

The Dynamics of Linguistic Humor Comprehension
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Abstract

As a performance whose functioning relies heavily on sociocultural rules, humor does not easily transcend cultural and language lines. In most cases, humor comprehension requires more than fluency in a language. Linguistic humor in particular can create challenges for second language (L2) speakers because it demands fluency, as well as a higher competence of linguistic rules governing how the language is applied. This study aimed to examine the role that such competence may play in humor comprehension by determining if fluent L2 English speakers from first language (L1) Mandarin and French speech communities could understand Standard American English (SAE) linguistic humor. The findings suggest that comprehension of linguistic humor may be dependent on sufficient exposure to a speech community, but further research with larger population sizes is necessary.

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I. Preface

I have always had a curiosity for how we use language, how our language-use associates us with certain identities, and moreover, how this relationship allows language users to use language for fun. When I studied for a semester in Paris, I saw this aspect of language-use manifest most saliently in linguistic humor, such as word play, plays on register and tone, and sarcasm. Although I considered myself to be fluent in French, I struggled to understand anything more than the literal denotation of texts and utterances.

As a sense of humor is a characteristic that I value significantly in others and myself, and language play has always been my preferred type of humor, I felt as though I could not express a large portion of my personality, or truly gauge others' personalities. I felt that I lacked a particular, implicit understanding of French that I already possessed in English. At the time, I did not have the vocabulary to attribute my challenges to unfamiliarity with the pragmatics of French or the collectiveⁱⁱ of the Parisian French speech communityⁱⁱⁱ. Only after progressing through my studies in linguistics have I been able to discern a connection between language-use and the rules that govern it, which this study intends to explore further and apply to humor comprehension.

II. Introduction and Overview of the Field

While the study of humor in linguistics has expanded considerably over the past three decades, much of the literature currently in existence is predominantly theoretical or attempts to categorize and explain aspects of humor through meta-

analysis of other works (Raskin 1980; Yamaguchi 1987; Richardson 1989; Attardo and Raskin 1991; Attardo 1994; Attardo et al. 2002; Schmitz 2002; Banitz 2005; Laviosa 2010). Case studies analyzing humor have focused on humor development and comprehension in L1 speakers (Fitzgerald 2004; Hite 2016), as well as some features of L2 humor interaction (Attardo and Bell 2010).

Among the studies focusing specifically on L2 humor competence, Nancy Bell has made tremendous contributions with research examining L2 humor production (2007), humor as an aid to L2 acquisition (2003; 2005; 2009), and L2 failed humor (Attardo and Bell 2010). However, despite her breadth of work in the area of L2 humor, her findings address less specifically linguistic humor, and focus on L2 users' performance of humor, rather than their understanding of the underlying sociolinguistic aspects involved in humor. Her study on L2 failed humor concentrated the most on L2 comprehension of humor mechanisms, but only discussed linguistic humor in one instance.

Thus, I wanted to explore how fluent L2 users interact specifically with linguistic humor. This study aims to determine whether non-American fluent L2 English speakers who grew up outside of the United States can understand linguistic humor to the same degree as American L1 SAE speakers. I posit that because of its relationship with advanced knowledge of linguistic and sociolinguistic rules, linguistic humor is the most challenging form of humor for L2 speakers to grasp. Thus, I expect to find that L2 English speakers will have more difficulty than L1 SAE speakers in understanding linguistic humor.

I was introduced to the notion of acquiring “language for use” through Hymes’s work on communicative competence, which theorized that communication relies not only on acquiring a comprehension of grammatical rules (which Chomsky coined linguistic competence), but also, even more so, on acquiring an understanding of how to use language in any given situation (Hymes 1972). However, as Hymes posited communicative competence as a critique to Chomsky’s linguistic competence, the notion is very generative in nature.

In an effort to transcend while still incorporate the scope of linguistic competence, communicative competence assumed that acquisition was complete in the same time period as grammatical competence. It is now known that a competence of language for use is not fully developed by the end of any time period, but rather consciously learned throughout life experience as one becomes familiar with the relationships between people and situations (Acar 2003). Thus, Hymes and the field of linguistics have moved away from the term “communicative competence”, and embedded it within theories of speech communities and communities of practice, which focus more on an individual’s learning as it relates to life experience and context. As the scope of this study began with ideas from communicative competence, which will be discussed more thoroughly in section three, this paper uses the term “communicative competence,” but reinterpreted through a focus on speech communities.

As the focus of this study greatly involves pragmatics and sociolinguistics, it is worth discussing the contributions that have shaped these fields. It would not be possible to analyze and discuss language-use without first discussing speech acts. A

speech act is a unit of language that always signifies meaning (Jakobson, 1957/1987). Austin (1962), Searle (1979) and Jakobson (1957/1987) offer three different approaches of how to examine speech acts. I will present a brief summary of the merits and weaknesses of each.

Austin defined speech acts as acts of signification and communication, and classified them based on the outcome they produce. While Austin's approach reinforces the tenet that meaning is embedded everywhere in language, his taxonomy is not well defined and can only be applied to English. Searle's approach addresses the obscurity in Austin's model by offering a clearly structured taxonomy of speech acts, which he calls illocutionary verbs. Searle argued that speech acts differed according to how they are performed. While his model is well structured and more inclusive, it is still limited because it only applies to English and it locates meaning predominantly in speaker intention, which ignores the notion that language acquires meaning through context. Additionally, both Austin and Searle's models focus only on referential meaning, which is where they fall short.

Jakobson's (1957/1987) approach incorporates all forms of meaning by classifying speech acts based on six factors^{iv} and six functions^v of language. In this model, meaning is not solely based on performance or speaker-intention, but is constantly negotiated by the speakers and hearers of speech communities and communities of practice^{vi}. Every utterance is a speech act, and so carries meaning through the six factors and functions of language. These functions are always hierarchically embedded in every speech act, allowing one speech act to carry multiple meanings, with the predominant meaning reliant on the context of the

utterance and speaker-hearer dynamic (73-79). As Jakobson's model can apply to any language and type of meaning, I will use his approach when referring to speech acts.

The study of identity has also seen significant progress in the way of describing identities as they relate to language. Earlier work in this field considered identity as a characteristic of individuals or groups, and thus was very essentialist in practice. The study of language(s) and identities has attempted to deconstruct essentialist approaches to identity research by regarding identities not as fixed, innate attributes, but as learned, dynamic and interactive products of social relations and discursive practices.

Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) earlier work on language and identity conjectures how language is used to form identity with a model they call "tactics of intersubjectivity." These six tactics (adequation, distinction, authentication, denaturalization, authorization, and illegitimation) represent the "relations that are created through identity work," or otherwise, the "local, situated, and often improvised quality of the everyday practices through which individuals...accomplish their social goals" (382). In their later work on language and identity, Bucholtz and Hall (2010) further demonstrate the interactive and learned nature of identities through their five-principle model to studying identity. The emergence principle holds that identities are not the source, but rather the products of pre-existing linguistic and extra-linguistic practices (19). This principle reinforces the tenet critical to semiotics that there is no language "in the one." The positionality principle posits that identities emerge through the dynamic roles that language users assume

(20). The indexicality principle invokes a mechanism through which identities are formed a priori. Although Bucholtz and Hall's application of indexicality is slightly flawed^{vii}, their principle attempts to explain that identity formation relies heavily on ideologies of how certain speakers should use language. The relationality principle establishes identity formation as interactive, explaining that the individual only has relative autonomy in identity formation (23). And the partialness principle, their fifth principle, reinforces that identity transcends the individual, and so is not something an individual possesses.

Johnstone (2010) also uses indexicality to establish how meaningful connections are formed between language and identity. As she discusses indexicality as it relates to the other components of the Peircian sign, Johnstone's use of the concept is slightly stronger than that of Bucholtz and Hall, despite that she also describes sign-object relationships as capable of being purely indexical.

Johnstone explains that linguistic features become associated with certain groups when "people learn to hear linguistic variants as having indexical meaning by being told they do, and they continue to share ideas about indexical meaning as long as they keep telling each other about them" (32). While the relationship between linguistic traits and identities is more than indexical, Johnstone establishes a good framework for thinking about how identity formation largely arises through language use.

Mendoza-Denton (2005) similarly describes identity as "the active negotiation of an individual's relationship with larger social constructs," which makes it "neither an attribute nor possession, but an individual and collective-level

process” (475). As a case to move away from “observation-cum-speculative-description” sociolinguistic analyses that could potentially reinforce essentialism, Mendoza-Denton (2005) offers a taxonomy outlining the breadth of variationist approaches that have been applied to the field. She establishes three research types that analyze identity as a construction. Type 1, sociodemographic category-based identity research studies linguistic identities that arise from the sociological and demographic-based stratification of populations (480). Type 2, practice-based identity research focuses on identities that are formed through practicing particular activities, and practice-based variation research, type 3, analyzes the variation of identities that can occur as practice continues (486-488). These sociolinguistic contributions will be helpful to keep in mind when analyzing how humor comprehension relates to speech communities’ sociolinguistic rules.

III. Second Language Acquisition and Humor Competence

Second language (L2) acquisition is frequently assumed to entail mainly lexical, grammatical, and syntactical mastery of a language (Bell 2007: 28). While these are all critical components of L2 acquisition, the sociolinguistic rules that govern speech communities are just as important for communication as are the ‘purely linguistic’ rules. When L1 speakers perceive an L2 speaker as fluent, or as having mastered the ‘purely linguistic’ rules of their speech community, they assume that the L2 speaker also has an understanding of the social norms governing how that language is used in that particular speech community (Varonis and Gass 1985). Consequently, while grammatical mistakes are typically attributed to an L2

speaker's learning status, "odd" word choice is more likely to be attributed to a characteristic of that speaker's personality or even ethnic group. This is problematic because an understanding of sociolinguistic rules is often a product of exposure to a community, and thus typically lags behind fluency (Bell 2007: 28).

Linguistic humor is a phenomenon that has the potential to differ significantly in different speech communities as a product of the sociolinguistic rules that regulate those communities. Humor is a particularly important factor of L2 language acquisition for L2 speakers integrating into American English speech communities. In the United States, humor is not only seen as a valuable tool in the professional world, but also has been a fundamental part of American culture since the 17th century (Banitz 2005: 1, 35). Raeithel (1980) deems that in the United States, "laughing is a social must, humor an omnipresent phenomenon and almost every American his own little comedian." Thus, it would be beneficial for L2 English speakers in the US to be able to recognize humor in utterances, and even produce it themselves.

However, L2 speakers may not recognize humorous remarks as easily as L1 speakers would because recognizing the linguistic "irregularities" that characterize linguistic humor entails an understanding of utterances as not only grammatical, but also appropriate, which Hymes (1972) coins as communicative competence (60). The concept of competence was first introduced by Chomsky (1965) as an argument that linguistics should focus only on the aspects of language that speakers implicitly know, rather than the aspects that speakers actually produce (Banitz 2005: 15). This approach to competence ignores the relationship between sociocultural

context and language, and because it is concerned only with the “ideal” structure of language, it cannot account for language irregularities. For this reason, a more holistic approach to competence is necessary to investigate humor. The notion of humor as a function of competence is not new. It has been suggested that humor competence be considered a fifth component of communicative competence (Vega 1989), and that a level of “cultural competence” is necessary to understand the humor of a speech community (Deneire 1995).

Hymes’s (1972) theory of communicative competence relates denotation to connotation as it explains how language itself, the performance of language, and the factors that affect performance work concomitantly to create meaning. Hymes states that four components are involved in communicative competence (63-67):

1. Whether and to what degree something is formally possible: this concerns itself with what is actually communicative in a speech community. This refers to grammaticality in the context of language structure.
2. Whether and to what degree something is feasible: acceptability in relation to cultural behavior.
3. Whether and to what degree something is appropriate: language’s obligatory connection to context.
4. Whether and to what degree something is done: how and if language is performed.

The interaction between speech acts and the sociocultural features of a community then gives rise to a general competence of how to speak appropriately in the community (Hymes 1972: 60). Thus, as the acquisition of communicative competence is contingent on experience in a speech community and community of practice, it seems logical to suppose that fluent L2 speakers would have difficulty

recognizing sociolinguistic abnormalities if they have not had enough exposure to a certain speech community.

IV. Definitions and Classifications of Humor

Various theories have attempted to define humor. Release theories suggest that humor serves as a mechanism to release oneself from inhibitions, conventions, and laws. Aggression theories suggest that humor involves a superiority asserted over the “butt of the joke.” Incongruity theories argue that humor occurs from the incongruity between a concept and reality, or rather, when there is a deviation from the expected/normal pattern of a situation (Attardo 1994: 49-50). The incongruity theory is the only theory to give a definition that attempts to explain how humor actually occurs, so for purposes of this study, I will define humor using the incongruity theory’s definition.

Several definitions later arise that attempt to relate the incongruity theory specifically to linguistic humor. Bally’s stylistics definition of register-based humor posits that humor occurs when there is a misalliance between how an utterance is said and the actual context of the utterance (Attardo 1994: 237). Raskin defines humor as an insincere form of communication that violates at least one of Grice’s maxims of communication^{viii} (Raskin 1985). However, maxims of communication may differ in different speech communities, so it is possible that L2 English speakers could have difficulties understanding aspects of verbal SAE humor simply from not recognizing a violation of a communication maxim. An L2 English speaker could even inadvertently invoke humor by unknowingly violating one of these maxims.

Raskin (1985) goes even further to develop a model for linguistic humor with the Semantic Script Theory of Verbal Humor (SSTH). Under this theory, in order for a text or utterance to be humorous, it must be compatible with two different scripts and the scripts must be opposing one another. The five fundamental script oppositions thought to be universal are good/bad, life/death, obscene/non-obscene, money/no money, and high/low stature (Attardo 1994: 204). However, this model was flawed in that it mostly applied to structured jokes and referential, or content-based humor, and could not be easily applied to forms of linguistic humor where pragmatics were more involved. Thus, Raskin and Attardo (1991) developed a more comprehensive model of linguistic humor called the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). This theory can account for any type of humorous remark or text, as well as the linguistic, literary, and logical features that render it humorous, whereas the SSTH dealt primarily with the referential features of humorous remarks.

The GTVH states that six knowledge resources (KRs) must be used to form a joke, and that all KRs are always present in varying degrees in every joke. The language (LA) KR is the most surface level aspect of the joke and concerns the joke's exact wording, along with the placement of the joke's functional elements. This KR is responsible for the position of the punch line (Attardo 1994: 223). The narrative strategy (NS) KR is the narrative organization of the joke: a framed narrative, question-answer dialogue, or riddle for example (223). The target (TA) is the "butt" of the joke; however, non-aggressive jokes do not have this category (224). The situation (SI) is the context surrounding the joke (225). The logical mechanism (LM)

accounts for the logic underlying the humor; analogy/false analogy, exaggeration, irony, understatement for example (225). The script opposition (SO) is responsible for the opposing scripts that are necessary for humor. The logical mechanism and script opposition KRs are the most abstract and significant components of any joke (226). As the GTVH is the most comprehensive model of linguistic humor I have found, I will use this model to analyze the jokes presented in this study.

Charaudeau (2006) posits that humor involves semantic play by allowing speakers to creatively use word polysemy to construct several layers of meaning in an utterance (31). Thus, it can be said that humor often depends on playing with speech acts (performing unexpected or contrasting acts, using bizarre turns of phrase, and ignoring general pragmatic conventions), so an understanding of how a speech community uses speech acts would be necessary in order to even possess the knowledge resources for joke creation and comprehension (Bell and Attardo 425). Thus, communicative competence would appear to be a very necessary component in understanding and creating humor, especially advanced forms. This begs the question of whether fluent L2 English speakers' abilities to fully engage with SAE humor, specifically linguistic humor, depend on their understanding of sociolinguistic norms, such as SAE speech act norms, like tone, register, and word choice.

As support for incorporating humor into L2 acquisition, Schmitz (2002) proposes a taxonomy of the types of humor and their levels of difficulty relative to the L2 speaker. Schmitz suggests that humor falls into one or more of three

categories: “universal” or reality-based humor, cultural-based humor, and linguistic humor.

Schmitz describes reality-based humor as irony, stupidity, and involving “real world” situations and human behavior. A textual example of a reality-based joke would be:

Are you fishing? No, just drowning worms.

(Schmitz 2002: 97)

The humor lies in the sarcastic response to the obvious question “are you fishing” (97). Schmitz reasons that because this type of humor focuses on behavior, it should not pose linguistic problems for L2 speakers to understand the joke, given that they already have an advanced enough grammatical competence. For this reason, he argues that reality-based humor is the easiest form of humor for L2 speakers and is universal (97). However, as not all cultural contexts may share the same perception of what situations and behaviors coincide and contradict one another, I will refrain from referring to reality-based humor as universal humor.

Cultural-based humor is defined as necessitating an understanding of the cultural practices of a community (Schmitz 2002: 103). An example of this type of humor is demonstrated in the following joke:

Why does California have the most lawyers and New Jersey the most toxic waste dumps?

New Jersey had first choice.

(Rafferty 1988: 54)

This joke entails an understanding of lawyers’ reputations in the United States, and so, is culturally based. Schmitz states that this is an intermediate level of humor, as it requires additional information about a community of practice, but still would not

pose significant comprehension problems for L2 speakers familiar with the context of the joke (99).

While Schmitz offers no explicit definition of linguistic humor, he describes it as word-based humor, or language play. An example of a word-based joke is:

Wife: Do you love me still?

Husband: I might if you'd stay still long enough.

(Lendvai 1996: 91)

The humor in this joke lies in the ambiguous meaning of the word “still.” Schmitz considers linguistic humor to be the most advanced form of humor in that it requires a very deep understanding of lexicon in order to recognize the “word sensitivity” underlying double meanings and other forms of language play (100). I will use this taxonomy to categorize the jokes being examined in this study.

V. Methodology

This study used 14 Duke students from three speech communities; five L1 Mandarin Chinese speakers from mainland China, four L1 French speakers from France, and five L1 Standard American English (SAE) speakers from the United States as a control group. All American participants have lived in the United States since birth and speak predominantly English at home. All Chinese participants have lived in China for most of their lives (two attended high school in Singapore for four years), speak Mandarin as the predominant language at home, have known English since childhood, and have been in the United States for one to five years. All French participants have lived in France for their entire lives, speak French as the main

language at home, have known English for at least 10 years, and have been in the United States for one to two years. As the participants' TOEFL scores were not available, language level was assessed according to how long the participants had been actively speaking English and how often the participants speak English. Only participants who said they enjoyed comedy were included in the study. IRB approval and funding was obtained to compensate participants, and every participant signed a consent form.

The participants were shown six short comedy sketches of varying comedic styles, and prompted to indicate every time they thought a joke was present, regardless of whether they personally found it funny. The iPhone stopwatch application was used to track when a joke was indicated. The stopwatch was started and stopped at the beginning and end of each comedy clip, and participants were instructed to press the "lap" button each time they perceived a joke. After each video, the participants were then briefly interviewed on the jokes they indicated, why they believed them to be jokes, and if they personally found them funny. The interviews were recorded, and participants' responses were then categorized into types of humor based on the previously discussed taxonomy proposed by Schmitz (2002). Initially, I was going to video-record the participants watching the comedy skits so as to monitor physical cues, such as laughter. However, as laughter does not always mark humor, and humor does not always evoke laughter (Bell and Attardo 2010: 426), I did not think it necessary to record information on body cues.

The six sketches shown were: "Adrenaline" from *Broad City* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzkCzwJEpOY&t=27s>, "The Day Beyoncé

Turned Black” from *Saturday Night Live*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ociMBfkDG1w>, “Pop Copy”

<http://www.cc.com/video-clips/eb32ns/chappelle-s-show-popcopy---uncensored>,

and “A Moment in the Life of Lil’ John” from *Chappelle’s Show*

<http://www.cc.com/video-clips/b0rmez/chappelle-s-show-a-moment-in-the-life-of-lil-jon---oprah---uncensored>, “Substitute Teacher”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd7FixvoKBw>, and “Gideon’s Kitchen”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd7FixvoKBw> from *Key and Peele*. All of these sketches exhibited varying degrees of the aforementioned categories of humor.

While the discussion will focus primarily on responses to linguistic humor, responses to the other forms of humor will be included for comparison. The jokes will be analyzed and compared using Raskin and Attardo’s (1991) General Theory of Verbal Humor.

VI. Results and Discussion

On average, the Chinese and French participants responded to around the same total number of jokes, and the American participants responded to slightly more jokes. The L2 participants were able to indicate some linguistic humor, but mostly tone-based jokes. The only lexically based jokes that all L2 participants could recognize were extremely exaggerated forms of wordplay, such as mispronunciation of names in the *Substitute Teacher* skit. The subtler linguistic jokes, such as those in *Broad City* and *Pop Copy*, were indicated primarily by the L1 English speakers. This suggests that advanced humor comprehension would

require enough immersion in a speech community to develop a communicative competence necessary to understand when the rules have been violated.

However, it cannot confidently be assumed that a participant's failure to indicate a joke meant that they did not understand the mechanisms underlying the humor because it is possible that the participants may have recognized sociolinguistic abnormalities, but did not believe them to be jokes. Additionally, despite some of the interesting differences between the L2 and L1 groups, the number of participants in each of these groups was too small to identify any significant trends; and regardless of the sample size, it would be impossible to make generalizations, as there is always variation in speech communities. Below is a breakdown of the type of humor that made up the participants' responses for each skit.

| Sketch | Avg. # of lap button presses | Reality-Based Humor | Cultural-Based Humor | Linguistic Humor |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| <i>Broad City</i> | 5.71 | 73% | 0% | 27% |
| <i>Substitute Teacher</i> | 4.86 | 50% | 14% | 35% |
| <i>Pop Copy</i> | 4.43 | 50% | 7% | 42% |
| <i>Gideon's Kitchen</i> | 5.0 | 100% | 0% | 0% |
| <i>The Life of Lil' John</i> | 4.07 | 54% | 0% | 46% |
| <i>SNL</i> | 4.86 | 53% | 47% | 0% |

Fig. 1: Responses to jokes of different types of humor in each sketch.

| Type of Linguistic Humor | <i>Broad City</i> | <i>Substitute Teacher</i> | <i>Pop Copy</i> | <i>Life of Lil John</i> |
|--------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Word-Based | 67% | 60% | 83% | 80% |
| Tone-Based | 33% | 40% | 17% | 20% |
| Register-Based | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |

Fig. 2: Responses to types of linguistic humor presented in sketches.

Responses of Each L1 Group to Types of Humor

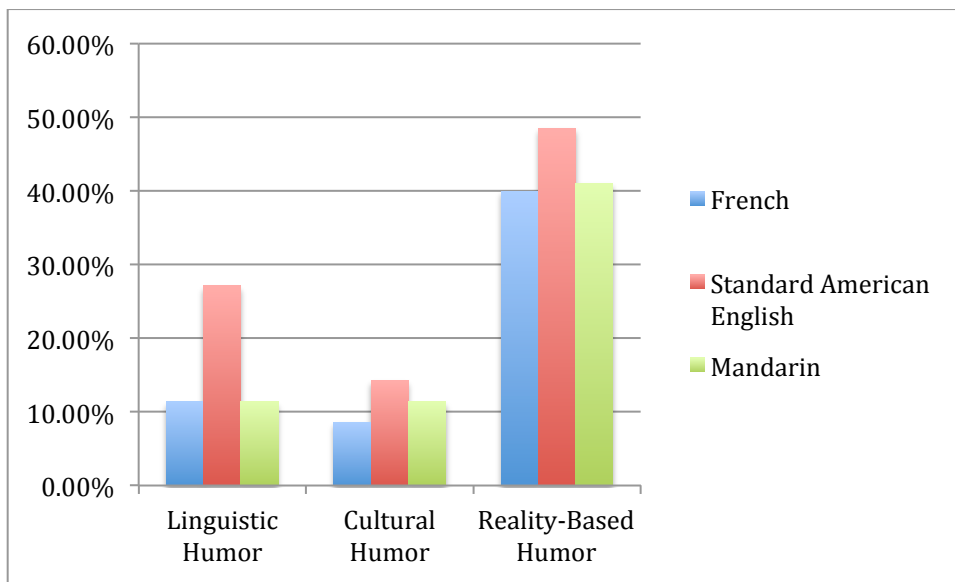


Fig. 3: The L1 American English speakers responded significantly more to linguistic humor than did the other groups.

Of Participants From Each Group Who Responded To Linguistic Humor

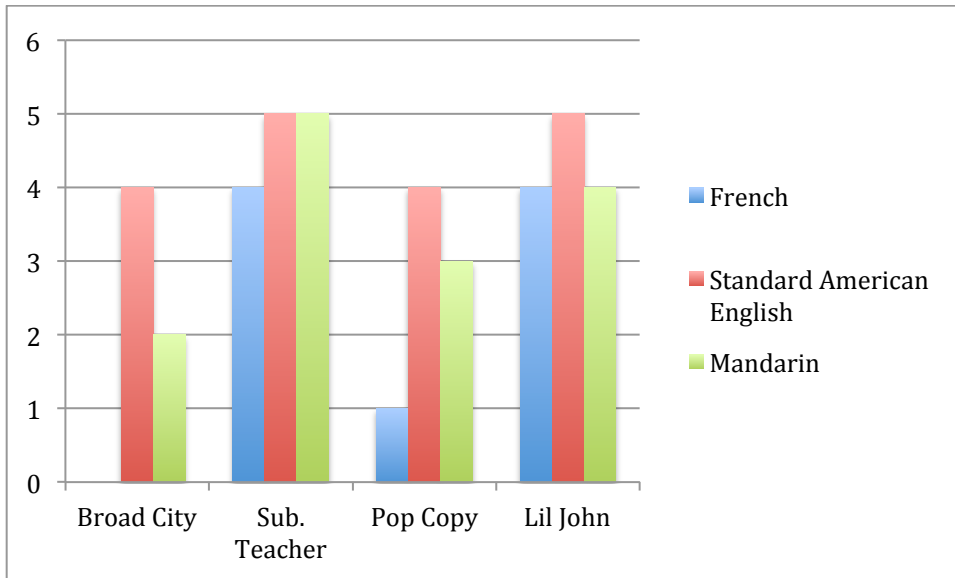


Fig. 4: Out of the four sketches that elicited responses about linguistic humor, *Broad City* and *Pop Copy* had the most responses from the L1 American English speakers.

As neither the *Saturday Night Live* sketch nor the second *Key and Peele* sketch “*Gideon’s Kitchen*,” contained responses of linguistic jokes, the participants’ responses from these sketches will not be discussed. In the *Broad City* sketch, every participant responded to the universal humor, but only 35% responded to the linguistic humor. Two Americans and one Chinese participant indicated word-based jokes, and one American and one Chinese participant indicated tone-based jokes. In the scene from *Broad City*, most of the humor lies in the interaction that arises between two friends Abbi and Ilana, who are out to dinner at a high-end restaurant when Ilana gets a severe allergic reaction to the shellfish she ordered. The first joke that most participants indicated was at the very beginning of the scene with Ilana talking to her friend Abbi in slurred speech:

Ilana (speaking in slurred speech): Oh...yeah this is pretty bad. But honestly, I know my limit; I’m just pacing myself for that lava cake.

Abbi: Ok you have absolutely reached your limit. Your face looks like the underbelly of a tugboat right now.

In this dialogue between Abbi and Ilana, which is the narrative strategy (NS) of the joke, the script opposition (SO) is normal vs. abnormal. Ilana is stating that her condition is fine, despite that she is already slurring her speech. To which Abbi responds with the analogy that Ilana's face looks like the "underbelly of a tugboat." Thus Ilana is the target (TA) of the joke and the logical mechanism (LM) underlying this joke is analogy, or Abbi's comparison of Ilana's face to the bottom of a boat. On the language level (LA), the joke lies in Abbi's word choice of "underbelly" and "tugboat." Abbi could have said "your face looks like the bottom of a boat," which would have elicited humor from the semantics of the phrase alone. The words "underbelly" and "tugboat" add an additional layer of humor to the joke because they are strange words to use casually; "underbelly" being a word that is not typically used in reference to boats, and "tugboat" being overly specific.

The linguistic humor in this joke was very subtle in that it required an advanced competence of SAE sociolinguistic norms in order to recognize the abnormality that rendered it humorous. Only one American and one Chinese participant commented on Abbi's word play. Both indicated that her comment was supposed to be funny because she used strange words, but neither elaborated on why they thought her words were strange. The other six participants who indicated that this comment was funny (two Americans, two Chinese and two French participants) did so because of the content itself, or the content's referential meaning, rather than how the content was expressed.

As the poetic function is the predominant speech act function that renders these words abnormal and humorous, a speaker unfamiliar with how the poetic function could manifest in SAE speech acts, may not recognize the stylistic effect of the act. This could suggest that the L2 participants who did not indicate this joke may not have had the knowledge of SAE speech community rules to recognize the speech act's poetic function underlying the humor. However, as speech act meanings are always negotiated, it is also possible that the other Americans did not interpret the poetic function either, or that they recognized it, but did not think it was supposed to be a joke. Nevertheless, this could also be the case with the L2 speakers, and because neither the American nor the Chinese participant elaborated on why Ilana's word choice was strange, it is unclear if they fully understood the underlying sociolinguistic norms.

Additionally, all of the participants immediately noticed Ilana's abnormal speech, and found it humorous. However, most of the French and Chinese participants thought Ilana was speaking in a particular accent or could not understand her, so they may have missed the humorous incongruity between what she was saying and how she was speaking. Whereas, all of the American participants knew that Ilana's speech was not a certain accent. Two of the American participants initially thought Ilana was speaking with a natural speech impediment, but later caught on that she was having an allergic reaction, and eventually realized the joke on Ilana's casualness and the severity of her reaction.

Two American participants indicated similar linguistic humor just after the previously mentioned exchange when Ilana tries to convince Abbi that she is fine:

Ilana (in slurred speech): Listen, we are here celebrating your birthday, ok?

Abbi: Yeah and for my birthday I would love for you to stay alive.

Ilana: Abbi I am a veteran of this game; I've got three to three and a half servings of shellfish left in me, I feel it.

Similarly to the first joke, the SO is normal vs. abnormal and the NS is the dialogue between Abbi and Ilana. Once again, the LA knowledge resource plays a significant role evoking the humor in this joke. Part of the joke in this exchange is how Ilana claims that she can continue eating shellfish. Specifically, Ilana's word choice, "I've got three to three and a half servings...left in me" is abnormal because it implies that Ilana needs a certain amount of strength to attain her goal, despite that she is only referring to eating. The participants who commented on this section said that Ilana's use of the idiomatic phrase "left in me" implies that she is fighting a strenuous battle to obtain her goal.

In this joke as well, communicative competence was necessary to recognize both the idiomatic phrase and that it was used out of place. Overall, although it was a small number of participants who indicated word-based humor, these responses were predominantly from Americans. However, it cannot explicitly be concluded that participants who did not indicate certain jokes did not understand the underlying humor because it is possible that these participants either did not intend an utterance to be funny or neglected to press the lap button.

In the *Key and Peele "Substitute Teacher"* sketch, linguistic humor did not constitute most of the jokes indicated, but it was the only category of humor that 100% of participants reported. It was also the most obvious and exaggerated of the

linguistic jokes indicated in this study. Within the linguistic humor, 100% of participants responded to the word-play jokes, and 50% responded to the tone-based jokes. Those that responded to the tone-based jokes were two of the French participants, two of the Chinese participants, and three of the American participants. The skit features a substitute teacher from the “inner city” confidently calling attendance, but severely mispronouncing every student’s name. Thus, the main jokes were structured as plays on common American names, as follows:

Teacher: Jay-kwellin, where’s Jay-kwellin at? No Jay-kwellin here?

Student: Uh do you mean Jacqueline?

Teacher: Ok, so that’s how it’s gonna be. Buh-lockay? Where is Buh-lockay at? No Buh-lockay here today? Yes, sir.

Student: My name’s Blake.

Teacher: Are you out of your goddamn mind? Blaaake (in a mocking tone), what? Dee-nice! Is there a Dee-nice? If one of y’all says some silly ass name, this whole class is gon’ feel my wrath. Now Dee-nice!

Student: Do you mean Denise?

Teacher: Son of a bitch!!!

Every participant understood the script opposition of correct versus incorrect, with the crux of the joke being the substitute teacher’s belief that he is correctly pronouncing the students’ names. The NS of the joke is the call and response between the class and the teacher. The LM is false logic; the teacher very logically pronounces most of the names as they are spelled, which is a commonly used strategy for trying to pronounce unknown words or names; only in this situation, his mispronunciations are inappropriate and thus humorous because of

the prevalence and common knowledge of the names. The LA knowledge resource is thus the pronunciation of the names. There is no target of this joke.

Despite that it requires some knowledge of a community of practice to recognize what is considered a typical name in that community, the L2 participants easily recognized that the joke was a play on name pronunciation. The participants could have already been familiar with the names Jacqueline, Blake, and Denise, or could have noticed the sharp contrast between the teacher's pronunciation and the student's pronunciation, indicating that the name was supposed to be the joke, even if they had never heard that name before. However, many of the L2 participants initially thought the mispronunciation of the name "Jacqueline" was just a strange word, rather than a name, until the student corrected the teacher with the actual name. All of the American participants knew that the teacher was saying a name, but no one indicated that they knew he was trying to pronounce "Jacqueline." This demonstrates that the L2 participants were able to understand English wordplay, even in utterances they had never previously heard. However, the wordplay was very exaggerated and obvious so it is unknown if the L2 participants could understand the same type of wordplay in a subtler context, such as a conversation.

Additionally, two Chinese participants, two American participants, and one French participant indicated that when the teacher mimicked Blake's name, the tone of the teacher's voice sounded mocking and condescending. Although not many participants in general indicated this as a joke, this shows that the L2 participants who did were able to distinguish between and classify different tones in American English.

Slightly over half of the participants indicated linguistic humor in Dave Chappelle's *Pop Copy* skit. Most of the jokes indicated were based on the incongruity between the employees' expected and actual behavior, and thus were reality-based. The skit is portrayed as a reenactment of an employee training video, except the employees are explicitly instructed to give poor customer service.

Narrator: This is the official 2002, Pop Copy employee training film with your host Ralph Henderson.

Supervisor: Hello! I'm Ralph Henderson, and if you're watching this video that means you've just been hired to work here at Popular Copy. Me and my friends are gonna show you the basics of what it's like to work here. You guys ready?

Employees (in jaded tone): Yeahhh!

Supervisor: Great!

Narrator: Getting to work.

Supervisor: First of all, never show up on time. And if a supervisor happens to ask you where you were, your response should sound something like this. Manuel why were you late?

Manuel: Man I got here when I could. Shit, you're not my fuckin' mom!

Supervisor: Perfect!

Narrator: Servicing the line.

Supervisor: Occasionally, you may get snagged by one of these customer people. Just remember: your job is to frustrate them and make them feel unwanted! If you can, wrap up a story that'll make them feel uncomfortable. For instance:

All participants indicated at least three jokes, and so understood the basic script opposition of the correct versus incorrect behaviors at work. The NS is in the form of an instruction module. The target of this joke was the customer service at office supply stores, and the LM is false logic, as the skit intentionally uses incorrect logic

to allude to poor customer service often found at these types of stores. The LA component underlying this skit is significant in that the way the characters speak both allows the skit to simultaneously seem like an authentic training video and a parody.

Every American participant commented on some form of linguistic humor, specifically on the manner in which utterances were expressed. Two American participants, who had previously seen Chappelle's comedy, indicated that Chappelle uses a "white guy" voice to portray his character as the manager. These were the only participants to comment on the style of his speech, likely because they were already familiar with how Chappelle normally talks. Another American participant indicated that the white employee spoke as though he was not white, but the participant did not elaborate on this.

In the segment called "Getting to Work," one American participant indicated that the narrator's voice saying, "getting to work," sounded like the voice one would typically hear in an infomercial. In the following segment, another American participant commented on Chappelle's remark, "you may get snagged by one of these customer people." This participant indicated that his word choice was supposed to be funny because Chappelle refers to the customers as if they are irrelevant and nuisances by calling them "customer *people*," and says that the employees might get "snagged," as if they should be in the middle of doing something more relevant than servicing a customer.

In both this comment, as well as those regarding how the narrator spoke, the participants had to draw from knowledge of sociolinguistic norms that speakers

outside of a SAE speech community may not have. In order to identify Chappelle's speech as "white," the American participants would have had to draw from pre-conceived notions of how white Americans typically speak in relation to black Americans, and map these beliefs onto Chappelle's way of speaking. Similarly, to associate the voice of the narrator with the voices used in actual infomercials, the participant needed to have previously formed a connection between a certain role or performance (infomercial narrator) and a certain way of speaking. Additionally, to identify Chappelle's inappropriate use of the words "people" and "snagged," knowledge of appropriate speech act registers is required. None of the L2 participants indicated these aspects as jokes, so it is possible that they did not notice any speech act incongruities because they did not have the same level of communicative competence in Standard American English speech communities.

The four L2 participants (one French and three Chinese participants) that did indicate linguistic jokes commented on the tonal, rather than lexical or dialectal aspects of the utterances. In a segment showing the employees' interactions with the customers, these participants commented that the employees' cold, insincere tone towards the customer was incongruent with the context of how one should behave at work. These participants both recognized the emotive function in SAE speech acts, and demonstrated an understanding of SAE emotive speech act norms.

In Dave Chappelle's *A Moment in the Life of Lil' John* skit, the participants indicated reality-based jokes more frequently than linguistic jokes, but 13 out of the 14 indicated some linguistic humor. The skit is a phone call between Lil John as played by Dave Chappelle and Lil John as played by Lil John. A large part of the skit's

humor comes from Chappelle's imitation of Lil John, but simply the way the two speak to each other is incongruent with conversational norms in many American English speech communities, and thus humorous in itself. The skit is as follows:

Lil John: Hello and good evening.

Dave Chappelle: It's me.

Lil John: WHAT?!

Dave Chappelle: It's me!

Lil John: WHAT?!

Dave Chappelle: IT'S ME! Little John.

Lil John: OKAYY!!!

Dave Chappelle: I was feeling lonely, I feel like I just need to talk to someone who will understand and, well, that someone is you John.

Lil John: OKAYY!

Dave Chappelle: Don't you like popsicles?

Lil John: WHAT!

Dave Chappelle: I said don't you like popsicles?

Lil John: WHAT?!

Dave Chappelle: I said don't you like popsicles?

Lil John: YEAHH

Dave Chappelle: WHAT

Lil John: YEAHH

Dave Chappelle: OKAYY!

Lil John: Sometimes I feel like I'm all alone in this world and I have no one to go to!

Dave Chappelle: WHAT?!

Lil John: I said, sometimes I feel like I'm all alone in this world and I have no one sir!

Dave Chappelle: WHAT?!

Lil John: No one!

Dave Chappelle: WHAT?!

Lil John: To go to.

Dave Chappelle: huh?

Lil John: NO ONE!!! That understands my pain!!

Dave Chappelle: YEAHHH!

Lil John: YEAHHH!!!!

While much of the humor in this skit seems very surface level from the ridiculous interjections and random conversational topics, a lot of it also derives from how the characters actually speak, such as their registers and phrasing. The script opposition was normal versus abnormal conversational utterances, and the narrative strategy was a phone call. Again, the language knowledge resource plays a significant role in this joke because Chappelle and Lil John defy conversational expectations by broaching strange topics and speaking in abnormal tones and registers. Other instances of unusual ways of conversing are demonstrated through Lil John and Chappelle's exaggerated and enthusiastic comments of "what," "yeah," and "ok," in response to somber subjects, like loneliness, and through random topic changes like talking about popsicles. The LM of the linguistic humor in this skit is garden-path, or leading the audience toward a certain expectation and later defying it.

All of the linguistic jokes indicated were based on the tone or register of the characters' voices. Two participants commented on the register of the characters' voices. One Chinese participant indicated that the way Chappelle says "hello and good evening" seems too formal for the context of the phone call and also for the clothes he is wearing. An American participant indicated that the actual Lil John spoke in an outdated and formal fashion. Dave Chappelle also imitated an outdated and haughty way of speaking by speaking with tall vowels and slurring his /s/ in words like "someone." A French participant recognized the abnormality in his speech, but perceived it to be a lisp rather than a stylistic choice. The ability to recognize an outdated way of speaking also requires social competence of a speech community. The participants who did not comment on the register differences of Lil John and Chappelle either may not have recognized them, or may not have perceived them as jokes.

Twelve participants indicated tone-based linguistic humor. Four Chinese participants, four French participants, and three American participants indicated that Lil John's tone seemed out of place regarding the serious context of the conversation. Three American participants commented that a large part of the humor was that Lil John spoke exactly as how he sounds in his songs; in other words, the literal responses of "what" and "ok" were appropriate, but he shouted them the way he does in his songs, which made his responses incongruent with conversational norms.

VII. Conclusion and Future Directions

As the American participants responded to the most linguistic jokes in total, it could be suggested that comprehension of linguistic humor is a product of communicative competence of Standard American English. However, this cannot be confidently concluded because every group's responses to the humor types were similar in number and the participant sample size was extremely small. While the focus of this study was to assess L2 speakers' communicative competence, the data demonstrated that even a proficient understanding of speech act use in a speech community does not guarantee successful communication, as meaning is always negotiated between speakers and hearers. Thus, when participants did not indicate a joke, it could have been because of their unfamiliarity with SAE speech act use, or it could have been that they did not interpret the same message as other participants did.

The greatest challenge of this study was setting up the experiment in a way that did not too significantly bias participants' responses. The interview questions needed to be specific enough so as to obtain the necessary information for the research question, but not so explicit that they would lead participants to an answer. Consequently, useful information may have gone unarticulated, as it was difficult to get participants to elaborate on their responses without leading them in a certain direction.

Additionally, as most of linguistic humor is typically encountered unpredictably, without any introduced frame or purpose in regular, everyday conversation (Bell and Attardo 425), it was difficult to find skits with linguistic jokes

of this same unanticipated quality. In some sketches, such as *Substitute Teacher*, the wordplay was so blatant and extreme that it would likely seldom occur in normal conversation. That being said, it was difficult to assess how L2 participants would have reacted to subtler forms of wordplay.

Another challenge was being able to identify whether a participant truly understood or did not understand a piece of humor. As self-reporting was the only measure of assessing participants' comprehension, it is possible that participants could have falsely reported (potentially from forgetting why they thought something was a joke) or not reported the entirety of their comprehension (concerning jokes with multiple levels of humor, such as the Lil' John skit). If a continuation of this study were to be conducted, participants should be prompted to elaborate more on their responses. Additionally, the sample size, particularly of the L1 control group, should be much larger, although generalized conclusions could never be made regardless of the sample size. As general linguistic humor was the focus of this study, more textual forms of humor, such as social media posts and memes, should be included in future research.

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ⁱ Linguistic humor is verbal or word-based humor, such as puns and sarcasm. See p.15.

ⁱⁱ Language acquires meaning through the constantly changing symbols that speech communities and communities of practice collectively generate (Donald 2004: 43-45).

ⁱⁱⁱ Speech communities are defined as “communities sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety” (Hymes 1972: 54).

^{iv} The six factors of language are the addresser (speaker), addressee (hearer(s)), context, contact/channel (medium of communication), code (the language itself), and message (Jakobson 1957/1987).

^v The six functions of language are the different purposes for which language can be used: emotive, conative, referential, phatic, metalingual, poetic (Jakobson 1957/1987).

^{vi} McConnell-Ginet (2004) defines a community of practice as “a group of people brought together by some mutual endeavor, some common enterprise in which they are engaged and to which they bring a shared repertoire of resources, including linguistic resources, and for which they are mutually accountable.”

^{vii} The index is one of the three fundamental components of Peirce’s sign complex, the icon, index, and symbol. Indexicality, as defined by Peirce, is a factual similarity between a sign and its object. Otherwise stated, indexicality is a real connection between a sign and its object. However, as these components are always embedded in every sign, no sign and object can possess a purely indexical relationship (Peirce 1955).

^{viii} Grice’s maxims of communication are a proposed set of rules that relate the language of a speech community to the events and situations of that speech community. The maxims are as follows: Maxim of quantity: Do not give more information than required. Maxim of quality: Do not say what you believe to be false. Maxim of relation: Be relevant. Maxim of manner: Be brief, orderly, and avoid ambiguity. (Grice 1975)