedy album (DVD or CD format) to date for the following 10 top-earning U.S. comedians: Bill Engvall (Berstein & Higby, 2009), Chelsea Handler (Miller & Rickabaugh, 2008), Chris Rock (Callner & Gladstein, 2008), Dane Cook (Cook et. al, 2009), George Lopez (Jaramillo, 2009), Jeff Dunham (Marmel, 2007), Jeff Foxworthy (Williams & Foxworthy, 2004), Jerry Seinfeld (Callner, 1998), Larry the Cable Guy (Higby & Bernstein, 2007), and Russell Peters (Peters & Peters, 2008).

Extended methodological justifications for using DICTION with specifically comic texts can be found in Waisanen (2011a, 2011b), but there are some additional points worth making relative to the current analysis. I would argue that stand-up comedy is one of the most fundamental arenas available for analyzing trends in contemporary comedy. It is true that many comics come from backgrounds in other areas such as improv and sketch. But public joke-making is still at the root of most writing and performance in the U.S. comedy scene—whether in talk-shows, sitcoms, comedy films, speeches, or other forums. As an incredibly singular act, it is also the form of discourse most likely to detail each comedian's personal rhetoric, as distinct from other texts that involve more collaborative performances.

As I have noted previously, communication scholarship on public comedy has mostly studied audience effects or used interpretive readings of humorous artifacts (Waisanen, 2011a, 2011b). This project finds an alternative to these approaches,

examining comedians' political-communicative visions through more methodical language analysis. For this analysis, DICTION's advantage over other programs is in not only comparing a group of texts, but in juxtaposing how those texts are compared to the many other texts in its database, which holds the potential to generate internal (textual) and external (contextual) insights about the discourses under investigation. Lastly, in addition to my previous studies' explanations about how the potentially sub-textual or polysemic meanings of satirical or ironic language are still amenable to this kind of analysis, it is worth pointing out a recent reception study, which found that even if jokes are missed, audience members often still “get the message” in comedic texts (Johnson, del Rio, & Kemmitt, 2010, p. 396).

Similar to my two previous DICTION studies, I find several distinct clusters emerging across these acts, in which the comedians largely project rhetorics of optimism, uncertainty, and individualism, among others. At the same time, numerous distinctive characteristics of these discourses are also noted. Overall, I conclude that these communicative themes and differences demonstrate stand-up comedy's strengths and weaknesses as a contribution to public discourse. As such, several connections and implications will be drawn regarding the possibilities and limitations of this popular type of messaging.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Table 1 highlights the complete results from this analysis. DICTION lists normal “low” (with a standard deviation of -1) and “high” (with a standard deviation of +1) ranges for each variable when comparing a text's features with general discursive norms (constructed from a database of around 20,000 previously analyzed texts in contemporary discourse). To follow DICTION's statistical procedures, but also to make explanations of what was both common and unique to the comedians clearer, I assigned the values of very

Table 1. DICTION variables and ranges for each of the 10 top-earning comedians

	Bill Engvall	Chelsea Handler	Chris Rock	Dane Cook	George Lopez	Jeff Dunham	Jeff Foxworthy	Jerry Seinfeld	Larry the Cable Guy	Russell Peters
Very High	OPTIMISM, self-reference, ambivalence, self-reference, satisfaction, past concern, motion	OPTIMISM, self-reference, satisfaction, human interest, motion	OPTIMISM, self-reference, praise, satisfaction, present concern, human interest, past concern, motion	OPTIMISM, REALISM, variety, self-reference, passivity, present concern, human interest, motion	OPTIMISM, REALISM, satisfaction, temporal terms, present concern, human interest, motion	OPTIMISM, variety, self-reference, satisfaction, passivity, human interest, motion	OPTIMISM, ambivalence, self-reference, satisfaction, blame, human interest, motion	REALISM, self-reference, satisfaction, blame, present concern, human interest, motion	OPTIMISM, leveling terms, satisfaction, past concern, motion	REALISM, self-reference, blame, cognition, present concern, human interest
High	concreteness	REALISM, present concern	blame	leveling terms, praise, satisfaction	self-reference, blame, passivity, past concern	ACTIVITY, praise, present concern	REALISM, past concern	variety	variety	insistence, ambivalence, satisfaction
Medium	ACTIVITY, REALISM, COMMONALITY, praise, embellishment, leveling terms, cognition, temporal terms, present concern, human interest, denial	COMMONALITY, embellishment, numerical terms, ambivalence, praise, blame, cognition, diversity, passivity, temporal terms, past concern	CERTAINTY, ACTIVITY, REALISM, COMMONALITY, insistence, denial, embellishment, numerical terms, ambivalence, communication, passivity, temporal terms, liberation	ACTIVITY, COMMONALITY, embellishment, ambivalence, blame, accomplishment, cognition, temporal terms	ACTIVITY, COMMONALITY, numerical terms, praise, inspiration, concreteness, rapport, exclusion, denial	REALISM, COMMONALITY, embellishment, numerical terms, ambivalence, tenacity, communication, temporal terms, past concern	ACTIVITY, COMMONALITY, embellishment, numerical terms, praise, communication, passivity, temporal terms, concreteness, diversity, liberation, present concern	OPTIMISM, ACTIVITY, COMMONALITY, past concern, embellishment, exclusion, ambivalence, leveling terms, praise, denial, hardship, aggression, communication, passivity, familiarity, temporal terms, concreteness	ACTIVITY, REALISM, COMMONALITY, present concern, human interest, numerical terms, praise, communication, spatial terms, past concern, denial, motion	OPTIMISM, COMMONALITY, embellishment, numerical terms, leveling terms, praise, communication, spatial terms, past concern, denial, motion
Low	numerical terms, collectives, blame, communication, passivity, diversity, exclusion, liberation	ACTIVITY, insistence, tenacity, leveling terms, aggression, denial, communication, concreteness, rapport, cooperation, exclusion, liberation	leveling terms, hardship, aggression, cognition, spatial terms, rapport, cooperation, diversity, exclusion	insistence, numerical terms, spatial terms, familiarity, past concern, rapport, cooperation, exclusion, liberation, denial	CERTAINTY, insistence, embellishment, variety, ambivalence, leveling terms, aggression, accomplishment, spatial terms, centrality, cooperation, liberation	insistence, collectives, blame, communication, diversity, exclusion, liberation	insistence, tenacity, leveling terms, aggression, cognition, accomplishment, denial, spatial terms, exclusion, rapport, cooperation	insistence, numerical terms, aggression, inspiration, accomplishment, cognition, rapport, cooperation, liberation	insistence, embellishment, tenacity, aggression, cooperation, exclusion, liberation, denial	CERTAINTY, tenacity, inspiration, aggression, passivity, temporal terms, rapport, exclusion, liberation
Very Low	CERTAINTY, tenacity, insistence, rapport, complexity, hardship, aggression, centrality, inspiration, spatial terms, accomplishment, familiarity, cooperation	CERTAINTY, variety, complexity, collectives, inspiration, accomplishment, spatial terms, familiarity, centrality	variety, complexity, inspiration, accomplishment, familiarity, concreteness, centrality	CERTAINTY, complexity, tenacity, collectives, inspiration, aggression, concreteness, centrality, diversity	complexity, tenacity, collectives, cognition, familiarity, diversity	CERTAINTY, rapport, denial, complexity, leveling terms, inspiration, hardship, aggression, accomplishment, cognition, spatial terms, familiarity, centrality	CERTAINTY, complexity, collectives, inspiration, familiarity, centrality	CERTAINTY, complexity, collectives, spatial terms, centrality, diversity	CERTAINTY, variety, rapport, collectives, inspiration, accomplishment, familiarity, centrality	ACTIVITY, variety, complexity, collectives, accomplishment, familiarity, concreteness, centrality, cooperation, diversity

low (SD = -1.0 and less), low (SD = -.99 to -.50), medium (SD = -.49 to +.49), high (SD = +.49 to +.99), and very high (SD = +1.0 and more) to each variable. In Table 1, the master variables are presented in upper-case, while the subaltern variables are in lower-case.

By running DICTION on each individual's transcript and then comparing and contrasting the categories across Table 1, conceptual similarities and differences could be easily viewed—providing a sense of the most distinctive elements and general, core clusters arising within and across the comedians' texts. Toward this end, I organized the categories around central areas emerging in the results, noting dissimilarities where appropriate. As with my two prior case studies, the results supported mapping these sections around some of the master variables (as composites of the other variables), but other themes also emerged. This section organizes these categories from clusters exhibiting the most similarities to areas where there is greater divergence among the comics.

Critical Positivity

By far the most surprising finding in this study relates to the comedians' scorings on the master variable optimism. Almost every comedian scored very high on this composite category (except Seinfeld and Peters, who both fell in the medium range). This result confirms a finding from my two prior case studies (Waisanen, 2011a, 2011b), demonstrating that optimistic language use appears to be far from simply coincidental in top stand-up comics' rhetorics. This result also counters much longstanding thought on the ins and outs of comedy. From Aristotle, who felt the very essence of comedy "rested in some . . . defect" (Speier, 1998, p. 1372) to contemporary critics of comedy, who often level charges of cynicism and detachment against this form of communication (see Peterson, 2008), optimism is not a concept that is always associated with comedic rhetoric. As I mentioned in the other studies, even practitioners assert that a strong negative opinion is the critical ingredient in stand-up comedy (Carter, 2001). If

the texts had been examined in an unsystematic fashion, however, this finding might not have become apparent.

Optimism entails "language endorsing some person, group, concept or event or highlighting their positive entailments" in *DICTION*'s (2000) processing (p. 43). With a few exceptions highlighted by the regular (i.e. non-"master") variables, the stand-up performances were filled with optimistic wording. As much as comic acts might denigrate existing conditions, they also appear to be playfully focused on the "normative." That is, as much as a comedy might critique problems, it also continually invokes the hope that things could be better. Critics of comedy who see the form as wholly "cynical" have likely missed this other half of the comic equation, which would appear to comport with Booth's (1974) observation that "affirming and denying are rhetorically interchangeable. Every protest implies an affirmative ground for protest; [and] every affirmation implies many negations" (p. 195).

In fact, all of the comedians scored very high (except Cook and Peters, who scored a close "high") on the satisfaction variable, or words dealing with "positive affective states," "moments of undiminished joy," and pleasure, nurturance, and triumph (Hart, 2000, p. 247). Corresponding to this generally upbeat language throughout each of the transcripts, levels of denial terms unexpectedly only landed in the very low to medium ranges. Dunham scored very low, Handler, Foxworthy, Cook, and Larry the Cable Guy (hereafter, LCG) scored low, and the rest fit in the medium category for such words, which are marked by "standard negative contractions" and "negative function words" (*DICTION*, 2000, p. 44).

Hardship terms were also very low for Engvall, Cook, Dunham, and Foxworthy, low for Handler, Rock, Lopez, LCG, and Peters, and only medium for Seinfeld. Hardship includes words dealing with "censurable human behavior," "unsavory political

outcomes," "natural disasters," and "incapacities" (p. 247). At the same time, terms of praise, which are "affirmations of some person, group, or abstract entity" (p. 247), all had medium to very high scores (with Rock very high, Dunham and Cook high, and the rest on medium). Aside from slight variations in the frequency of such terms across the comedians, the broad direction across most of these relevant variables was toward a positively-inflected rhetoric.

Yet some qualifications should be noted. This project concentrated on comedians who are celebrities and financially well-off, so this optimism may be partially related to issues of class. It would be interesting to know if this optimism might hold for a group of struggling humorists. There may also be distinctions worth parsing out further between what has been classically characterized as "Juvenalian" versus "Horatian" types of satire. As Holbert et. al (2011) find, the former is a far more tragic, aggressive form of satire, while the latter connotes a lighter, less merciless approach to creating mirth. It could be the case the top comedians implicitly pursue a horatian rather than juvenalian form of satire to encourage the most accepting responses possible from broad audiences. Additionally, there was some noteworthy variation along the blame variable. Partly, this may be due to individual styles for "terms designating social inappropriateness," "downright evil," "unfortunate circumstances," "unplanned vicissitudes," and "outright denigrations" (Hart, 2000, p. 247). No one scored very low, and while Engvall and Dunham scored low on this category, Handler, Cook, and LCG were medium, Rock and Lopez high, and Peters, Foxworthy, and Seinfeld very high. This finding suggests varying amounts of denunciating language threaded throughout the acts. Overall, I would argue that some of these results make further sense when related to the next master variable finding.

Perplexing Phenomena

A second consistent, surprising finding across the results involves comedic uncertainty. Again, this result confirms a general finding from my two prior case studies (Waisanen, 2011a, 2011b). All the comedians scored very low on the master variable certainty, except Lopez and Peters, who had close low scores, and Rock, who landed in the medium range. Certainty centers upon "language indicating resoluteness, inflexibility, and completeness and a tendency to speak *ex cathedra*" (DICTION, 2000, p. 42). Contrary to perspectives that might see stand-up comedy as a monologic, dogmatic act, such high degrees of uncertain language use may indicate that, while comics pronounce and denounce, they generally do so with considerable hesitation and respect for the limits of human action. This finding makes sense when one considers the tone of utter bafflement that permeates comedic acts, suggesting that comedians largely find their world a puzzling place, one that their humor struggles to make sense of and possibly placate. Rock's higher score on this variable might be expected given his trademark unrelenting and indicting tone. Yet his having landed only in the medium range is still quite telling.

Moreover, many of DICTION's regular variables support the uncertainty theme, with some caveats. Complexity was one of only two variables in which every comedian fit within the same range. All scored very low on this calculated variable, which is "a simple measure of the average number of characters-per-word in a given input file" (DICTION, 2000, p. 47), promoting Flesch's (1951) notion "that convoluted phrasings make a text's ideas abstract and its implications unclear" (DICTION, 2000, p. 47). The comedians used simple terms, likely fueled by the need to translate or mainstream messages for broad audiences. Clarity is necessary to "getting" setups and punch lines. Yet complexity also relates to the uncertainty finding in highlighting how more complex, conceptual

grasps of phenomena appear to be mostly bypassed by the comedians' very wordings.

Most of the comedians had very low tenacity terms (with the exception of Handler, Foxworthy, Seinfeld, and Peters, who were merely low on this category—and Dunham, who had a medium score). These words document "verbs connot[ing] confidence and totality" (Hart, 2000, p. 246). Together with accomplishment terms, or "words expressing task-completion" and "organized human behavior" (DICTION, 2000, p. 45), they were very low in the acts analyzed (apart from Lopez, Foxworthy, and Seinfeld on low and Cook on medium). As also highlighted in Waisanen (2011b), the transcripts evidenced what might be characterized as a discourse of "process" rather than "product." Stand-up comedians take their audiences on a tentative journey. But it is not a trip to a final destination or a discourse full of reified language. Instead, the comedy seems to serve largely expressive aims (see Gregg, 1971), providing only qualified hope to the baffling nature of the present.

All the comedians had very low levels of inspiration terms, except for Seinfeld and Peters's low and Lopez's medium scores. These words focus on "abstract virtues deserving of universal respect" (DICTION, 2000, p. 44). Similarly, all the comics had very low uses of familiarity terms, with the exception of Cook's low and Seinfeld's medium scores. Like inspiration, familiarity terms constitute "the most common words in the English language" (p. 46), spotlighting the comedians fairly idiosyncratic, simple word choices, and their general avoidance of standardized terms or adherence to orthodox cultural language patterns.

A few unique qualities emerged in the results, however. The range of scores on ambivalence terms, "expressing hesitation or uncertainty, implying a speaker's inability or unwillingness to commit to the verbalization being made" (DICTION, 2000, p. 43) went from low to high (with the majority on medium, Engvall and Foxworthy on very high, Peters on high, and Lopez on low).

In total, each act reveals much uncertain wording, but the degree of hedging and restraint throughout the acts may bear some stylistic variations, indicating that stand-ups like Lopez, for instance, may be slightly less likely to deflate the force of their claims. Greater deviations are evident in leveling terms, which "ignore individual differences and build a sense of completeness and assurance" (p. 42) (Dunham scored very low, Handler, Rock, Lopez, Foxworthy low, and Seinfeld, Peters, Engvall medium; but Cook scored high and LCG very high). While the master variables tend to be more telling than the individual variables about the general lack of certainty across the comedians, in some cases comics appear to be more totalizing and resolute than others.

The same conclusion might be reached from the insistence calculated variable results (the majority scored low, with Engvall on very low, Rock on medium, and Peters on high). *DICTION* assumes on this dimension that a "repetition of key terms indicates a preference for a limited, ordered world" (Hart, 2001, p. 50). At the same time, numerical terms, which involve "any sum, date, or product specifying the facts in a given case" (*DICTION*, 2000, p. 43) and generally "hyper-specify a claim, thus detracting from its universality" (p. 43) produced only medium scores for the majority of the comics (except Engvall, Cook, and Seinfeld, who scored low).

Generally, while the 10 top-earning U.S. comedians tend to maintain a critical positivity, this positivity is characterized by a perplexed orientation. These comics sustain a hopeful rhetoric, but it's a short-term, non-dogmatic, process-driven commitment that finds much of life mystifying and bemusing. At least in these cases, and given the world's problems, comedy creates a temporary shelter, a field of vision offering hope in individual perceptions. The next theme emerging from the results further reveals these connections among uncertainty, optimism, and other findings.

Ego-Driven Scope

Individualism constituted a third area around which the results largely clustered. Similar to the results from Waisanen (2011a, 2011b), this theme resulted as much from anti-social as individualistic words. All of the comedians scored very high on self-reference terms, except Lopez, who was in the close high range. These words are "all first person references" (Hart, 2000, p. 247). In one sense, the very self-driven, singular performance of stand-up can be related to this approach. The self-reference variable also provides a reliable indexing "whereby the locus of action appears to reside in the speaker and not in the world at large (thereby implicitly acknowledging the speaker's limited vision)" (p. 247). The individualism theme has political implications, as comic messengers view the world's events through perspectives that do not appear to go far beyond their own.

All the comedians scored very low on centrality words (except Lopez, who scored low), which denote "institutional regularities and/or substantive agreement on core values" (*DICTION*, 2000, p. 43) (a finding that also relates to the uncertainty theme). On this characteristic, stand-up comedians tend not to observe typical cultural or organizational patterns, eschewing outside sources of authority. At the same time, the individualism theme was supported by every comedian scoring very low (except Dunham and Engvall, who were low) on collective words, which "reflect a dependence on categorical modes of thought" (Hart, 2000, p. 246).

Furthermore, on cooperation words, "designating behavioral interactions among people that often result in a group product" (*DICTION*, 2000, p. 48), all the comedians scored low (with Engvall and Peters on very low). Constructing a worldview grounded in the self's visions and demands, most of the comedians scored low (with Dunham, Engvall, and LCG scoring very low).

and Lopez medium) on the rapport variable that covers "terms of affinity," "assent," "deference," "identity," and "attitudinal similarities among groups of people" (DICTION, 2000, p. 48). On communication terms, referring to "social interaction, both face-to-face . . . and mediated," and general modes of social intercourse (DICTION, 2000, p. 45), most of the comedians fit in the medium range, with Engvall, Cook, Handler, and Lopez scoring low. Overall, these findings suggest that the top comedians skirted social and collective emphases across their acts.

Generally, this finding bears a relationship with the uncertainty theme. The discourses manifest a comic optimism about each performer's immediate sphere of influence. But beyond the self, the material and social world were crafted as sites for uncertainty and puzzlement. That the spatial variable, which spotlights terms dealing with geography, distance, and measurement (DICTION, 2000, p. 46), mostly ranged from very low to medium in the acts speaks volumes in this regard (with Engvall, Handler, and Seinfeld scoring very low, Rock, Cook, Lopez, and Foxworthy low, and LCG and Peters medium). Referrals or extrapolations to other places and spaces could not compete against a plethora of self-driven terms (see also Waisanen, 2011a, 2011b).

On the master variable commonality, or "language highlighting the agreed-upon values of a group and rejecting idiosyncratic modes of engagement" (Hart, 2000, p. 250), however, every comedian landed in the medium range. Given the nuances demonstrated in many of the regular variables above, I would argue that the ego-driven scope of the top-earning comedians' humor is best constructed from these elements, showing how their rhetorics are mostly aligned with individualism. Still, this finding might be reconciled with how stand-ups perform before live, immediate audiences, whose very presence is necessary to the laughter and popularity of their acts. At least some common ground should be expected in

the dynamics of the art form. Comedians invite audiences to inhabit their fun-filled worlds, but there are limited social spaces as trends in the next section detail.

Material Concern

In a number of ways, the results provide some evidence that comedians have moderate similarities and differences on rhetorical realism. The realism master variable describes "the tangible, immediate, recognizable matters that affect people's everyday lives" (DICTION, 2000, p. 46), and the transcripts demonstrated an even spread from medium to very high on this quality (Engvall, Dunham, Rock, and LCG came in medium, Handler and Foxworthy landed in the high range, and very Cook, Lopez, Seinfeld and Peters very high). By and large, the discourses were skewed toward tangibility—particularly on human interest terms focusing "on people and their activities giv[ing] discourse a life-like quality" (DICTION, 2000, p. 47), where everyone scored very high (except Engvall and LCG, who were in the medium range).

In general, comedy is close to the human lifeworld, stressing a phenomenological language parallel to the individualism theme (see Waisanen, 2011a, 2011b). The comics' agent-centered rhetoric remained close to human experience, with all rating relatively high on present-concern terms (most of the comedians rated very high, except Engvall, Foxworthy, and LCG, who were medium, and Handler and Dunham with a close high score)—or "present-tense verbs" corresponding to "general physical activity," "social operations," and "task performance" (DICTION, 2000, p. 46) taken together, these findings suggest that comedy is quite focused on immediate, topical matters.

Yet when some of the other regular variables are considered individually, some unique characteristics emerge between the texts. On concreteness terms, Rock, Cook, and Peters scored very low, Handler and Dunham low, Lopez, Foxworthy,

Seinfeld, and LCG medium, and Engvall high. This variable is derived from "a large dictionary possessing no thematic unity other than tangibility and materiality" (p. 47). With the variety variable, which "divides the number of different words in a passage by the passage's total words," suggesting "a speaker's avoidance of overstatement and a preference for precise, molecular statements" (p. 43), some diversity became apparent (Handler, Rock, and Peters scored very low, Lopez low, Foxworthy medium, Seinfeld and LCG high, and Engvall, Cook, and Dunham very high).

Juxtaposed against *DICTION*'s database of comparative texts, comedians like Handler, Rock, and Peters are perhaps slightly more partial to overemphasis, while some of the others may turn to more exacting rhetoric. Of course, tangibility and precision are two different concepts—one suggesting palpability and the other accuracy—and further possible subdivisions continue in this regard when one considers that Cook and Dunham both scored in the lower ranges on concreteness, but very high on variety terms.

The other time-focused variables (apart from present-concern) suggest further differences among the comics. Temporal terms "fix a person, idea, or event within a specific time interval, thereby signaling a concern for concrete and practical matters" (Hart, 2000, p. 249). While Peters landed low on this score, Engvall, Handler, Rock, Dunham, Foxworthy, Seinfeld, LCG, and Cook were all medium, and Lopez very high. Considered in conjunction with terms of past concern, which describe "the past-tense forms of the verbs contained in the Present Concern dictionary" (p. 249), these words may index different preferences for storytelling (i.e. over past experiences), providing some indication that comic groupings can form around temporal discourses. Since Engvall, LCG, and Foxworthy (the three comedians of the "blue-collar" comedy movement) had the lowest scores on present concern terms, it is notable that they all scored high or very high on the past concern variable (along with Rock and Lopez). That

Cook scored low on this variable (and Handler, Dunham, Seinfeld, and Peters medium) could indicate an inclination for more present-focused, premise-based comedy.

One other result is worth consideration. Comedy writer Mel Helitzer (1987) explains that all humor is grounded in a relationship between realism and exaggeration. In essence, comedy must always begin in truths or reality and then be bent or distorted in "a transition from sense to nonsense" (p. 190; see also Waisanen, 2013). It may be true that, as Berger (1997) notes, "the comic conjures up a separate world, different from the world of ordinary reality" (p. x)—but this study suggests that comedians also have robust concerns for the world of here and now. That the embellishment variable evidenced medium scores for a majority of the comics (with Lopez and LCG low on this category) may further indicate that, as much as comedians might exaggerate or take flights of fancy, there is a strong language of realistic analysis present, at least more than is typically assumed when comedy is inappropriately as a "non-serious" discourse.

Discursive Movement

On variables dealing with action, force, and other functional processes, the results tended to skew from very low to medium, though with a few important caveats. As indicated by the activity master variable, or "language featuring movement, change, the implementation of ideas and the avoidance of inertia" (Hart, 2000, p. 247), the comedians mainly landed within the medium range (most scored medium, with Peters scoring very low, Handler low, and Dunham high). While most of the regular, individual variables spotlight further individual variations, the one very clear finding was almost all of the comedians' very high motion terms (except for Peters, who scored only medium), "connoting human movement," "physical processes," "journeys," and "modes of transit" (Hart, 2000, p. 248). While stand-up

is quite focused on the human lifeworld and immediate matters, this finding may illustrate how comedy tends to employ language with some active qualities. On the other hand, that Peters scored very low and medium on the two foregoing terms may imply that his performances are more contemplative and philosophically-inclined than the others.

In fact, Peters was the only comic to score very high on cognition terms: "cerebral processes, both functional and imaginative" or "forms of intellection: intuitional . . . rationalistic . . . and calculative" (DICTION, 2000, p. 45). Some correlation between Dunham's very low, Rock, Foxworthy, and Seinfeld's low, and Engvall, Handler, and Cook's medium scores on cognition words and the master activity terms is also evident. Dunham's high activity and very low cognition terms could indicate an opposite orientation to Peters—i.e. a language that is moving but less intellectual. I found similar variations between Joan Rivers's low intellectual terms (Waisanen, 2011b) and Dennis Miller's relatively high use of such words (2011a) (Miller also appeared to have increased his usage of these terms over time). At the same time, while the comedians' discourses tend to be assertive, they are mostly not aggressive (matching the optimism theme). A majority of the performers scored low on aggression terms that relate to "human competition and forceful action," and features such as "social domination" and "goal direction" (DICTION, 2000, p. 45) (except Engvall, Cook, and Dunham on very low, and Seinfeld and LCG on medium).

Overall, despite the cluster around motion terms, this area had the greatest divergences compared with the results for the other master variables. While a number of other sub-themes could be discussed, these trends constitute the primary findings emerging from the results. To narrow this analysis further, I conclude with several key implications arising from this continued project.

CONCLUSION

Comedy is often characterized as an incredibly elusive form of communication. As a type of discourse permeating contemporary life, communication scholarship has a role to play in countering this assumption. The results of this project demonstrate that beyond needed audience effects research or interpretive, close readings, systematic textual analyses can provide another important tool for pinning down some general aspects of modern comedy. In this spirit, there are a number of points suggested by these findings.

First, the question of whether humorous communication is an art or science has been subject to much speculation both among comic insiders and outsiders (see Cook, 2010). This project answers this question with a resounding "both." There were clear, often unexpected, demarcations in the results evidencing general comic orientations toward optimism, uncertainty, and individualism, and to certain extents, realism and action. There are clearly generic patterns in comedy that can be tracked, while recognizing that on some dimensions, a humorist's rhetoric can have distinctive characteristics bypassing more regularized types of analysis. This study thus adds to my previous DICTION projects on comedy (Waisanen, 2011a, 2011b) more genre-based understandings of stand-up as a form of public communication.

Different than what many people might expect, humor is still a relatively under-theorized domain. When one reflects on what makes something funny, scholarly and lay theories have typically only been able to account for some examples of humor but not others (Hurley, Dennett, & Adams, 2011). This project shows that at least some patterns or clustered ways of viewing the world can be unearthed through communication research focusing on comic data. Since DICTION deals with "*natural data* . . . political messages occurring in real space and time in the phenomenal world—it [also] resists the several contaminations necessarily part of experimental, and even survey,

research" (Hart, 1985, p. 101)," ultimately holding in front of us the "intriguing possibility of beating the professional wordsmith at a game he or she did not know was being played" (p. 122). Toward this end, future research could also use other computer programs to explore what comic language looks like via data visualizations, word links, concept mappings, etc.

Second, the politics of comic discourses invite some scholarly revision. Contrary to perspectives that cast a pejorative light on comedy as necessarily negative, dogmatic, or mired in groupthink, this project outlines how there actually tend to be high degrees of critical optimism, uncertainty, and independence across such texts (results also reflected in Waisanen, 2011a, 2011b). At least in the 10 cases examined here, comedy's politics introduces audiences to *an agent-centered paradigm, where individuals orient themselves to the world in a puzzled but critically hopeful manner, carving out tentative, humanist comic spaces for shared laughter over how things could be better*. It is a rhetoric of means rather than ends, of journey and process rather than destinations.

In essence, this study finds with Berger (2011) that "the world of comedy is the world of freedom—of chance and coincidence, while the world of tragedy is one of determinism—as the tragic figures move towards their inevitable destruction. . . . Comedy, then, is optimistic [emphasis added]" (p. 114). Previously, Morreall (2009) hinted at a relationship between comic optimism and normativity in describing how, "humour can be beneficial . . . by promoting critical thinking," especially as regards "a discrepancy between what people should be and what they are" (p. 74). Given this study's findings, it is not the case that comedy is necessarily about "the social" while tragedy is about "the individual" (Berger, 2011, p. 115). Thus, more critical pause might be shown with work assuming humor to be an avenue to cohesion and interpersonal development (see Graham, 1995).

A relationship between comic optimism and uncertainty also surfaces in Charland's (1994) observation that "rhetoric becomes the comic art necessary for the continuation of civic life in the face of the tragic worldly order of necessity. Rhetoric, always optimistic, would emerge out of the recognition of human finitude" (p. 339). Yet factors involving observational exactness, the possibilities for human agency and action, or other stylistic preferences appear to vary across such acts. Additionally, as Holbert et. al (2011) highlight, there is still much work to do in parsing out the features and effects of different types of comedy, which are unlikely to be monolithic.

Given these results, it is interesting that Burke (1969) connects rhetoric focusing on "agents" with a general philosophy of "idealism." At the same time, the assertive (but not aggressive), non-dogmatic optimism threaded through these comic acts parallels Burke's argument that a comic frame "is neither wholly euphemistic, nor wholly debunking" (Burke, 1984, p. 166), aiming to "shatter one system of pieties, or frame[s] of reference, [while] they ready audiences/viewers for another" (Demo, 2000, p. 152). Similarly, "for Burke, a comic frame does not mean seeing humor in everything but refers to an open and balanced critical stance" (Thompson & Palmieri, 1993, p. 276).

Third, at least in the cases studied here, comedy may be less than reformist in its degrees of uncertain and process-oriented rhetoric. Stand-up comedy is seen by scholars like Campbell (2011) as a "modality of 'justice,'" where comedians "master a repertoire of linguistic and performative techniques that unsettle and disturb any assumed correspondence between signifier and signified" (p. 165), inviting confrontations with received stereotypes and opinions. By all appearances, the transcripts I studied illustrated a language eschewing received or common, institutionalized patterns of thinking. To the extent that popular forms of stand-up comedy ask their audiences to only inhabit their comic spaces, temporarily, the

need for critical political judgments and more policy-oriented thinking may be held in abeyance (see Waisanen, 2011b). Then again, as an artifact of sampling the 10 richest U.S. comedians who are mostly not addressing specifically political issues, it might be expected that much of their wording would be more positive and less reformist.

A related challenge is that rising above human embeddedness to comment on the world more theoretically or conceptually—as in more “cosmopolitan communication” practices, for example (Pearce, 2007, p. 161)—is bypassed in these rhetorics. Wilkie and Saxton (2010) argue that “comedians draw their audience into a world that is rooted in the moment” (p. 25). Grounded in adult-child interactions, comedy is entrenched in a young person’s inability to work with “ideas and concepts remote in time and space” (p. 24). In other words, this is a language highly situated within particular human settings, and that can be both its benefit and its cost (a point also identified in Waisanen, 2011b).

In particular, the lack of complexity and relatively individualistic visions on display in these texts appear to construct little space for social relations beyond the immediacy of the joking forum, thereby forgoing more multifaceted approaches to public engagement—and possibly advancing the very uncertainty underlying these texts. In other words, if all that can be known is oneself, what else is there to hold on to? As some have noted previously, it is telling that many people find stand-up comedy “to be both fundamentally democratic and deeply dictatorial” (Quirk, 2010, p. 121). Perhaps, then, there are paradoxes in these types of discourses that can be parsed out in further close readings.

This project made a broad inquiry into the discourses of the most popular U.S. comedians as measured by income. Future studies should target less elite comic communicators; as mentioned, issues of class and a more representative, perhaps random, sample of stand-ups based on other cri-

teria like humorous styles, intent, audience reach, etc. seem warranted for future work. That only one female comedian who was present in the 2009 and 2010 top-earning lists also invites further inquiry into more diverse comedic demographics. While focusing on words provided important insights into the organization and emphases of modern comedy, it constituted only one way of analyzing the texts. Researchers should also combine this type of methodology with performative criticism examining the embodied, contextual, and visual dimensions of such acts. Overall, systematic approaches to comedy will continue to be useful because, as Hart (2000) reminds us, “people have scant ability to monitor their individual language decisions . . . have no ability to monitor their patterns of language choice,” but most of all, “think that they have considerable control over such matters” (p. 35).

The comic imagination is a needed contribution to public discourse. The successes of contemporary comedians should not prevent us from surveying comic rhetorics with meticulous readings, however. Their very words invite audiences to orient themselves to their material and social worlds with common, or uncommon, political attitudes and positions. In the end, comedy is but one type of communication that might be chosen among many others—a point explored in greater depth in Waisanen (2013). If, as Sanders (1995) suggests, “very little distinguishes us from other animals, finally, except language and laughter” (p. 5), research should continue to track how configurations of both bring unique communicative visions to the public arena.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Comedy: The strategic use of humorous discourse to induce an audience's laughter.

Joke: The technical means by which a comedian attempts to invoke laughter in an audience, typically through a variety of practices involving doubled meanings, linguistic inversions, understatements, exaggerations, evocative bodily gestures, etc.

Rhetoric: The persuasive use of discursive and non-discursive symbols.

Stand-Up: A comic format in which a single speaker stands before an audience and tells jokes.

Systematic Textual Analysis: The use of computer programming to examine linguistic patterns or discontinuities in a public artifact or artifacts.