Laughing Matters: Humor Strategies in Public Speaking

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Abstract

The ability to powerfully and persuasively impact the audience is an important part of one's career and life. Humor in public speaking is an effective way to inform, persuade and connect with the audience. In this paper, I apply the framework of analyzing context in terms of three dimensions - physical, temporal and experiential, to study humor use in public speaking. The results of the analysis of ten speech samples show that in the selected public speeches, non-verbal elements play an important role in the humor practice based on the physical contextual dimension. The temporal contextual dimension is most widely utilized in humor design. Humor based on the experiential contextual dimension reaches higher level of efficiency. Humor that employs a combination of different contextual dimensions increases the value of the intended effects.

Keywords: humor, context, public speaking

1. Introduction

Humor studies that attempt to discover how humor functions have covered a wide range of fields and topics in the past decades. Among them a significant number of researches focused on humor in interactional activities of human beings, such as in the workplace (Holmes, 2006; Schnurr & Chan, 2011; Moody, 2014), between genders (Hay, 2000; Davies, 2006; Kotthoff, 2006; Strain et al., 2015), across cultures (Davies 2003, Rogerson-Revell 2007, Murata 2014), or on the responses of humor (Bell, 2009, 2013; Kuiper, 2014). However, in many cases, conversation seems to be the most frequent source of language data in these researches (Dynel, 2014). Though being dyadic in nature, humor sometimes presents itself in a non-conversational manner. This does not mean it is monadic. Rather, the interaction process takes place in a one-way direction linguistically, while the receiver interacts with mostly non-linguistic responses. The situation of public speaking is one such activity.

Public speaking is the process or act of delivering a speech or presentation involving an individual speaking directly to a live audience in a structured and deliberate manner in order to inform, influence, or entertain them. It is a vital means of communication and a crucial skill in any area of success (Carnegie, 1990; Lucas, 2005). Recent research into humor use and reception in the classroom (Azizinezhad & Hashemi, 2011; Reershemius, 2012; Wang, 2014), identified markers of humor as well as the various social or academic functions of humor in these public speeches. On the other hand, relatively little research has been devoted to understanding the mechanisms of humor (Reddington & Waring, 2015). I propose to study the humor mechanisms in public speaking, in terms of how humor is designed, produced, presented and received in public speeches of various forms, hoping to describe the strategy of humor application in public speaking.

2. Humor in Public Speaking

Public speaking is considered one of the greatest sources of fear and the highest causes of stress for most people, yet it is practically unavoidable over the course of one's lifetime (Miller, 2011). Public speaking anxiety is by far the most prevalent type of social phobia (Hancock et al., 2010). Humor is deemed by many as useful in public speaking because by integrating humor people can reduce the amount of anxiety they feel by relieving distress and change negative thinking patterns (Sultanoff, 1994; Wooten, 1996; Rashidi et al., 2014). In addition to that, it plays a certain role in contributing to the effectiveness of the speeches (Davidson, 2003). As Freud (1989) stated, jokes and laughter allow people to express hidden feelings. In the case of public speaking, both the speaker and the listener are able to express feelings through the projection and reception of humor. Mulholland (1994) believed that humor which generates shared amusement is powerfully persuasive. It in turn adds to the speaker's credibility. Welker (1977) suggested that humor serves as an attention getter and tension reducer.

Scholars have studied humor in different genres of public speaking in various ways. Smyth (1974) believed that any person who is to give a speech should insert a little humor or levity into it. Gruner (1985) pointed out that there is evidence to suggest that humor may be a wise communicative strategy for public speakers to use. Gruner et al. (1993) studied the hypotheses that an audience's laughter tends to generate other laughter and hypothesized that speakers using humor that elicits laughter by an audience would be rated high on `character,' 'authoritativeness', and 'dynamism'. Bjorklund (1985) made an investigation of the joking that occurs during meetings of a club which gathers weekly to practice public speaking. In this setting where humor is expected as part of a good speaking performance, she assumed that the use of humor can establish rapport with an audience and aid in persuasion. Deming (2001) suggested several strategies instructors can use when enhancing learning among trainees which includes incorporation of humor in lecture presentations.

Henderson (2003) explained effective public speaking strategies for chemical engineers with a recommendation for enlivening communication tools with contrast, funny stories and self-deprecating humor. Bippus (2007) found that most of the variation in the perceived effectiveness of the political candidates' humor may be explained by whether he jokes about himself or his opponent, the funniness and timing of the humor, and the audience's belief that the candidate used humor to make a serious point in a sensitive way or to provide a different perspective on an issue in the debate. Cooper (2007) highlighted a presentation and media skills training conducted to help farmers overcome the fear of public speaking to influence their own business and agriculture and said that people often feel the necessity to include some humor into their talk. Hobbs (2007) examined lawyers' use of humor from a defense perspective, and no cases were located in which a plaintiff's lawyer or prosecutor used humor to ridicule a civil or criminal defendant's defense. Stewart (2012) analyzed humor used by presidential candidates during debates of an electoral season and concluded that humor as exercised by presidential candidates in the 2008 primaries played a serious role in enhancing electoral status, and likely will continue to play an important role in making candidates more likeable and hence more electable in future elections.

All these above-mentioned studies tackle with either certain occasion of public speaking or certain angles of humor in practice. I propose to categorize and analyze humor in public speaking in general terms and determine whether there is a tendency in the frequency of humor and how it affects the audiences' response.

3. A Three-dimensional Model of Humor in Public Speaking

3.1 Background

Sultanoff (1994) believed that humor is comprised of three components: the cognitive experience or wit, the emotional experience or mirth, and the physiological experience or laughter. This is in alignment with the three main categories of humor theories developed in more than 2,000 years: cognitive theories on incongruity and its resolution (e.g. Kant, Schopenhauer, Koestler, etc); social theories that highlight the importance of aggression, disparagement and superiority, i.e., humor as a social game (e.g. Hobbes, Bergson, Gruner, etc); and psychoanalytical tension-release models inspired by Freud (Keith-Spiegel, 1972; Attardo, 1994). Under each of these categories lie diversified types of humor in the form of detailed terms summarized by different scholars. One possible problem that adds to the difficulty of studying humor under this premise is that the classification can be varied from one research to another. For example, Nesi (2012) analysed six types of humor as "teasing", "lecturer error", "self-deprecation", "black humour", "disparagement" and "word play". Yang (2014) described different humor types as "story-telling", "teasing", "self-deprecation", and "joking about someone". Dyck and Holtzman et al. (2013), on the other hand, classified humor styles under the names such as "affiliative", "self-enhancing", "aggressive", and "self-defeating". There has been a lack of unanimous reference of humor types which further leads to the somewhat messiness of classification and disconnectivity among studies of various focuses. In addition, new classifications will emerge endlessly. For example, Veale et al. (2006) coined a new concept named "hyper-understanding" in humor game play. Indeed, a more elegant method of definition of humor types is in need, simply to make the management and analysis of data easier to handle.

3.2 Contextual Dimensions

I have formulated three dimensions of context in the mechanism of humor application, which are *physical*, *temporal*, and *experiential* (Xu, 2014). I believe that such decomposition of context in humor is sufficient to describe the concept without the need for further subdivision.

3.2.1 The Physical Dimension

The physical dimension of context comprises all factors which exist in the tangible universe, which include all qualities associated with physical or energetic entities that can be sensed, any element involving the agent

sensing a physical phenomenon during a communicative interaction. It is important to point out that physical dimension is not just limited to the tangible factors around the speaker, but also of those of/within the speaker. Here are two examples both employing physical dimensions of context for humor to take effect.

(1) Ladies…and ladies, good night.

This beginning of this speech requires the physical dimension around the speaker to be regarded as humorous by the audience. In fact, the speaker is facing an all-female audience. The gender composition of the audience is something that one can instantly see, therefore the dimension that functions to play vital part in the humor production and reception is purely physical.

(2) I usually have to go the children's clothing department to buy clothes.

The line is only humorous because it resorts to the diminutive stature of the speaker. Not having a sight of his build may create difficulty in understanding this type of humor.

3.2.2 The Temporal Dimension

The temporal dimension of context describes factors which are affected by the sequence in time of the occurrence of the associated events. Here, I do not make any distinction between discourse and action in the formulation of the temporal dimension. To streamline the analysis, they are described as ''events'', as sequence of events may involve any combination of discourse and acts. Hence, within the boundaries of the temporal dimension I propose, linguistic context and social context are no longer differentiated.

The next example is taken from a TED talk given by psychologist Meg Jay in 2013. She began her speech by narrating the consultation with her first client as a PhD student. She described the client as a 26-year-old woman who was 'wearing jeans and a big slouchy top' and ready to talk about her issue. Jay put it this way:

(3) …and told me she was there to talk about guy problems. Now when I heard this, I was so relieved. My classmate got an arsonist for her first client.

Now this remark involves the application of the temporal dimension of context to produce humor. It is made up of two parts: the first part about the "guy problem" sets up the starting of the job, but it's not funny yet. The second part jumps into the speaker being 'relieved' - here building a sense of expense for the audience - that her classmate got an "arsonist" - obviously a much tougher client to handle as a psychologist. The sequence of the utterances leads to sharp contrast between 'guy problem' and 'arson' which further triggers the laughter in the audience.

One relatively effective way to distinguish a temporal-dimensional humor is to shift the order of utterances or acts. If the meaning stays pretty much the same, but the whole humorous effect is tarnished, it is mostly likely that the temporal dimension plays a major role in the humor projection. In other words, without the utterances or acts before or after, the whole remark or occurrence becomes considerably less humorous or utterly humorless.

A very large proportion of the humorous lines utilizing the temporal contextual dimension in public speaking involve incongruity. A number of humor theorists have argued that incongruity alone is insufficient to account for the structure of humor (Chapman & Foot, 1996). They have proposed in various arguments the idea that there exists a second, more subtle aspect of jokes which renders incongruity meaningful or appropriate by resolving or explaining it. Within this framework, humor appreciation is conceptualized as a biphasic sequence of first discovering the incongruity, followed by a resolution of the incongruity. The mechanism of resolution is necessary in order to distinguish humor from nonsense. Whereas nonsense can be characterized as pure or irresolvable incongruity, humor can be characterized as resolvable or meaningful incongruity.

In verbal humor, the incongruity is manifested in the relationship between the last line, or punchline, and the part of the utterance preceding it. In revolving the incongruity, the humorous effect of the utterance is realized. In my approach, incongruity and its resolution are recognized as one manifestation of the temporal dimension.

3.2.3 The Experiential Dimension

The experiential dimension encompasses all factors related to the intangible memory of the mind that is stored over the lifetime of individuals through collective and private experiences. These factors include but are not limited to social setting, culture, personality, world view, knowledge, discourse, status, etc. Similarly, the experiential dimension can be used to describe cognitive context, social context and sociocultural context.

No distinctions between the various factors are necessary because all these factors are based on memory store derived from past experiences. Culture is only different from discourse for example, in that culture is derived from long-term collective experiences whilst discourse involves a short-term private experience. It is also the

most variable among individual interactants.

Below is an example of the experiential dimension of context being explored to induce humor in a speech, by stand-up Comedian Joe Wong, in a performance on the Late Show.

(4) I believe that Dominos is a terrible name for a chain restaurant.

The concept "Dominos" as the act of "taking turns to fall" is a shared cognition by most people. Here it is used to target at the 'chain restaurant' being broke one by one, which is definitely not the intention of the business owners, hence the humor mechanism is established. Therefore the experiential dimension is functioning as a primary force in making this remark laughter-inducing.

It is also important to note that more than one dimension can be utilized to provide the backbone of humor. In fact, in public speaking, there lies a possibility that a good number of humor use can result from combination of two or even all of the three dimensions. I will elaborate this part in further detail in the following section.

4. Method

I selected ten speeches given in public as the basis material for this study. The chosen speeches adhere to the following four criteria: 1) The speeches cover a wide variety in terms of time, length, genre, occasion, and audience number/composition. This assures that the study of humor has a firm footing to yield meaningful results. 2) The speakers are diversified with regard to identity, specialty, race, and gender. 3) All speeches have a live audience so that the reaction of the audience may be observed and gauged in order to record the humorous effects. 4) All speeches are delivered in English because this is the working language as well as the target language of this particular study.

The following ten speeches were selected which satisfied the above requirements set for this study:

1) Actor Jackie Chan's monologue on Saturday Night Live in 2000; 2) Politician Michelle Obama's speech at the 2012 Democratic National Convention; 3) Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's duo speech at the 2013 71st Annual Golden Globes; 4) Denzel Washington's commencement speech at the University of Pennsylvania in 2011; 5) Laura Bush's commencement address at Wellesley College in 1990; 6) Oceanographer Edith Wider's speech at TED 2013; 7) Businessman Bill Gates's speech at 2013; 8) Author Tom Wujec's speech at TED 2010; 9) Musician Dereck Sivers's speech at TED 2009; and 10) Ilana Wexler at the 2004 Democratic Party Convention.

The samples vary in the time the speech is given, ranging from the 1990s to the 2010s. The length of the speeches is different with the shortest lasting for 2.32 minutes and the longest for 22.08 minutes. Among the 11 speakers 6 are females. The oldest speaker was 65 years of age, while the youngest 12 years old when the speeches were made. The genre of the speech is varied as well, with 2 on entertainment shows, 2 commencement speeches, 2 on political arenas, 2 informative speeches, and 2 persuasive speeches. The size and composition of the audience are expected to be varied, due to the extensively diversified nature, occasion and venue of the given speeches.

The present study is aimed at these goals: 1) Analyze the occurrences of humor in each speech and observe whether there is a clear pattern or tendency among different types and nature of speakers. 2) Examine the percentages of the application of physical, temporal, experiential, and multiple contextual dimension of humor respectively in the samples. 3) Examine whether there lies possible trends in the utilization of the three contextual dimension singularly and collectively. 4) Explore whether a correlation between different categories of humor and the audience' response can be established. 5) Discuss humor strategies that can be effectively applied into public speaking.

It must be acknowledged that this approach has a certain drawback. That is, the number of the samples is quite small to make direct statistical comparisons. The reader is well advised of this limitation when reading this paper. Nevertheless, this study intends not to make an absolutely conclusive comparison between humor in different speech types, but to deliver an efficient and effective humor mechanism that is widely used in public speaking so that humor strategies can be presented.

In order to perform the analysis, the manuscript of all speech samples are comprehensively tagged where a humorous line or act is encountered. Using the framework of contextual dimensions, the humor occurrence is categorized based on the contextual dimension(s) that it relies upon to achieve its intended effect. The text is marked using different font formats to represent different contextual dimension. I use text in italics to tag humor based on physical contextual dimension, underlined text for the temporal contextual dimension, and text in grey background to symbolize experiential contextual dimension. Where multiple dimensions are utilized, multiple tagging is used for the text and the background.

Meanwhile, I also recorded the audience' response in detail. As laughter is the most direct reaction to humor (Snyder, 2000), I have regarded laughter as the primary response triggered by humor in a speech. Besides, I have taken into consideration that there are occasions when audience accompany laughter with applause and cheering, I apply the umbrella term "reaction" to include possible responses to humor in my observation. In this light, a classification has been made in this study according to how the audience members receive the humor attempted by the speaker: 1) Low-intensity: reaction that lasts for 1 second and less. 2) Medium-intensity: reaction that lasts between 1 and 3 seconds. 3) High-intensity: reaction that lasts for more than 3 seconds.

5. Analysis

In this section, I conduct an in-depth analysis of the humor design, production, and reception in the chosen speech data, hoping to explicate how the three-dimensional model is able to streamline the explanation of humor mechanism in such materials. Due to the large volume of text, only examples of detailed analyses are presented below.

5.1 Examples of Humor through the Physical Contextual Dimension

Consider the following lines from the Jackie Chan's monologue on Saturday Night Live:

(5) Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you! Whoo! Thank you very, very much! You know what? If you put a mike in my chest you can hear the heartbeat. Even myself I can hear from here. Boom-boom, boom-boom, boom- boom. I'm so scared.

Jackie Chan, who is famous for his acrobatic fighting style, innovative stunts and comic timing in movies, is a veteran entertainer. Yet he is not a native speaker of the English language. Naturally on a stage where he is expected to speak to entertain he feels nervous. His nervousness can be immediately detected by his body language and facial expression. Out of this nervousness he executed his first attempt at humor at the beginning of this monologue. The gesture of placing one hand to his chest combined with the mimicry of the sound of his heart pounding conveyed his genuine feelings about speaking on this stage, while at the same time forms the physical dimension of this humor projection. It is worthy of note that in Chan's movies, a significant proportion of the comedic elements arise from the physical acts during fighting sequences. Therefore, it is likely that he is most comfortable and capable with this style of humor, more so when he is speaking in a foreign language on an occasion when being funny is the main target of a speech.

Consider the following lines from Tom Wujec's talk entitled 'Build a tower, build a team':

(6) And those of you who are interested may want to go to MarshmallowChallenge.com. It's a blog that you can look at how to build the marshmallows. There are step-by-step instructions on this. *There are crazy examples from around the world of people tweak and adjust the systems.*

Marshmallow challenge requires the participants to build the tallest free-standing structure out of given materials with the marshmallow on the top. This humor is projected through the visual imagery of a photo the speaker displays as a PPT slide on the big screen. It shows a strange-looking marshmallow challenge end-product. It is obviously funny as the challengers tilt the table in order for the top of the marshmallow to reach a higher level. This visual stimulus serves as the foundation of the audience to appreciate the humor.

5.2 Examples of Humor through the Temporal Contextual Dimension

Consider the following lines from Laura Bush's speech at at Wellesley College:

(7) Somewhere out in this audience may even be someone who will one day follow in my footsteps, and preside over the White House as the President's spouse and I wish him well.

The humor in this remark close to the ending relies on the temporal contextual dimension to be effective. When Bush spoke before Wellesley, the women's liberal arts college in Massachusetts, she knew that she was not the students' first choice and that her presence had sparked quite a bit of controversy. But she ended up winning over the audience and brought down the house. Humor was one of her most powerful "weapons". Earlier in the speech Bush talks about the importance of family, that one's personal dream should always come first. She then moves on to predict that maybe someone among the audience will marry a president. This part constitutes the first component of the humor, as people are led to think that she's going to speak more about this choice. However, she abruptly changes the focus this idea by "wishing *him* good luck". Hence, the speaker implies that the Wellesley graduates are strong-willed, independent women who will be a competent partner for any man, even the president. This remark would otherwise be less humorous if it were not for the prior preparation to set up the stark sequential contrast that provides the basis for this humor.

Consider the following lines from Michelle Obama's speech at Democratic National Committee:

(8) We were so young, so in love, and so in debt.

The humor in this remark relies on the temporal contextual dimension within the utterance itself. The first two 'so…' structures point to a poetic value, followed abruptly by "so in debt", which instantly changes the tone and force of the whole utterance: from romantic to realistic, from sentimental to teasing. It would be otherwise normal and not humorous if the sequence of expressions is shifted.

5.3 Examples of Humor through the Experiential Contextual Dimension

Consider the following lines from Tina Fey at the Golden Globes:

(9) Ricky Gervais could not be here tonight, because he's no longer technically in show business.

Understanding this humor requires knowledge of Ricky Gervais and what happened between him and Golden Globes. Gervais, while hosting the 2011 Golden Globes, made a torrent of insults and jabs targeted at Hollywood celebrities. This resulted in him being banned from hosting duties in the following year. The audience members share this background information which forms the backbone of this humor simply because of the business in which they work and the social environment in which they live. Those who know little about this prior knowledge, however, would have difficulty appreciating the humor in the above utterance by the speaker.

Consider the following line from Ilana Wexler at Democratic Party Convention:

(10) When our Vice President had a disagreement with a Democratic senator, he used a REALLY BAD word.

This remark is humorous because the speaker makes reference to how Dick Cheney, Vice President at that time, recently used the F-word in a sharp exchange on the Senate floor. Therefore, proper appreciation of the humor required possessed knowledge of this incident which is a piece of leaned information that may be considered the experiential contextual dimension functioning for this particular humor to take place.

5.4 Examples of Humor through Multiple Contextual Dimensions

In public speaking, chances are different dimensions of context are often combined to create humor. Below are examples to showcase how the miscellaneous integration of contextual dimensions are utilized to induce humor among audience.

Consider the following line from Denzel Washington at University of Pennsylvania:

(11) I said: "OK…Well, should I give you the cup back?" "Oh yes. You should give it back to me, because, you know, that is my cup, and it should be give back…to me."

This humor is achieved through two dimensions of context at the same time: visual imagery of Washington rendering a reenactment of one audition for Broadway musical earlier in his career along with the sharp contrast in the style of delivering lines by him and his partner. The act of Washington swinging his arms in the air and raising his tone, both in an exaggerated fashion, to imitate the acting style of his partner provides the foundation on which the physical dimension is built. Still, Washington's very different way of delivering his line in an obviously much more low-key, naturalistic style, followed immediately by that intensively, theatrical manner establishes another layer of humor that is based on the temporal dimension.

Consider the following line from Bill Gates' speech titled 'Teachers need real feedback':

(12) Everyone needs a coach. It doesn't matter whether you're a basketball player, a tennis player, a gymnast, *or a bridge player*.

Here, there are two factors that provide the core of this humor in Gates' opening line. First, he offers a list of occupations where the player needs a coach. The first three are quite normal and predictable, while the last one is very much not in the same category - a much less physically-challenging item. This constitutes the temporal contextual dimension. Second, the speaker provides a photo of him playing bridge on the big screen, with a tag indicating that it's 'me' who is enjoying playing the game. This image constitutes the physical contextual dimension.

Consider the following line from Dereck Sivers' talk under the title of 'Weird, or just different':

(13) *And this map is also accurate.*

Here, humor lies in the vision of a world map that displayed up-side-down on the screen which forms the physical contextual dimension. However, overall humorous effect also requires the experiential contextual dimension provided by the long-term learned knowledge of what an accurate map should look like and the short-term knowledge of how the speaker interpreted his idea that 'I love that sometimes we need to go to the opposite side of the world to realize assumptions we didn't even know we had, and realize that the opposite of

them may also be true.'

Consider the following line from Bill Gates' speech under the title of 'Teachers need real feedback':

(14) My bridge coach, Sharon Osberg, says there are more pictures of the back of her head than anyone else in the world.

This remark follows the one previously discussed in Example 12. Gates continues the first joke with another one. The photo with Gates smirking, his bridge coach's back facing the camera, along with the name tags all offer a physical dimension for the foundation of the humor. In addition, when Gates quotes his bridge coach, the words alone might not be humorous without the background information of knowing that Gates, as one of the most successful entrepreneurs in the world, usually is at the center of attention by any photographers. Hence the person teaching and playing bridge opposite him has to settle for the back of her head being taken in the frame of photos. Someone who does not know the speaker's identity will find this remark barely humorous. Here the experiential contextual dimension provides another layer of the desired humorous effect.

Consider the following line from Edith Wider's speech about 'How we found the giant squid':

(15) It was Mike that got me invited to the squid summit, a gathering of squid experts at the Discovery Channel that summer during shark week.

This humor is delivered through a combination of two dimensions of context as well. The speaker, as an oceanographer and marine biologist, jokes about being invited to an event entitled 'squid summit'. While the word 'summit' is usually used to describe a meeting between government leaders, the usage to refer to a gathering of experts specializing in the study of 'squids' is humorous due to the cognitive understanding of language use, which is an experiential contextual dimension. On the other hand, the speaker follows immediately with another term 'shark week', which is yet another 'overstatement' in language use, to set up a temporal contextual dimension for the total delivery of the designed humor. Had it not been for the latter part, the utterance would not produce humorous effect of such value.

Consider the following line from Denzel Washington's speech at University of Pennsylvania:

(16) So you'll be happy to see that I'm not wearing my Yankees cap today. But I am wearing my Yankees socks, my Yankees t-shirt, my Yankee jock shorts, and my Yankees underwear, my Yankee toe-warmers, but not my Yankee cap.

The speaker is utilizing both the temporal and the experiential contextual dimensions to realize this humor. In the first place, University of Pennsylvania is located in Philadelphia. Yankees are an American professional baseball team based in the New York City that competes in Major League Baseball. It's one of the main competitors for Philadelphia's local baseball team. In this sense, by claiming that he is 'not wearing his Yankees cap', he is showing his 'goodwill' towards the students. Nevertheless, he then suddenly states that he wears others series of Yankee clothing, creating an abrupt change of tone. The temporal dimension in this humor is provided by the sequences of utterances, whilst the experiential dimension is provided by the long-term collective knowledge of American sports and culture.

Consider the following line Michelle Obama's speech:

(17) That's the man who sits down with me and our girls for dinner nearly every night, patiently answering their questions about issues in the news, and strategizing about middle school friendships.

This particular humorous line requires the application three dimensional contexts to yield an effect. First, the speaker brings about the topics his husband talks with their daughter. While the first topic sounds quite formal and serious, the second one is a bit informal and almost childish. The sharp and sudden contrast forms the temporal contextual dimension of humor production. Second, due to people's knowledge of the man under topic as a president and the long-established somewhat authoritative figure, the mental picture of him 'strategizing' about middle school friendship offers the experiential contextual dimension for humor induction. Last but not least, the speaker here uses her fingers to make a vivid gesture of someone 'plotting' things provides the physical contextual dimension for humor to be achieved. It's noteworthy to point out that the understanding of what this gesture really means also constitutes the experiential dimension.

6. Results and Discussions

The ten sample speeches are numbered according to the order described in the second paragraph of the previous section. The frequency of humor occurrence is calculated, based on the number of humorous lines or acts in relation to the total running minutes of the speeches.

Table 1. Frequency of humor occurrence (Ent-Entertaining Speech; Pol-Political Speech; Com-Commencement Speech; Inf-Informative Speech; Per-Persuasive Speech)

Speech No.	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10
Type	Ent	Pol	Ent	Com	Com	Inf	Per	Inf	Per	Pol
Length (min)	4	24.4	7.4	22.08	10.63	8.2	10	6.42	2.32	3.15
Humor / min	4.5	0.3	3.6	1.6	1.0	0.5	0.3	0.93	1.3	1.0

The occurrence of humor per minute varies among the ten speech samples. However, upon closer look, we can divide the speeches into three groups accordingly. The first group consists of the two speeches with humor frequency higher than 3.0 (4.5 and 3.6 respectively). They are given by two entertainers on entertainment occasions. The second group has two speeches with humor frequency higher than 1.0 (1.6 and 1.3 respectively). The rest six speeches all have humor frequency lower than 1.0. Not surprisingly, speakers of the first group are both entertainers, speaking on live entertainment shows where the primary intention of the speech is to induce laughter. Speakers of the second group, however, are also entertainers, speaking on non-entertainment events. This may suggest that entertainers are more inclined to integrate humor in public speaking, event on occasions when to entertain is not the primary goal.

Relative usages of physical, temporal and experiential and multiple dimensions for the ten speech samples are shown in Figure 1. Single and combined use of each contextual dimension is calculated and displayed. The vertical location of each bubble shows the average percentage usage while the size (diameter) of each bubble shows the coefficient of variance, which is a measure of the relative spread of the data. (The coefficient of variance is obtained by dividing the mean by the standard deviation.)
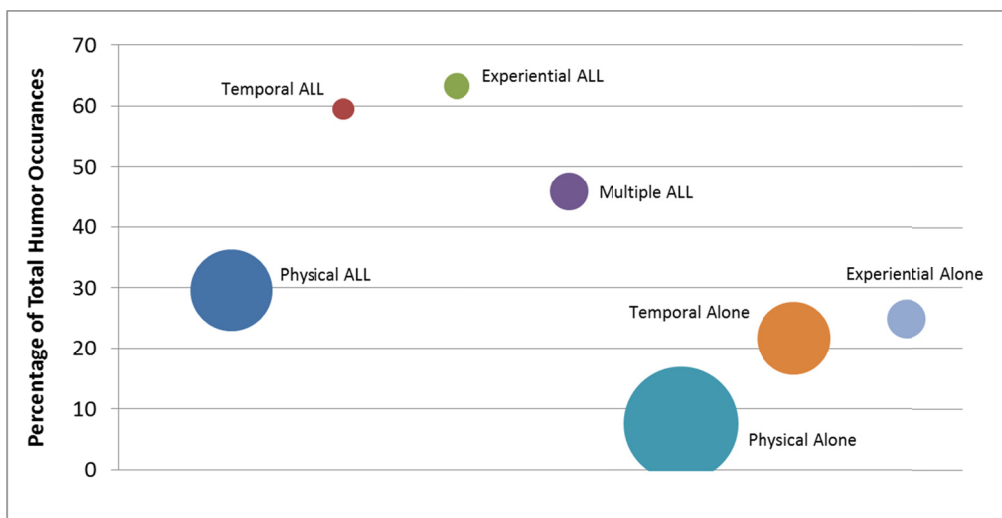

Figure 1. Distribution of contextual dimensions in each speech sample

In addition to the analysis on the relative usage in the contextual dimensions, I also examined how they triggered responses of low, medium, high intensity. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Usages of contextual dimension usages in relation to audience response

Response	Physical	Temporal	Experiential	P+T	P+E	T+E	P+T+E
L	8	6	9	1	1	3	0
M	6	15	17	2	3	13	1
H	1	4	5	1	1	16	4

Overall, the physical dimension appears to be the least used dimension among the three contextual dimensions, with an average usage of 29.5%. Utilization of the physical contextual dimension among the speeches seems to be highly unevenly distributed (large bubble sizes in Figure 1), which suggests a difference in preference for this type of humor among different speakers. There are also subtle differences in the way in which the physical contextual dimension is used between entertaining and non-entertaining speeches. This is mainly manifested in the degree of unorthodoxy in the physical action portrayed by the humor projector. Entertainers and kids tend to facilitate this type more. Other speakers appear to be more reserved in this regard, utilizing photos and other visual and audio aids to achieve humorous effects. In the speech samples, usage of the physical contextual dimension for humor creation tended to provoke low and medium audience response.

The temporal contextual dimension is used quite heavily in the speeches, accounting for an average of 59.5% of the total humorous occurrences. More than half of the temporal dimension usages lie in its combination with other contextual dimensions to produce humor, with a figure of 63.7%, which is the highest combination rate among all three dimensions. This suggests that it is the least 'independent' among humor types based on contextual dimensions. It is also the most evenly distributed type among the speech samples in terms of total usage, as indicated by the relatively small bubble size in Figure 1 (Temporal All). Usage of the temporal contextual dimension for humor creation provoked medium and high audience response in the speech samples studied.

The above observation suggests the following possible trends in using the temporal contextual dimension for humor design:

First, public speaking is an activity, or even an art, of speaking. A large proportion of attention is put to the careful design of language concerning word choice, word order, sentence structure, logic, etc. In this sense, temporal dimensional humor, due to its very basic nature of hinging upon language and logic, is the type that taps into this mentality most easily. Therefore, it is the most widely used and intricately designed humor type in public speaking.

Second, the temporal dimension is more flexible to be "partnered" with other dimensions, because in many cases, it is based on linguistic and logic foundations alone. Hence, it is easier to be integrated with other layers of contextual dimensions to either increase the humorous effects or to product different humor value.

Third, it is also by this trait that I believe that such humor is more suitable for non-native audiences to understand - if they have a grasp of the working language (English in this case) or the translation does the original text justice as much as it can - for it is relatively independent from socio-cultural knowledge.

The experiential contextual dimension is used most heavily in the speeches, accounting for an average of 63.3% of the total humorous occurrences. More than half of the temporal dimension usages lie in its combination with other contextual dimensions to produce humor, with a figure of 60.7%. Usage of the experiential contextual dimension for humor creation provoked medium and high audience response in the speeches studied. The usage of the experiential dimension *alone* is most evenly distributed among all speech samples, but slightly less so than the temporal dimension in combination usage.

While used singularly, the experiential dimension induced medium and high intensity audience response. Therefore, it appears to be the most efficient humor type. However, because it relies more on prior knowledge, acquired either through the long term or short term, for the appreciation of such humorous encounters, audience composition is highly critical in the successful reception of such humor. Although it still accounts for the most utilization frequency, it is not as evenly distributed among different speeches. This probably has something to do with whether the speaker is confident enough that the audience members share the same frame of reference to receive this type of humor. In addition, the difference between utilization frequency in the temporal and the experiential contextual dimension is not significant, which may be due to the fact that a speech is limited in time, therefore provides limited chance for short-term collective memory. This is different from my previous study of the humor patterns in 2 situation comedies, where the difference between the usages of the experiential dimension, also the mostly utilized dimension, and the temporal dimension is more significant (Xu, 2014).

Overall, multiple contextual dimensions are used more than single ones. The most frequently occurring dual contextual dimensions are temporal and experiential. In humor that induces low-intensity audience response, singular dimensions are mostly applied; in humor that induces both medium and high intensity response, multiple dimensions that employ both the temporal and experiential contextual dimensions are mostly applied. Humor that employs all three dimensions at the same time induces high-intensity audience response.

7. Conclusion

The ability to impact the audience powerfully and persuasively is an important part of one's career and life. Whether it's previously designed or spontaneous, humor in in public speaking is effective in helping the speaker relax as well as connecting with the crowd.

In this paper, I have used the simple yet unifying framework of analyzing context in humor mechanism to study humor use in public speaking. The framework utilizes contextual dimensions that are broken down into three mutually independent dimensions: physical, temporal and experiential. This approach offers a comprehensive tool for the analysis of humor in public speaking from a context point of view. I have applied this framework to analyze ten samples of public speeches. The ten samples are varied in type; content; length; age, gender and identity of speakers.

Non-verbal aids, such as photos, bodily motion, facial expressions, play an important role in the conveyance of humor based on the physical contextual dimension. Humor design based on the temporal contextual dimension is most widely utilized. When employing humor based on the experiential contextual dimension, higher efficiency of appreciation was achieved.

A combination of different contextual dimensions was shown to reach greater effects and value insofar as how the intended humor may be understood and appreciated. In humor that induced both medium and high intensity responses, multiple dimensions that applied both the temporal and experiential contextual dimensions were mostly applied. Humor that involved all three dimensions at the same time induced high-intensity audience response.

A little humor can actually make some messages and the accompanying information a little more palatable. This systematic analysis of humor mechanism based on contextual dimensions offers some insight into the design and practice of humor in public speaking.

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