

NEGATIVE POLITENESS STRATEGY IN A STAND-UP COMEDY

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to identify the factors influencing Trevor Noah's use of negative politeness strategies in his stand-up comedy special "Atlanta Afraid of the Dark" (2016). Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research examined and explained the types and influencing factors of negative politeness strategies in Noah's performance. The study utilized Brown and Levinson's theories on politeness strategies, particularly negative politeness, to identify and categorize these strategies and their influencing factors. Additionally, Ramon Papan's framework for the structural build of stand-up comedy techniques was used to analyze the elements of Noah's comedy. The study found that Noah frequently used impersonal humor in his jokes. It also revealed that social context significantly impacted the content of the jokes, with Noah purposefully addressing social issues. The findings showed that Noah's humor often employed negative politeness techniques, such as being indirect, questioning, hedging, and depersonalizing both the speaker and the listener. In conclusion, the negative politeness strategies of pessimism, questioning, hedging, and depersonalization played a crucial role in delivering the punchlines. Additionally, callbacks were created using negative politeness methods, such as showing deference and apologizing.

Keyword: comedy, politeness strategy, negative politeness strategy

INTRODUCTION

Comedy language serves as a vital medium of communication in various linguistic activities, primarily generating excitement and, most importantly, laughter. This comedic essence is neither spontaneous nor coincidental; it lies in the meticulously crafted structure and composition of performances such as stand-up comedy, where the desired outcome is laughter. As Limon (2000) explains, laughter in response to a stand-up routine signifies the joke's humor, as a joke cannot be considered funny without eliciting laughter. A joke that merely prompts smiles or nods of approval is deemed unsuccessful; the degree of audience laughter directly measures the joke's effectiveness. A comedian's success, whether within a specific routine or over their career, can sometimes lead to indiscriminate laughter from the audience, suggesting a predisposition to find humor based on prior positive experiences with the comedian's material. In stand-up comedy, the comedic narrative is typically delivered directly by a single comedian, although sometimes groups perform, often using a roasting style of language.

Communication is fundamentally the act of transferring information from one place, person, or group to another, involving at least one sender, a message, and a recipient (Siregar, 2018). Despite its seemingly straightforward nature, communication is actually a complex subject. Various factors can influence the transmission of a message from the sender to the recipient, including emotions, cultural context, the medium of communication, and even physical location. This complexity underlies why effective communication skills

are highly valued by employers globally: achieving accurate, effective, and unambiguous communication is exceptionally challenging.

Stand-up comedy can be examined as a subject within language studies (Winarsih, 2020). As a form of comedy, it represents an art that utilizes language as a cultural product. Politeness is one strategy employed by speakers to communicate with others, enhancing their appearance in the eyes of the audience. This aligns with Yule's (1996) assertion that politeness involves methods used to acknowledge another person's social image.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), during conversations, individuals are driven by two primary desires: the need for approval and connection with others (positive face), and the need to maintain independence (negative face). The desire for a positive face includes the wish to be respected, to be considered part of the same group, and to be accepted by others. Conversely, the desire for a negative face includes the wish for freedom of action, to avoid imposition, and to remain independent from others.

This study examines Trevor Noah, a globally recognized comedian from South Africa known for his stand-up comedy. His YouTube channel, associated with "The Daily Show," has garnered significant influence among millions of subscribers. The selection of Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy performance in Atlanta in 2016 as the study's focus is well-founded due to its engagement with cultural, racial, and stereotype-based humor. The jokes presented in this video are nuanced, addressing critical global discourses. Over the course of nearly an hour and a half, Noah's performance not only elicits laughter but also provides insight, feedback, wisdom, and a heightened awareness of conflict discourse.

This interest is supported by the impact of Trevor Noah's comedy. Noah himself acknowledges the influence of key comedic figures, stating, "The rulers are undeniable. Richard Pryor, Cosby; for me I didn't know of him before I started comedy, but Eddie Murphy changed my perspective on the craft and I definitely look up to him as a comedic influence. Chris Rock as a leading contemporary Black comedian and Dave Chappelle. These are the individuals who have established the foundation and set the standard for all comedians, not just Black comedians" (Sangweni, 2020). He also follows a principle in his comedy, stating, "You should create my show. 'Create your show. Create your best version of it.' I apply those lessons from Jon to everything I'm doing" (Sangweni, 2020). Given his reputation, Trevor Noah represents a significant potential object of analysis and research interest.

A study by Selfia and Marlina (2016) explores the understanding of politeness techniques, which are methods used to communicate respectfully. These techniques are evident in everyday life as well as in talk shows. For instance, the "Hitam Putih" talk show is one of Indonesia's most well-known and popular talk shows. This article describes various types of politeness strategies and highlights the prominent techniques employed by Deddy Corbuzier during interviews, especially when questioning guest stars.

According to Hartati (2020), the negative politeness strategy consists of ten components: conventionally indirect language, questioning and hedging, expressing pessimism, minimizing imposition, showing deference, apologizing, impersonalizing the speaker and hearer (avoiding the pronouns "I" and "you"), stating the face-threatening act (FTA) as a general rule, nominalizing, and going on record as incurring a debt or as not indebting the hearer. This study focuses on the factors that influenced Trevor Noah's use of negative politeness strategies in his stand-up comedy performance in Atlanta on February 27, 2016. The interest stems from Noah's career and his approach to dark comedy, which is often seen as unconventional and challenging within societal norms of ethics and law. Negative politeness strategies may provide a valuable framework for addressing dark comedy, which, while limitless in its context to provoke laughter, presents unique challenges in breaking barriers. Structuring these strategies could offer a useful pattern for discussing dark topics and serve as an alternative medium for conveying value. Therefore, this study aims to uncover the factors influencing Trevor Noah's use of negative politeness strategies in his 2016 Atlanta stand-up comedy performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Politeness is essential in communication, playing a crucial role in enhancing interactions between speakers and listeners. Linguists have proposed various definitions of politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that individuals act out of a desire to be polite, driven by a concern for maintaining two distinct levels of politeness (Mujiono, 2015). Consequently, people often choose to be courteous.

Brown and Levinson (1987) characterize negative politeness as a formal type of politeness, emphasizing its intrinsic nature of being deferential. Yule (1996) differentiates negative politeness from positive politeness, describing it as a deference strategy. In this context, the speaker uses formal language to convey politeness, which can increase the likelihood of awkwardness or embarrassment. During interactions, speakers frequently use phrases like “sorry” and ask questions when requesting help. Ogiermann (2009) noted that negative politeness is more polite than positive politeness because it more extensively addresses the addressee’s face wants. Moreover, Brown and Levinson (1987) highlight that negative politeness is typically used among acquaintances to acknowledge social distance and respect status differences, whereas positive politeness is used among closer friends to reduce social distance. According to Brown and Levinson’s theory (1987, p. 72), there are ten substrategies to address the hearer’s negative face: (1) Being Conventionally Indirect; (2) Questioning Hedge; (3) Being Pessimistic; (4) Minimizing the Imposition; (5) Giving Deference; (6) Apologizing; (7) Impersonalizing the Speaker and the Hearer; (8) Nominalizing; (9) Going on Record as Incurring a Debt or as Not Indebting the Hearer; (10) Payoff; and (11) Social Circumstances.

In the structure of comedy, Papan (2016) outlines several techniques and processes for building stand-up comedy: (1) the setup, which involves creating a comedy premise where a comedian must express or describe a situation, either briefly or in detail; (2) the punchline, which responds to the setup and whose success depends on the comedian’s ability to construct and direct the audience’s understanding through the setup; and (3) the callback, which occurs when a comedian reuses a punchline in a new context.

METHODS

This research employs a descriptive qualitative design. Raider (2010, p. 55) explains that the qualitative method incorporates the researcher’s interactions with the field and its members as a fundamental part of the knowledge, rather than considering it an intervening variable. Typically, this approach involves transforming the data into textual forms, such as transcripts and field notes. This method was chosen to describe the pragmatic phenomena observed in Trevor Noah’s stand-up comedy performance in Atlanta on February 27, 2016, with a particular focus on analyzing the types and factors of negative politeness strategies.

Understanding the source data involves identifying where the research obtains access to the object of study, allowing for the collection and processing of data to yield results aligned with the research interests. For this study, the researcher obtained data from a YouTube video titled “Trevor Noah Stand Up Comedy in Atlanta 27 February 2016,” posted by the channel Mzansi Is Funny on August 22, 2019. The video can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gBvLjfUSy8>.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results obtained in the research is illustrated in the data presentation. The results and the discovery will be delivered in the following.

Being Conventionally Indirect

The justification for using this data is based on its indirect approach and the nuanced conveyance of meaning within the context of discussing the experiences of Black people. Indirect formulation of responses is employed to ensure the interlocutor does not perceive the actions as imposing (Hobjilă, 2012). This use of conventional indirectness is explained

through the project of realist metaphorical rejection.

“Way it was although it would be something though if you could work so hard you became black that would just be wouldn’t it that would change the workplace forever see guys walking into their office talking to the bus gym I uh I think I’m gonna take a few days off I uh I don’t know I feel it coming on I uh yeah I’ve been putting in some overtime and I don’t know man”

Minute 10:38-10:55

The category of being conventionally indirect can be validated in this data due to the use of phrases and sentences that, while having contextually clear meanings, differ from their literal meanings (Brown & Levinson, 1988, p. 137). This clarity can be seen in the way the situation and experiences of Black people are foreshadowed.

Questioning Hedge

To understand the type of questioning hedge as a form of negative politeness strategy, it is important to consider the classification terms that highlight the significance of such modifications. These adjustments make the level of utterances only partially true, true in some aspects, or more accurate and complete than previously stated. Instead of using statements or imperatives, politeness can be achieved by formulating expressions as questions (Brown & Levinson, 1988, p. 52). These indicators can be identified in the data presented below.

“what’s exactly like sex when you think about it with me the comedian playing the role of the man and you the audience the role of the woman”

Minute: 01:43-01:47

The primary rationale for categorizing this identified data as a type of questioning hedge lies in its deliberate avoidance of providing a straightforward answer within the contextual intentions of the speaker. This approach is characterized by using words like “exactly” as hedges to convey the speaker’s lack of presumption. Consequently, the speaker’s statement becomes somewhat ambiguous (Kurniawan, 2015).

Being Pessimistic

Table 1. The Identified Amount of the Types Negative Politeness Strategy in Trevor Noah’s Stand-Up Comedy

No	Type of Negative Politeness Strategy	Total of Identified Form
1	being conventionally indirect	20
2	questioning hedge	15
3	being pessimistic	11
4	minimizing imposition	-
5	giving deference	18
6	apologizing	6
7	impersonalizing the speaker and the hearer	21
8	nominalizing	21
9	go on record as incurring a debt or as not indebting hearer	1
Total		94

However, the comedian's subsequent statement using the being pessimistic strategy was delivered with awkwardness and nervousness, which resulted in the face-threatening act (FTA) of interrupting the flow of the performance.

just you know it's so there's awkward experience I find I'm always nervous

Minute: 01:35-01:37

The interpretation of the data above suggests that the speaker's commentary on a negative situation conveyed a genuine sentiment to the listener. In this context, the use of being pessimistic reflects the speaker's acknowledgment of negative face by openly expressing doubt about the appropriateness of the conditions (Brown & Levinson, 1988).

Minimizing Imposition

The absence of any instances of minimizing the imposition within the object suggests a lack of this particular type of negative politeness strategy. It is reasonable to infer that this observation aligns with the nature of stand-up comedy as the context for analysis.

Giving Deference

The ability to give deference is employed to establish a perception of distance, particularly in determining the relative status between the speaker and the audience. This involves conveying that the hearer's importance or position exceeds that of the speaker. This textual and contextual demonstration is illustrated below.

*"because it's my job to satisfy you and you just have to sit there
and then just like sex my success"*

Minute: 01:54-02:05

The significance can be analyzed in the context where the speaker refers to himself. Here, the speaker articulates deference by acknowledging an obligation to entertain the audience. This metaphorical approach aligns with the comedic role of diffusing potentially face-threatening situations, implying that the speaker, despite being in an authoritative position, adopts a stance of deference. This use of satire underscores how comedy employs deference to manage potential social tensions. Deference in this context refers to politeness that signals social distance and mutual independence between individuals of similar status, treating each other with a degree of formality despite their equality or near-equality (Haugh, 2010).

Apologizing

The data categorized as apologizing involves the speaker addressing the significant impact of a joke that caused harm. This reflects the pragmatic persona's need to provide clarification on a matter, as illustrated clearly in the following display.

"right no I'm kidding I don't know I'm.... still searching for the answer my two favorites"

Minutes: 36:55-36:57

In analyzing the aforementioned data, it is important to note that the utterance clarifies the speaker's acknowledgment of making a mistake and underscores the sense of humor intended for the audience. Apologizing serves as a tool and medium through which jokes are delivered, functioning as a politeness strategy that helps the listener understand why the speaker's remarks may have caused offense. This demonstrates the speaker's recognition of the listener and their respect for the listener's sensibilities (Njuki & Ireri, 2021).

Impersonalizing the Speaker and the Hearer

The identified instance of impersonalizing the speaker and hearer involves the speaker describing their management of the situation in Atlanta in a way that removes personal involvement or identity.

*"I'll fall down in the heat they would have their vans reporting live they'd be
staying there going so hot in that Atlanta even Africans are fainting so I'm*

Negative Politeness Strategy in a Stand-Up Comedy

Table 2. The Identified Amount and Frequency of the Factors of the Types Negative Politeness Strategy in Trevor Noah's Stand-Up Comedy

No	Factors Negative Politeness Strategy in Trevor Noah's Stand-Up Comedy							
	Type of Negative Politeness Strategy	Payoff				Social Circumstance		
		Paying Respect	Maintaining Social Distance	Giving Real Out to the Addressee	Giving Conventional Outs to the Addressee	Relative Power	Social Distance	Size of Imposition
1	being conventionally indirect	1	-	-	-	1	18	-
2	questioning hedge		-	-	1	4	10	-
3	being pessimistic	1	-	-	1	2	7	-
4	minimizing imposition	-	-	-	-	-	-	
5	giving deference	3	-	5	-	5	2	1
6	apologizing	1	-	-	2	2	-	-
7	impersonalizing the speaker and the hearer	-	-	-	-	-	21	-
8	nominalizing	-	-	2	-	-	-	-
9	go on record as incurring a debt or as not indebted to hearer							

enjoying this really happy to be here you know this is this is gonna be good for us I I hope I say I hope because I never know what stand-up comedy it's"
Minutes: 01:13 -01:31

The impersonalization depicted involves the speaker transferring information about the situation, indicating a pragmatic lack of empathy in describing the atmosphere and conditions in Atlanta. The use of interchangeable pronouns identifies the speaker's deployment of impersonalizing redressive devices (Brown & Levinson, 1988). Pragmatically, the speaker conveys details such as temperature in a detached manner, relying solely on logic and consciousness, and without personal sentiment or discrimination.

Nominalizing

The initial identified instance of nominalization occurs when a formal structure is established. Nominalization serves as a politeness strategy by allowing speakers to omit the actor or agent of a specific verbal event. This approach helps in formal situations by maintaining boundaries related to social distance and power relations. The following excerpt illustrates this concept.

thanks for hanging out thanks for coming to the show tonight thank you
Minute: 67:18 -67:32

The speaker's intention to maintain the power dynamic on stage was evidenced by

their use of nominalization. Subsequently, the speaker initiated the performance to engage the audience. This formal expression of appreciation, however, marked the conclusion of the show, where various types of negative politeness strategies were employed throughout the content presentation.

Go on Record

The absence of the “go on record” type of negative politeness strategy in the object suggests that this form remains vacant within the context of stand-up comedy. This study explored the influence of social circumstances on the dimension of social distance, emphasizing that the use of indirect communication strategies is influenced by these conditions. This observation suggests that indirect communication tends to occur more frequently in situations where social distance is perceived to be at its peak. The speaker must also consider various psychological factors such as status, age, gender, and intimacy levels, which collectively determine the overall level of respectfulness (Kurniawan, 2015).

Furthermore, attention was directed towards factors identified in questioning hedge, being pessimistic, and impersonalizing the speaker and hearer, all of which predominantly operate within the realm of social circumstances and relative power dynamics. Conversely, there was less emphasis on giving direct addresses. These findings indicate that these factors significantly shape the comedic content delivered by the speaker. They affect how social consequences are portrayed and how social distance is maintained in comedic contexts, including topics such as portraying the significance of stand-up comedy, critiquing American pronoun usage, addressing social issues in Africa, and presenting arguments filled with fallacies.

These findings underscore that social distance serves as a critical factor that enriches the nuances and the delivery of doubts and jokes. In response to these results, the study concludes that social distance serves as a wellspring for cynicism and questioning societal norms. This understanding highlights how being pessimistic can function not only as a comedic tool but also as a critique of society at large, reflected in the speaker’s discourse during their stand-up performance.

The Process of Factors of Politeness Strategy Influencing Trevor Noah Using the Negative Politeness Strategy

Standup Comedy Set-up from The Negative Politeness Strategy and its Factor

The initial step in the process of employing negative politeness strategy in comedy involves the construction of a premise through techniques such as set-up, punchline, and call back (Papana, 2016). This method requires comedians to succinctly or elaborately articulate and describe the comedic situation. The use of set-up within negative politeness strategy often manifests through conventionally indirect approaches, as illustrated below.

*something I've come to honor but I hope I change one thing in your hearts
forever just one thing and that's is that animal in the wild that looks like
a horse it has black and white stripes yeah do me a favor from now on please
it's not zebra okay it's zebra just like it's not Deborah it's Deborah(SC,b)*

The previous data describes how the speaker acknowledged animal jokes. In this context, the set-up highlighted the origin of the jokes, occupying the audience’s attention with the content, while also establishing social distance through a less implicit approach.

Stand-up Comedy Punchline from the Negative Politeness Strategy and Its Factor

The punchline is the humorous climax of a joke, responding to a previously presented set-up or description. Its effectiveness depends on how well the comedian constructs and leads the audience through the preceding set-up (Papana, 2016). In Trevor Noah’s comedy, the punchline successfully integrates negative politeness strategies such as being pessimistic, questioning hedge, and impersonalizing the speaker and hearer. The rationale

and illustration of this can be seen in the following excerpt.

The use of being pessimistic has become pivotal in delivering the punchline, as demonstrated below.

"there's no statistics at all game starts off the whistle blows breath and welcome ladies and gentlemen to this majestic Match"

Minute : 43:02-43:08

The comedic impact arose from the speaker's pessimistic statement, where the speaker expressed pessimism about whistling as something trivial yet adhering to societal norms, as indicated in the setup. Through the consideration of social distance, the speaker strategically critiques social norms related to whistling.

Standup Comedy Call-Back from The Negative Politeness Strategy and its Factor

The concept of a callback involves using a previously delivered punchline and reintroducing it in a different context (Papana, 2016). Successful execution of callback strategies hinges on prior familiarity with the material. However, in this instance, the second punchline lacked humor as it merely echoed the first.

The utilization of callback strategies within negative politeness strategy can be exemplified through techniques like giving deference and apologizing. In this context, giving deference serves as a callback where jokes about comedians and sexual activity maintain continuity or a cohesive narrative. The speaker employed giving deference to recall the punchline, as demonstrated below.

*because it's my job to satisfy you and you just have to sit there
and then just like sex my success (SC,a)*

Minute: 01:54-02:05

It is assertive to state that the punchline resonated due to the shared understanding between the comedian and the audience regarding the prominent role in sexual activities. The callback was employed to reintroduce the humorous element, with the speaker effectively using the giving deference strategy as a marker of success acknowledged by the audience.

CONCLUSION

This study posits that Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy in "Afraid of the Dark," performed in Atlanta 2016, prominently featured negative politeness strategies. These strategies were primarily manifested through impersonalizing the speaker and hearer, followed by being conventionally indirect and, in third place, giving deference. Conversely, questioning hedge, being pessimistic, apologizing, and nominalizing were also utilized, while minimizing imposition and go on record strategies were absent.

From this analysis, it can be concluded that Trevor Noah's comedic presentation in "Afraid of the Dark" was significantly influenced by social circumstances rather than personal gain or payoff. The study suggests that Noah intentionally used global and local social issues as the main themes for his comedy. The set-up phase utilized negative politeness strategies such as being conventionally indirect, questioning hedge, and impersonalizing the speaker and hearer. Similarly, the punchline phase was shaped by strategies like being pessimistic, questioning hedge, and impersonalizing the speaker and hearer. Finally, the callback phase employed negative politeness strategies through giving deference and apologizing.

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