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Language and Identity in Stand-up Comedy: A Discourse Analysis of Humor

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi persinggungan antara bahasa, konstruksi identitas, dan humor dalam konteks stand-up comedy dengan menggunakan pendekatan analisis wacana kritis. Stand-up comedy, sebagai genre budaya populer, bukan hanya sekadar media hiburan, tetapi juga merupakan ruang di mana makna sosial diciptakan, diperdebatkan, dan dinegosiasikan. Penelitian ini berfokus pada bagaimana para komika memanfaatkan strategi linguistik seperti alih kode, penggunaan slang, metafora, dan idiom lokal untuk merepresentasikan dan menampilkan berbagai identitas sosial, termasuk yang berkaitan dengan etnisitas, gender, dan kelas sosial. Melalui analisis terhadap penampilan terpilih dari para komika Indonesia, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa humor berfungsi sebagai alat wacana yang kuat untuk mencerminkan realitas sosial, menantang ideologi dominan, dan memfasilitasi perlawanan simbolik. Selain itu, respons penonton seperti tawa, keheningan, atau tepuk tangan turut membentuk makna humor dan identitas di atas panggung. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa stand-up comedy menjadi wadah kritis untuk menegosiasikan norma budaya dan identitas dalam wacana publik kontemporer, serta memberikan kontribusi yang signifikan dalam studi linguistik dan budaya.

Kata Kunci: stand-up comedy, analisis wacana kritis, bahasa dan identitas, alih kode, humor sebagai perlawanan

ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersection between language, identity construction, and humor in the context of stand-up comedy using a critical discourse analysis approach. Stand-up comedy, as a popular cultural genre, is not merely a medium of entertainment but also a site where social meanings are created, contested, and negotiated. The research focuses on how comedians utilize linguistic strategies such as code-switching, the use of slang, metaphor, and local idioms to represent and perform multiple social identities, including those related to ethnicity, gender, and class. Through analyzing selected performances by Indonesian comedians, the study reveals that humor functions as a powerful discursive tool that reflects social realities, challenges dominant ideologies, and facilitates symbolic resistance. Furthermore, audience reactions such as laughter, silence, or applause are shown to co-construct the meaning of humor and identity on stage. The study concludes that stand-up comedy serves as a critical platform for negotiating cultural norms and identities within contemporary public discourse, contributing significantly to linguistic and cultural studies.

Keywords: stand-up comedy, critical discourse analysis, language and identity, code-switching, humor as resistance



INTRODUCTION

Stand-up comedy has emerged as one of the most popular forms of contemporary entertainment, experiencing rapid growth in various parts of the world, including Indonesia. This phenomenon is evident in the rise of stand-up comedy communities, dedicated television programs, and widespread use of digital platforms such as YouTube and Netflix. Typically delivered in the form of a solo monologue, stand-up comedy performances are characterized by their personal, spontaneous, and conversational style. These performances are not only a space for laughter but also serve as a medium through which comedians express their views on social, cultural, and political issues. Many comedians use their material to address critical themes such as inequality, discrimination, social stigma, and power relations. As such, stand-up comedy functions both as a cultural expression and a reflective mode of social communication.

Language plays a central role in constructing humor in stand-up comedy. Comedians do not rely on formal or standardized language, but rather on improvisational, idiomatic, and context-specific expressions that reflect the cultural and social background of their audience. The careful selection of words, play on language, regional accents, and rhetorical techniques such as irony, sarcasm, and hyperbole are essential tools in creating comedic effect. Linguistic strategies like code-switching between local dialects and Indonesian, or between Indonesian and English, not only enhance comedic timing but also signal the comedian's multicultural identity. Language thus reveals both the communicative competence and the socio-cultural positioning of the comedian. Therefore, analyzing language in stand-up comedy provides insight into how humor is constructed through meaningful linguistic choices.

One of the most compelling aspects of stand-up comedy is how comedians represent their identities through humor. These identities may include ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, and even political affiliation. Comedians often use their own lived experiences or prevailing social stereotypes as material, which can serve either to reinforce or subvert existing social structures. For instance, female comedians frequently draw upon gendered experiences to critique patriarchal norms, while comedians from minority ethnic groups may use stereotypical narratives to challenge dominant assumptions. In some cases, comedians use humor as a tool to reflect marginalization or to build solidarity across social boundaries. Identity within humorous discourse is not fixed it is negotiated and reconstructed in front of the audience through narrative choices, speaking styles, and audience feedback. This shows that humor is both a personal expression and a site of collective identity representation.

Beyond entertainment, humor in stand-up comedy often contains sharp social and political commentary wrapped in an accessible and engaging manner. Comedians address sensitive topics such as racism, gender bias, religious intolerance, and socioeconomic disparity using humorous language that is critical yet reflective. In this sense, humor functions as a discursive strategy to voice discontent, critique oppressive norms, or foster dialogue among diverse social groups. The effectiveness of such humor depends heavily on the comedian's ability to read social contexts, transform personal experiences into relatable narratives, and utilize language that resonates with the audience. Moreover, audience reactions play a significant role in reinforcing or contesting the meaning behind the discourse. Therefore, humor in stand-up comedy becomes a space of interaction filled with social and ideological significance.

Despite the growing popularity and social impact of stand-up comedy, academic inquiry into the practice remains relatively limited, especially from linguistic and sociocultural perspectives. Most studies tend to focus on aesthetic or entertainment aspects, while the ideological dimensions, identity representations, and the role of

language in constructing humorous discourse are often underexplored. In a diverse society like Indonesia, rich in cultural and linguistic variation, stand-up comedy provides a unique lens through which we can examine how identity and social relations are understood, negotiated, and contested through humor. It is thus important to investigate how language and humor work together in stand-up comedy and how they contribute to the construction and negotiation of social identities in the contemporary public sphere.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach using the method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach is selected because the aim of the research is not merely to examine texts as linguistic structures, but to explore the underlying social and ideological meanings embedded in language use, particularly in the context of stand-up comedy. CDA views language as a non-neutral medium; it is shaped by values, power relations, and social positioning. In stand-up comedy, comedians do more than entertain they communicate perspectives, shape identities, and often challenge dominant societal norms. Thus, CDA provides the analytical tools to examine how humor functions as a discursive practice that both reflects and constructs social realities.

The analytical framework used in this study is based on Teun A. van Dijk's model of discourse analysis, which integrates three key levels: textual structure (micro-level), social context (macro-level), and social cognition (meso-level). At the textual level, the study examines how comedians structure their language through lexical choices, syntax, metaphors, irony, and other rhetorical devices. At the social context level, the study considers the broader cultural, historical, and societal influences that shape both the production and interpretation of the discourse. At the social cognition level, the research explores how audiences understand and respond to the humorous discourse, and how collective perceptions are constructed through these interactions. This framework ensures that the analysis extends beyond the surface of the text to reveal deeper meanings and power dynamics.

The data sources for this study consist of video recordings of stand-up comedy performances, obtained from digital platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, Instagram, and other social media channels. The selection of these videos is based on purposive sampling, using the following criteria: (1) performances that explicitly explore or represent identity themes (e.g., gender, ethnicity, religion, social class), (2) use of diverse linguistic features (e.g., code-switching, regional accents, or bilingual delivery), and (3) significant audience engagement, either through direct reactions or comments. The comedians featured in the analysis are chosen for their consistent engagement with identity and social issues in their material. This study focuses on two to three comedians in order to allow for in-depth textual and contextual analysis.

Data collection techniques include documentation and non-participant observation. Documentation involves collecting and transcribing the video content, capturing not only the spoken words but also relevant non-verbal elements such as pauses, laughter, facial expressions, and gestures. Observation consists of repeated viewing of the performances to understand cultural nuances, contextual references, and audience responses. In addition, literature review supports the theoretical foundation of the study by incorporating relevant works on humor theory, identity construction, and language in performance.

The unit of analysis in this study is the discourse segments or "bits" of stand-up comedy that contain elements of humor and identity representation. These segments may be in the form of sentences, paragraphs, or thematic chunks that address specific social issues. Within each unit, the study analyzes linguistic features such as diction,

cultural metaphors, code-switching, phonological play, and rhetorical strategies like sarcasm and satire. Beyond the linguistic structure, the study also investigates how identity is constructed explicitly through personal narratives or implicitly through assumptions, tone, or interaction with the audience.

Data analysis is carried out through several stages. First, video materials are transcribed verbatim, with annotations for both verbal and non-verbal cues. Second, the texts are segmented into discourse units that are relevant to themes of identity and ideology. Third, the researcher conducts coding, assigning labels to the data based on humor types (e.g., irony, satire, self-deprecation), identity themes (e.g., gender, ethnicity, class), and linguistic strategies (e.g., code-switching, slang, dialect use). Fourth, the researcher interprets the meaning of the coded segments, analyzing how language is used to convey, reinforce, or challenge identity positions and ideological stances. These interpretations are contextualized within the social and cultural background of the comedians and their target audiences.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, several strategies are implemented. These include source triangulation (comparing data from different comedians and platforms), peer debriefing (discussing findings with fellow researchers or supervisors to avoid subjective bias), and, when possible, member checking (comparing interpretations with public responses or audience comments). The researcher also maintains an audit trail, keeping detailed records of the data collection and analysis process to ensure transparency and replicability. These methods enhance the trustworthiness of the study and support the credibility of the interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Sample of Discourse Excerpts and Analytical Categorization

Comedian's Excerpt	Linguistic Strategy	Represented Identity	Audience Response	Discourse Function
"I'm Batak, but I can't even do the angry voice"	Irony & self- stereotyping	Ethnic (Batak)	Spontaneous laughter	Challenging ethnic stereotypes
"Women are expected to be thin, polite, and smile all the time."	Satire & hyperbole	Gender (female)	Applause & laughter	Critique of gender norms
"If you're poor, you pay taxes. If you're rich, you get a tax cut."	Sarcasm & political metaphor	Social class (working class)	Laughter & clapping	Social inequality awareness
"At home I speak Javanese, but on stage I sound like a TV host."	Code- switching & mimicry	Linguistic/cultural identity	Mixed laughter	Highlighting bilingual identity and adaptation

Source: Constructed by the researcher based on selected stand-up comedy performances by Indonesian comedians.

Based on Table 1, it can be interpreted that the linguistic strategies employed by comedians serve as tools for identity representation as well as vehicles for subtle but impactful social critique. In the first excerpt, the comedian uses irony and self-stereotyping to subvert the common perception of Batak people as being naturally

temperamental. Rather than reinforcing this stereotype, the comedian undermines it humorously, which elicits spontaneous laughter from the audience indicating not only amusement but also a shared understanding of the critical subtext. A similar mechanism is observed in the second excerpt, where exaggeration (*hyperbole*) is used to mock restrictive gender norms. The audience's response laughter followed by applause suggests both appreciation of the comedic delivery and support for the underlying message of gender equality.

In the third excerpt, sarcasm and political metaphor are deployed to highlight issues of economic inequality, particularly concerning taxation and privilege. The audience's enthusiastic laughter and clapping demonstrate recognition of the satire and agreement with the critique of systemic injustice. The final excerpt illustrates the use of *code-switching* and mimicry to reflect linguistic identity and the cultural pressure to conform to dominant language standards. The mixed audience reaction ranging from light laughter to thoughtful silence reveals an awareness of the complexities surrounding bilingual or multilingual identity in public performance. Overall, this table illustrates that stand-up comedy functions as a discursive space where identity is performed and social realities are negotiated through strategic language use and humor, often resulting in both entertainment and reflection.

The findings of this study reveal that comedians employ a wide range of linguistic strategies to construct and deliver humor. These strategies are not merely technical but are imbued with social significance. One of the most prominent techniques observed is code-switching, often between Indonesian and regional languages such as Javanese, Betawi, Sundanese, or even between Indonesian and English. Code-switching serves to create emotional proximity with audiences who share similar cultural backgrounds and helps build an inclusive atmosphere that reflects linguistic diversity. Additionally, comedians make use of slang, borrowed words, idiomatic expressions, and community-specific jargon to build a sense of familiarity and authenticity. Rhetorical techniques such as irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, and *wordplay* are also frequently used to frame social critique in an entertaining and subtle manner. The comedians manipulate language to blur the boundaries between seriousness and humor demonstrating how humor operates as a symbolic force in public discourse.

In terms of content, the analysis indicates that social identity representation forms the core narrative in most stand-up routines. Ethnic identity, for instance, is often portrayed through everyday anecdotes, cultural stereotypes, and intergroup dynamics. Some comedians employ *self-deprecating humor* to mock their own ethnic background, while others critically expose dominant cultural assumptions and challenge ethnic hierarchies. Regarding gender identity, female comedians frequently use humor to voice the lived realities of being women in a patriarchal society, addressing issues such as body shaming, beauty standards, or gendered expectations. This use of personal experience as comedic material serves as a form of empowerment and resistance. Male comedians have also begun to explore gender issues, often using satire to deconstruct toxic masculinity and traditional norms. Class identity is another recurring theme, with many performers drawing from the hardships of working-class life, unemployment, or marginalization to connect with audiences emotionally and socially.

The study also reveals that humor functions as a space for negotiating power and ideology. Comedians are not merely entertainers; they are social actors who construct discursive spaces to critique systems of oppression, inequality, and social norms. Satirical commentary on bureaucracy, religious dogma, identity politics, or class-based privilege is embedded within seemingly light-hearted jokes. In this sense, humor serves as a form of symbolic resistance an indirect but effective way to confront dominant structures

without provoking overt conflict. Through laughter, comedians introduce critical reflection on sensitive topics, facilitating a safe space for audiences to rethink their positions. This use of *soft power* within comedy aligns with broader critical discourse theories, where meaning is created through nuanced, strategic performances.

Another key finding is that identity in stand-up comedy is not simply represented it is performed. Drawing from Judith Butler's concept of *performative identity*, the study shows that the identities enacted on stage are not fixed representations of the comedian's real self, but rather constructed personas created for specific communicative and cultural purposes. A comedian might assume the persona of a rural villager, an ethnic minority, or a stereotypical "traditional mother" to deliver critique or connect with a particular audience. These personas allow comedians to articulate controversial or taboo topics under the veil of humor, making them more digestible and socially acceptable. Identity in comedy is thus fluid, context-dependent, and negotiated through interaction with the audience and broader sociopolitical discourses.

Audience response plays a crucial role in shaping the meaning and effectiveness of humorous discourse. Reactions such as loud laughter, applause, verbal engagement, or even awkward silences indicate the degree to which the humor resonates. Laughter, in this case, is not merely a physiological response, but a form of discursive agreement a signal that the audience understands and aligns with the message embedded in the joke. Conversely, silence or discomfort may suggest ideological tension or disagreement. In this way, the audience becomes an active participant in the meaning-making process. In some cases, inclusive humor receives widespread support, while jokes perceived as offensive or marginalizing trigger backlash, sometimes even leading to cancel culture dynamics. Thus, comedian-audience interaction reflects broader power relations and cultural boundaries in contemporary public life.

Finally, the study underscores that stand-up comedy provides a unique space for articulating marginalized narratives that are often excluded from mainstream discourse. Recurring themes such as poverty, discrimination, minority identity, religious diversity, and body image stigma are voiced through personal storytelling or shared experiences. These themes, while embedded in humor, carry profound social messages. Stand-up comedy emerges as a transformative genre a form of entertainment that educates, provokes reflection, and fosters dialogue. It reaffirms the role of popular culture as not only a mirror of society but also as an agent for change. Through laughter, comedians open critical conversations, encouraging audiences to reevaluate their own assumptions and the structures that shape their lives.

One of the central findings of this study is that the linguistic strategies employed by comedians serve not merely to provoke laughter, but to construct and present social identities. Through practices such as *code-switching*, the use of regional accents, and culturally embedded metaphors, comedians actively represent themselves as members of specific social groups whether based on ethnicity, gender, or class. This aligns with Judith Butler's theory of *performative identity*, which argues that identity is not innate or fixed, but continuously constructed through repeated acts, including speech. In this context, comedians are not simply "telling stories" about who they are; they are *creating versions of themselves* that are negotiated in the public eye. For instance, a female comedian who jokes about beauty standards or body image is not just relaying personal experience but is actively framing herself as a critical agent who resists patriarchal constructions of femininity.

In addition to shaping identity, stand-up comedy also functions as a powerful medium of discourse for ideology and social critique. Drawing from Teun A. van Dijk's discourse theory, language is not a neutral medium but a tool that reflects and reproduces

structures of power. Stand-up comedians deliberately use humorous narratives to expose inequalities, mock inefficient bureaucracies, or satirize themes such as gender discrimination, ethnic stereotypes, and religious intolerance. Through laughter, they encourage the audience to reflect on social injustices that might otherwise be difficult to address openly. Thus, comedy becomes a form of *counter-hegemonic discourse* a subtle yet effective way to challenge mainstream ideologies from within the realm of popular culture. Humor, in this sense, is not only entertainment; it is a form of cultural resistance that opens up space for alternative perspectives and hidden truths.

This also emphasizes the role of comedians as social agents and cultural intermediaries. They do not merely entertain; they articulate the voices and experiences of marginalized individuals and communities. The stand-up stage becomes a platform for the expression of perspectives that are often silenced or overlooked in formal discourse. Personal storytelling, drawn from lived experience, becomes a gateway to larger discussions on systemic inequality, poverty, or identity-based exclusion. For comedians from marginalized backgrounds, humor serves as a survival strategy and a means to reclaim public space. As *cultural brokers*, comedians mediate between complex social realities and the public's desire for both humor and insight, using comedy to transform hardship into shared reflection.

Equally important is the interactive nature of humor and meaning-making between the comedian and the audience. A joke's effectiveness depends not only on its content but on how the audience responds to it. Laughter, silence, applause, or verbal feedback become part of the discursive event. This supports the idea of *co-construction of meaning*, where the audience is not a passive receiver but an active participant in interpreting humor. Especially in multicultural settings, audience reactions also reveal underlying social tensions whether they feel represented, alienated, or challenged. A skilled comedian must read the room, adjusting their delivery to maintain balance between provocation and inclusivity. This dynamic illustrates how stand-up comedy reflects and is shaped by the socio-cultural boundaries of the communities it engages with.

In a diverse society like Indonesia, stand-up comedy holds significant potential as a site for exploring identity politics in an open yet safe manner. Humor can build bridges between different groups, provided it is wielded with cultural awareness and ethical responsibility. However, humor also carries risk: when used carelessly or without reflection, it can reinforce harmful stereotypes or deepen social divides. Therefore, comedians bear a particular ethical responsibility to be both expressive and reflective, to advocate for their communities without vilifying others. This study shows that the most impactful comedians are those who balance critique with empathy, who transform discomfort into laughter, and who use humor to foster collective introspection.

Finally, this research contributes to broader interdisciplinary scholarship on language, culture, and popular media. Popular entertainment is often dismissed in academia as trivial, yet this study demonstrates that beneath the laughter lies a complex web of ideology, power, and identity. By framing stand-up comedy as a legitimate object of academic inquiry, this research bridges critical discourse analysis with real-world cultural practices. It invites further studies on how humor operates in digital spaces, how identity is performed across generations, and how media can function as a vehicle for social change. The study underscores that humor is not neutral it is a form of discourse, a cultural act, and a political gesture.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, this research concludes that stand-up comedy functions as a complex discursive space where language, humor, and identity intersect dynamically. Comedians do not merely aim to entertain but actively construct and negotiate social identities particularly those related to ethnicity, gender, and class through strategic linguistic choices such as *code-switching*, metaphors, satire, and culturally grounded references. These linguistic strategies not only serve comedic purposes but also carry deeper ideological and political meanings, making humor a subtle tool of resistance and cultural critique. Additionally, the performance of identity on stage is shown to be fluid and performative, aligning with Judith Butler's theory that identity is shaped through repeated actions rather than fixed traits. Audience responses play a vital role in validating or contesting these performances, turning laughter into a form of social agreement or tension. Therefore, stand-up comedy, as analyzed through critical discourse analysis, is a rich site for exploring how language, power, and identity operate within contemporary popular culture. It also contributes to broader discussions in media, sociolinguistics, and cultural studies.

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