



Impoliteness Strategies of Dark Humor on Trevor Noah's Show "Son of Patricia"

Annisa Nurul Shabrina✉, Hendi Pratama

Universitas Negeri Semarang

Article Info

Article History:

Accepted 30 March 2023

Approved 8 June 2023

Published 15

September 2023

Keywords:

dark humor, stand-up comedy, impoliteness strategy

Abstract

This study aimed to explore the phenomenon of how something vulgar or sensitive becomes a joke to execute many meanings, which is interesting to study. It was specifically focused on dark humor presented in stand-up comedy performances as one of the famous media for presenting humor. The researcher investigated the impoliteness strategies and their contribution to express dark humor. This study used phenomenological qualitative with a pragmatic approach. It analyzed dark humor found in Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy performance entitled "Son of Patricia" through the impoliteness strategy by Culpeper (1996). The result showed that there was 51 dark humor found in Noah's performance. It enclosed several topics, which were his personal experiences. The most impoliteness strategies used were sarcasm or mock. It was used in all the performance topics to cover up his attacks on others' faces by making jokes. However, withhold politeness was not found in the performance, as there was no dark humor expressed by failing to use politeness. There were some cases where two impoliteness strategies used together in a joke. The researcher hopes this study will broaden the scope of this study to encompass additional variables, populations, or timeframes. Such an expansion could provide a more comprehensive understanding of impoliteness strategies used in expressing dark humor enclosed behind the dark humor and its impact on various contexts.

✉Correspondence Address :

Kampus Pacasarjana Unnes, Jl. Kelud Utara III Semarang
502

Semarang, Indonesia

E-mail:annisanurul365@students.unnes.ac.id

p-ISSN 2087-0108

e-ISSN 2502-4566

INTRODUCTION

Humor can be found in everyday human life. It is crucial as a social phenomenon in attraction and interpersonal communication (Murstein & Brust, 1985). Humor represents things that humans mutually agree as something fun. According to Attardo (2008), laughter following a joke indicates that the hearer agrees with the speaker that the situation is acceptable for joking. There are two forms of humor: light and dark humor, which deal with different perspectives and issues. Light humor may promote humanity, wisdom, and transcendence (Ruch & Poyer, 2015) and humorously deal with adversity, shortcomings, and the human condition (McGhee, 2010).

Meanwhile, dark humor is content-defined and covers subjects like illness, deformity, death, and handicap (Mindess et al., 1985). In dealing with diverse discourses, both humor styles are unique. Dark humor is not for everyone because of how it is presented. However, dark humor is becoming more popular. For some people, dark humor might be considered edgy or a coping method. It can also be used to criticize something and establish an understanding of a sensitive issue. Dynel and Poppi (2018) conducted research primarily oriented toward criticizing terrorism-related themes, including ineffective security enforcement, radical Islam, political and public reactions, and integration policies.

Furthermore, Faina (2013) reviewed the perspective on *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, irony, and satire shaped post-9/11 America*. It was found that using such humor can help you understand the increasingly complex media landscape resulting from the cultural moment of 9/11. This humor can be conveyed in a variety of formats, ranging from papers to performances.

Stand-up comedy performance is one of the formats for presenting humor that has become famous in Indonesia. This performance became famous in Indonesia around the 2010s with the rising of some stand-up comedians like Raditya Dika, Pandji Pragiwaksono, and Ernest Prakasa. Each comedian has their trademark and brings

different topics to their performance—nevertheless, stand-up comedy's material results from opinions or the stand-up comedians' personal experiences. Material of stand-up comedy is a monologue that results from observation, restlessness, or even views from stand-up comedians wrapped by comedy. Moreover, utterances that stand-up comedians speak are often considered vulgar. Those vulgar and sensitive jokes become dark humor in their performance. Comedians often use some approaches in delivering dark humor, and one of them is by using impoliteness strategies.

The impoliteness strategy is the opposite of the politeness strategy by Brown and Levinson (1987). Culpeper (1996) defined impoliteness strategy as a speech act that harms other people's 'face'. Nevertheless, it can also go beyond. As Culpeper (2011) explains, one of the purposes of the impoliteness strategy is entertainment, so it goes beyond hurting other people's "face". Exploitation occurs when impoliteness is encouraged and involves a victim or, at the very least, a potential victim. It can be modified to amuse both the audience who overhears and the intended recipient. Most of the time, the impoliteness strategy is used to mask personal attacks on others. Hafisa and Hanidar (2020) studied impoliteness strategies in the dark humor of a stand-up comedy performance by Trevor Noah. The most strategies used was negative impoliteness, and it used to amuse the audience by allowing them to hear someone being mocked or condescended to.

Moreover, Yuanita (2019) described the impoliteness of the language used by the komika in the Stand-up Comedy Academy (SUCA) II TV program in Indonesia, which aired on Indosiar. Based on the analysis that has been done, it can be concluded that in the Stand-up Comedy discourse on Indosiar, the negative impoliteness strategy ranks highest, which is then followed by the second rank, the positive impoliteness strategy. The most common forms of negative impoliteness include underestimating or demeaning others, explicitly associating others with negative things, mocking, ridiculing, and insulting them. The use of harsh language and

cursing, as well as the use of offensive or inappropriate nicknames, are the two most common forms of positive impoliteness.

There are a lot of comedians who use dark humor as their trademark. One of them is Trevor Noah. He is a famous and successful South African comedian. He is also a television broadcaster, political commentator, and author, best known as the host of the American television series *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central from 2015 to 2022. *The Daily Show* has received three Emmy nominations, including Outstanding Variety Talk Series. Noah became a contributor to *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart in 2014. Even more, he already has 12 special comedy shows in which he often incorporated observations about growing up in South Africa, his life as an immigrant in America, and other aspects, including politics. *Son of Patricia* is one of his comedy specials in 2018. This comedy special explored his life as an African living in America, his personal experience getting racism and politics.

The phenomenon of how something vulgar or sensitive becomes a joke to execute many meanings is interesting to study. Furthermore, the impoliteness strategy has the function of entertaining people, which aligns with how dark humor contains offensive and sensitive discourse. Based on those conditions, this study intended to analyze the realization of impoliteness strategies in dark humor and its contribution to expressing dark humor. Noah's stand-up comedy performance was used in this study because he is a successful and famous comedian who often throws dark jokes in his performance.

METHOD

This study used phenomenological qualitative with a pragmatic approach. Based on Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative research is set up with a solid connection to the real world. It could be an event or even a phenomenon that affects a person or group. As this study insisted on exploring the phenomenon of dark humor based on Trevor Noah's personal experience, interpretivism, a perspective of qualitative

methodology, is also advised when the research objective is problem-solving or exploring the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Moreover, the whole idea of this study was also relevant to the phenomenological concept. The study of common social phenomena from the viewpoint of those who experience them is known as phenomenology (Titchen & Hobson, 2005). Enlarging our comprehension of what it means to be is the aim of phenomenology (Heidegger, 1962). This study aimed to explore the result of analyzed data and deepen the understanding of dark humor using an impoliteness strategy to answer the research problems in this study.

The object of this study was Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy performance entitled 'Son of Patricia.' The source of data was taken from all the dark humor in this performance. It was collected from the object through recording, transcribing, and identifying. After getting all the dark humor in the performance as the data source, they were analyzed through an impoliteness strategy and became the sub-data. This study used the framework of the impoliteness strategy by Culpeper in 1996. The impoliteness strategies used were calculated. Then, later the contribution of them in expressing dark humor was investigated based on the context of each topic of the jokes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The present study analyzed the realization of impoliteness strategies in the dark humor of a stand-up comedy performance by Trevor Noah. After transcribing the performance and taking out the dark humor, there were found 51 dark humor listed as the source of data in this study. All of them were analyzed through impoliteness strategies by Culpeper (1996), and the result can be seen in the table below.

Table 1. Total of Impoliteness Strategy Used in Dark Humor

No	Types of Impoliteness Strategy	Total
1	Bald of Record Impoliteness	14
2	Positive Impoliteness	6
3	Negative Impoliteness	8
4	Sarcasm or Mock	32
5	Withhold Politeness	0
Total		60

The table shows that dark humor is usually presented using sarcasm or mock, with 32 jokes or more than half of the amount of dark humor listed. It is followed with bald record impoliteness, with the total jokes being 14. Then, the least strategy used is negative impoliteness with eight jokes and positive impoliteness with six jokes. There was not found any withhold politeness strategy in Noah's stand-up comedy performance.

The Contribution of Impoliteness Strategies in Expressing Dark Humor in Trevor Noah's Stand-up Comedy Performance

All of the strategies are used in different contexts as needed. Furthermore, much discourse is delivered as jokes in this stand-up comedy performance. The performance starts by talking about LA's traffic. And then there are a lot of personal experiences of Noah that are being presented humorously. For instance, the difference in holiday habits between white and black people, his experience of a holiday in Bali with local people, another experience meeting Obama and criticizing Trump, and even the racism he experienced in America. All topics are being delivered humorously using impoliteness strategies that become jokes. How the impoliteness strategies can express humor is elaborated below.

First, it starts with the most used strategy, sarcasm or mock. This strategy is commonly used as entertaining impoliteness as Culpeper (1996) stated that mock impoliteness is based on a mismatch between conventionalized impoliteness formulae and the situation, as well

as additional indicators (e.g., laughter) that the impoliteness is not genuine. Furthermore, a contrast between the potentially violent setting and the unusual, imaginative mismatch provides a sense of humor (Culpeper, 2011). As stated before, Trevor's stand-up comedy performance conveys various topics for making dark humor, and sarcasm or mock is found in almost every topic he delivered.

In the topic of different holiday cultures between black and white people, Noah sarcastically shows that he does not like camping by imagining his family's reaction to him going camping in excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5:

Every day I wake up in my bed, and I'm like, "Thank God. I'm not camping." If my family saw pictures of me camping, they would be devastated. If my grandmothers saw me out in the woods, she'd be like, "Oh, what happened to Trevor? I thought he was successful. Oh! It must be the crack. Ah."

His family would think that Noah was not successful because activities like camping are some things he used to do in Africa on a daily basis. For context, many black people in the past lived on property where they did not have proper access to clean water and electricity. It was different from the white people's life, that mostly could afford it easily. Noah grew up and lived in such conditions that he could not afford it, so he found that camping activity was the same as how he used to live in his home country. He even mentioned his gratitude for not 'camping' every morning. The cultural difference in this context became jokes as Noah used sarcasm by using words that openly meant the opposite intending to attack the white culture.

In the second place, the impoliteness strategy used to express dark humor is bald on record impoliteness. This strategy is the boldest and most direct in attacking others' faces. Nevertheless, it can also express dark humor in some contexts and situations. In Noah's story about camping, he used bald-on-record impoliteness to reject his white friend's invitation to go camping and make it into humor (excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4:

Like my white friends are always inviting me to camping. Always, like with enthusiasm like, "Trevor, wanna go camping, dude?"

I'm like, "Why?"

"Like dude what do you mean, 'Why?' It's amazing. Are you kidding me? It's like no water, no electricity, you know? It's just like us and the great outdoors, you've got to take a dump like in the hole in the floor or something, dude."

I'm like, "Yeah, that was my life. That was me growing up. You know how hard I worked to never go camping again?"

In contrast to the earlier part of this story where Noah used sarcasm to express his disliking of camping, now he uses bald record impoliteness to reject his friend's invitation. Noah used bald-on-record impoliteness to explicitly state why he does not want to go on camping, and the reason is because of the cultural difference. He directly listed all the activities white people do in their camping and told them that those are what he usually does as black people.

The last two impoliteness strategies, which only have one difference, are negative and positive impoliteness. Negative impoliteness is used more than positive impoliteness. This finding differed from Hafisa and Hanidar's (2020) study, which found that negative impoliteness strategy was seen in Trevor Noah's other stand-up comedy show. In this study, the negative impoliteness strategy was used most to amuse the audience by allowing them to hear someone being mocked or condescended. Furthermore, AlMamoory and Alwan (2022) also found that negative impoliteness strategy was frequently used in expressing dark humor by sitcom characters to entertain people.

However, both are still used to express dark humor in the stand-up comedy performance. Trevor used positive impoliteness in one part of his holiday experience in Bali (excerpts 7 and 8).

Excerpt 7

Because one minute he's smiling at everybody, and then he turns and looks at me. And just with his eyes, he was like, "What are you doing here?"

So, with my eyes, I was like, "Hey man, I'm sorry, I didn't know this was your house. They said it was an authentic experience. That's why I came."

He was like, "Yeah, authentic for white people. You've got your own poor. Go back to where you came from."
I was like, "Yeah, I shouldn't be here, man. I'm sorry."

An interaction between him and one of the house owners happened. For context, the conversation between local people and Noah was made only through 'eye contact' as he wanted to show how they 'bond' very well by having the same fortune. Noah said that he understood the local people's thoughts on how he should return to his own place since both of them are 'poor' compared to white people. He made it into a joke using positive politeness from the local's perspective by disassociating himself from the others.

Excerpt 8

About 15 minutes later, everyone's done with their poverty porn, so they come and join me.

Furthermore, in excerpt 8, Noah addressed others' activity of exploring the local private house as poverty porn to attack their positive face by degrading their unethical behavior. He used positive politeness from the local's perspective by disassociating himself from the others.

For negative impoliteness, it is found in his story when he meets a racist and xenophobic man mocking an immigrant (excerpt 23).

Excerpt 23:

I was watching the news one day, and there was a guy at a rally, and they were asking him about immigration and families being separated, etc. and this guy, regardless of his politics, he was being really mean and xenophobic, and racist. You know, just acting real presidential. And the journalist asked him, the journalist asked him about children and he just went straight in he was like, "Boy, I tell you what, I don't give a damn about any of these goddamn Mexicans. They came over here. They ain't supposed to be here, boy. Woo! It's our country now, you hear? That's right, boy. Go back to where you came from. Woo! These Mexicans ain't done nothing good. Ain't bought nothing good to America. We don't need y'all. Come on, Bubba. It's Taco Tuesday."

In this experience, Noah attacked a guy's negative face, which was racist and xenophobic. He showed how mean the guy's behavior to other people. However, in the end, he established the punch line that showed the guy's interest in tacos even after he made fun of them. His behavior is very contrary. Still, in the same story, Noah linked it to how white people used to need to sail around the world to get spices (excerpt 25). Noah attacked the negative face of white by ridiculing them for having no spice and having to sail

around the world to find it so they could have better food.

The excerpts and discussions above showed how each impoliteness strategy expresses dark humor, but two strategies can also express dark humor in one joke nonetheless. For instance, in one of his racist experiences (excerpt 42), Noah handled a racist truck driver with humor.

Excerpt 42:

All I know is I stepped into the road, drove his truck around, rolled the window, looked me dead in the eyes, said, "Get out of the road, nigger." And I turned and I was like, "Yo, my nigga." And he almost crashed and died.

For context, Noah was walking along the street when suddenly a truck passed by, and the driver was racist to him. Noah used positive impoliteness by using taboo words 'nigga' and inappropriate identity markers for the racist man. He also sarcastically did that to annoy the racist man.

Furthermore, other combinations of impoliteness strategies are found in the dark humor of stand-up comedy performance by Trevor Noah. It was also found the combination of bold on record strategy with sarcasm or mock. This combination was found in excerpt 10, which joked about Noah's holiday experience in Bali. In one of the itineraries, there was a snake show but no proper safety for the audience. Noah refused to watch the snake show after knowing that the place did not have appropriate safety. At first, a French man ridiculed him, so he directly stated that he was just trying to not die as a black person. He also sarcastically replied to the French man's offensive question that he had a big brain to avoid dangerous events. Another combination of bold on record and sarcasm or mock was found in excerpt 47 and 48. Both joked about the difference in words' meaning in two cultures. In excerpt 47, Noah clearly explained that kaffir would mean nothing in America because of the different cultures. Americans probably thought that kaffir meant something else, which is very casual.

Moreover, he mocked how most American is lactose intolerant, so none wanted to be them.

Then, in excerpt 48, Noah explained that nigger has no power in Africa and that people could casually call people by it, and none would get offended. He clearly stated it and sarcastically used nigger to attack how white people use it to be racist.

The following combination was negative impoliteness and sarcasm or mock. It was found in different topics (excerpt 39, 43, 50, and 51). All of them were Noah's getting racism experiences. In excerpt 39, Noah used negative impoliteness to associate racism with negative aspects, which is the stereotype explicitly. He even sarcastically said that people must get creative to be racist and stop trying to get all the predictable stereotypes. In excerpt 43, Noah ridicules the racist man's reaction after being called nigga. He attacked the racist man's negative man and sarcastically showed how he felt terrible for him.

Meanwhile in excerpt 50 and 51, Noah attacked the negative face of white people, which is racism. He made sarcasm by wanting to send white people to Africa to get roasted and feel the racism towards them. Moreover, Africans will not fear America since it is their own country.

CONCLUSION

The dark humor analysis in the stand-up comedy performance by Trevor Noah showed several variations. Four out of five impoliteness strategies were found in the dark humor of Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy performance. The impoliteness strategies found were bold on records impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, and sarcasm or mock. There was not found any withhold politeness strategy in Trevor's stand-up comedy performance. The most used impoliteness strategies were sarcasm or mock, and the least impoliteness strategies used were positive impoliteness. Sarcasm or mock being the most commonly employed strategy, was to be expected, given this is the most popular strategy for entertaining impoliteness. Mock impoliteness is characterized by a mismatch between conventionalized impoliteness formulae and the

situation and additional indicators (e.g., laughter) that the impoliteness is not genuine (Culpeper, 2011). Moreover, some combination of impoliteness strategies was used in some dark humor. The combination was bald on record and sarcasm or mock, negative impoliteness and sarcasm or mock, and also positive impoliteness and sarcasm or mock.

The researcher hopes this study will broaden the scope of this study to encompass additional variables, populations, or timeframes. Such an expansion could provide a more comprehensive understanding of impoliteness strategies used in expressing dark humor enclosed behind the dark humor and its impact on various contexts. Furthermore, stand-up comedians should be mindful of the potential effect of their dark humor on different audience members. Audiences should also be open to exploring dark humor while being aware of their boundaries and triggers. Embracing different perspectives and engaging in critical thinking can lead to a more enriching stand-up comedy experience.

REFERENCES

- AlMamoory, S. M. A., & Alwan, A. A. (2022). Impoliteness strategies of dark humor in South Park Series: A sociopragmatic study. *Resmilitaris*, 12(3), 2503-2515.
- Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic theories of humor*. Mouton de Gruyter.
- Attardo, S. (2008). *A primer for the linguistics of humor*. In T. Raskin, & V. Raskin, *The Primer of Humor Research* (pp. 101-155). Mouton de Gruyter.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Some universals in language usage politeness*. Cambridge University Press.
- Creswell, J. W., and Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.
- Culpeper, J. (1996). Towards an anatomy of impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics* 25: 349-367.
- Culpeper, J. (2011). *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dynel, M., & Poppi, F. I. (2018). In tragoediarisus: Analysis of dark humor in post-terrorist attack discourse. *Discourse & Communication*, 12(4), 382-400.
- Faina, J. (2013). A decade of dark humor: How comedy, irony, and satire shaped post-9/11 America (2011). *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 4(3), 8.
- Hafisa, A., & Hanidar, S. (2020). Impoliteness strategies in Trevor Noah's Afraid of The Dark Stand-up Comedy Show. *Lexicon*, 7(2), 215-223.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time*. Harper & Row.
- McGhee, P. E. (2010). *Humor as survival training for a stressed-out world: The 7 humor habits program*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse.
- Miles, M. B. And Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. SAGE Publications.
- Mindess, H., Miller, C., Turek, J., Bender, A., & Corbin, S. (1985). *The antioch humor test: Making sense of humor*. Avon.
- Murstein, B. I., & Brust, R. G. (1985). Humor and interpersonal attraction. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 49(6), 637-640.
- Ruch, W., & Proyer, R. T. (2015). Mapping strengths into virtues: The relation of the 24 VIA-strengths to six ubiquitous virtues. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6.
- Titchen, A., & Hobson, D. (2005). *Phenomenology research methods in the social sciences*, 121-130.
- Yuanita, A. (2019, December). Language impoliteness in Stand-up Comedy Academy (SUCA) II on Indosiar. In *Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Conference (SoSHEC 2019)*. Atlantis Press.