The language (and power) of humour

Humour represents an element that run across all cultures. But what is the power of humour? Can you think of any example of the correlation between humour, language and power?

Humour displays some forms of **incongruity** that operate at any level of the language (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, discourse organisation, social interaction, etc.), as exemplified by puns and verbal jokes. It can also affect wider areas, such as discourse, for instance with the use of irony and other type of figurative language (re.: the area of **pragmatics**, the verbal play inheres in a mismatch between the conventional meanings of speech acts and the suggested meaning that those utterances have in a particular context). Humour is realised by a range of forms including puns, witticisms, jokes, anecdotes, slapsticks, parody, satire, and more. Incongruity can employ different varieties of discourse as its raw material and can be realised via the echoing or mixing of different styles, and registers.

**Humour and speech acts**: “It can be argued that the use of tropes like irony and hyperbole (and also litotes) which involve doubleness of meaning violate H.P. Grice’s conversational maxim of quality: in the interest of effectiveness of communication we normally tell the truth” (Wales 2011: 240).

**Stand-up comedy**: there are significant differences between broadcast humour and stand-up comedy. Broadcast humour is not ‘live’ in the way that stand-up comedy is. This aspect affects the language of stand-up comedy in various ways, in particular the features of speech as would occur in unscripted, informal talk. Although it may be scripted and rehearsed, the language must seem spontaneous. As well as use of **colloquialisms**, there will be more **fillers**, like ‘sort of’; **ellipsis** (shortened forms of words); **redundancy** and **back-tracking** (the repetition of words); and **sympathetic circularity**—phrases like ‘isn’t that right?’ addressed to the listener.

Apart from these—possibly scripted and rehearsed—features of spontaneous speech, any live act has to alter the text on the spot, depending on how well it is being received: material can be inserted or removed; the order can be changed; timing can be speeded up or vice versa. Unlike other performances on a stage, the audience are not just the ‘fourth wall’—present, but not acknowledged as present, in drama, for example. The solo stand-up comedian is addressing the audience, not other performers on the stage, and needs to build a rapport. This means that there may be **conversational features** as in one-to-one dialogue. The status relationship between the participants is different, however: the audience are generally addressed en-masse and do not have an equal opportunity to take part. It is, in effect, a **monologue**, but with an implied, if silent, partner. The ‘naked’ confrontation with an audience makes stand-up more dynamic, but is risky for the performer. Sometimes comedians also use **props**, i.e. a piano, a book of poems, etc. Sometimes comedians use a **character** for their act: as well as being a vehicle for their humour, going on stage as a fictional character offers a degree of protection

Activity: List the comedians who are popular on the current stand-up circuit and categorise them according the degree of naked confrontation with the audience: are there props, the use of a persona etc? How many female comedians are there?

Comedy is risky, not only for the performers but for their targets. Laughter creates a bond between teller and tellee, and excludes the butt. The expression ‘alternative comedy’ has been used since the 1980s to specify a particular stance of humour.

“I come from two Indias”

Vir Das (12 November 2021, Kennedy Centre, Washington DC)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5A-F9qu6c_4>

(note: the text has been edited for the purpose of analysis)

The temptation in this moment is about to make a video about myself and I don’t wanna do that because I am reminded that I come from India. I come from which India? I… come from two Indias. Those are the Indias I bring on stage with me right now. I come from an India where children in masks holds hands with each other and yet, I come from an India where leaders hug each other without masks. I come from an India where the AQI[[1]](#footnote-1) is 9000 but we still sleep on the roof and look up at the stars. I come from an India where we worship women during the day and gangrape them at night. I come from an India where we claim to be divided over Bollywood on Twitter and yet we’re united by Bollywood in the darkness of a theatre I come from an India where we scoff at sexuality and yet fuck till we reach a billion people. I come from an India where journalism is supposedly dead because men in fancy studios, in fancy suits, give each other handjobs and yet women on the road with laptops are still telling the truth where we bleed blue every time we play green. But every time we lose green, we turn orange all of a sudden.

I come from an India where we laugh so loudly in the comfort of our own homes that you can hear us through the walls, and yet I come from an India where we break down the walls of a comedy club because you can hear laughter inside. I come… from an India where old leader will not stop talking about their dead fathers and young leaders will not stop following their living mothers. I come… from an India that has the largest working population under 30 on the planet but still listens to 75 years old leaders with 150 years old ideas. I come… I come from an India where every time we get information we are always available to care for the PM but we can’t seem to get any information on PMCARES[[2]](#footnote-2).

I come… from an India where we kicked out the British but yet we call the govt the Ruling party. I come… from an India where women wear saris and sneakers and yet have to take advice from old men who have never worn a sari and never will get to take one off in their entire lives. I come from an India where our music is Bahut Hard[[3]](#footnote-3) but our sentiments are bahut soft. I come from India where people sleep outside on the road outside the club but, man, 20 times a year the road is the club. I come… from an India where we take pride in being vegetarians and yet run over the farmers who grow up our vegetables. I come from an India where we claim to fully support the troops until it comes to their pension plans. I come… from to an India where we can never be on time… no matter where we go but yet… we are always early on the ‘cowin’[[4]](#footnote-4) website for some reason.

I come from an India where we have maids and drivers and yet want to come to America to do their job. I come from an India that self serves and I come from an India that self preserves. I come from an India that will not shut up and yet I come from an India that will not speak up. I come from an India that will accuse me of airing our dirty laundry and yet I come from an India that wears their heart on their sleeve irrespective of how dirty their clothes are. I come from an India that tells me every single day to go to Pakistan and yet I also come from an India that invites Pakistanis over every single day if only… to whoop their ass on a cricket field. I come… I come from an India that is going to watch this and say “This isn’t stand-up comedy. Where is the goddam joke?”. And yet I come from an India that will watch this and know there is a gigantic joke it just isn’t funny. I come from an India where children living in basements and writing on comments sections have more courage than men in skyscrapers. I come… from an India that is Hindu, and Muslim, and Christian, and Sikh, and Parsi, and Jew, and when we all look up at the sky, we only see one thing together: the price of petrol.

I leave you tonight and go back to India. Which India do I go back to? Both of them. Which India am I proud of? One of them. Which India is proud of me? NONE of them. I wanted to do this because we’re at the Kennedy Centre. You know, this is a dream for an artist… it’s been mine for a very long time. And the reason it’s a dream is because you get to see great people here. You get to see greatness, on this stage. And this whole room was built for a great man, in his memory. But as I stand here before you, I am reminded that I represent a great people. Great people, who built a great thing… that is tuning into a memory. And I know that you believe in that India, like I believe in that India, because I see it in your eyes. And you are in this room tonight, so before I leave your country… I will leave this stage and I will put the camera on you, and you make some noise for the India you WANT to live in, because I promised you that this is the Kennedy Centre but tonight is our fucking house, so make some noise for India.

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Provide a stylistic analysis of the text by Vir Das: which devices and strategies does he use in his show? What are the effects of such language choices? Can you identify other linguistic features? Use appropriate terminology for your analysis.

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1. Air Quality Index: from 301 and higher, the quality of air is hazardous and Health warning of emergency conditions: everyone is more likely to be affected. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund (PM CARES Fund) is a fund created in 2020 to contrast problems connected with the Covid-19 pandemic. The Fund is private but uses public infrastructures and the national emblem of India, and therefore it generated many debates. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Bahut" = Bhot (Hindi, meaning “very” in English) + “Hard" (it is also the title of a new Rap song: Bhot Hard), general meaning: “very well”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. CoWIN app: an app introduced by the central government of India for the Covid vaccination process. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)