Prosodic Features of Humorous Utterances in American Stand-up Comedies

By

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Abstract

The present study investigates how phonopragmatic elements are employed in the context of the American Stand-Up Comedies through the lens of a phonopragmatic approach that is based on phonological and pragmatic theories. The problem is that different variations of prosody convey different meanings when they are performed. Therefore, one of the primary challenges presented in this work is the fact that an incorrect modulation of prosody may result in a different meaning, which may subsequently be misinterpreted. Standup comedy is particularly selected to bridge this knowledge gap by phonopragmatically examining stand up comedies in American context. This study, thus, attempts to achieve the following aims: explaining the oral narrative elements and acts within American stand-up comedies; examining the intensity, frequency, speech rate functions of intonation within oral narratives, illocutionary acts and conversational maxims. In step with its aims, this study hypothesizes that: the abstract and the coda are the least frequent oral narrative elements and oral narrative have the least number of acts within American stand-up comedies; high frequency, high intensity, slow speech rate, contrastive function of intonation, the representative speech acts and the violation of quantity maxim are mostly employed by the comedians. To achieve its aims, the present study follows certain steps: providing an overview of all significant concepts; selecting the relevant data (the American stand-up comedies) from the website www.youtube.com.; adopting an eclectic model for the sake of analysing the data spectrographically (using PRAAT) and phonopragmatically; conducting a statistical analysis to validate the results, discuss them and to arrive at certain conclusions. The present study ends up with a variety of conclusions, the most central of which is that American comedians show a preference toward the use of high intensity to have an effect on the audience and load their messages with the appropriate illocutionary force. Also, the abstract and the coda show less employment of the acts as they are optional elements within the oral narratives. Moreover, the most non-observed maxim is the maxim of quantity in American Stand-Up Comedies.

Introduction

People interact with one another in order to pass on messages from one person to the next in a society. Language is the medium via which people convey their messages while they are communicating with one another (Rafika, Yuliasri and Warsono, 2020:475). Dialogue between two or more individuals is the most typical use of spoken language (Syauqillah, 2016:1). Standup comedy as an effective communication style incorporates humour, jokes, puns, and laughter, despite the fact that it is sometimes regarded as unserious social discourse

(Haghish et al. 2012:9).

Standup comedy is a kind of humor in which a comedian addresses a live audience and engages with them while delivering jokes. In this subgenre of comedy, the performer (the comedian) conveys some kind of statement to the audience in hopes of providing them with some form of entertainment. In order to communicate his content in front of a live audience, the comedian, also known as the comedian, makes use of a variety of different language approaches. Language is used to reach a wide range of issues and objectives, including but not limited to people's customs, politics, peculiar and imagined personalities, and many more (Attardo, 2001:62).

Furthermore, comedians engage in direct conversation with the audience when they take the stage. (Schwarz, 2010:321). In a nutshell, a receptive audience is responsible for the processing and interpretation of a comedian's planned meanings as well as any (comic) ideas that are proposed.

Standup comedy is, of course, a two-way street and must be able to grab not only the anticipations of communication link participants but also the contributions and commitments that agents make to the common ground (Khairani, 2017:16). It is a new form of comedy that originated in the United States and England (Rullyanti and Nurdianto,2019:60). Only one individual, referred to as the comedian, may execute this joke. First, the comic introduces an idea, and then they turn it into something funny (Fitri, Mahyuni and Sudirman, 2018:108). The comedian anticipates receiving comments and reactions from the audience. In an ideal situation, the answer would be a nonstop flow of laughing (Armijo et al., 2011:14).

Standup comedy is a form of narration that has a storyline line, characters who interact with each other, as well as a beginning, middle, and conclusion to the narrative. It should have an Opening, a First canned joke and a Closing (Rutter, 1997:251-252). In any standup comedy, the language functions are discriminated into two main categories, the transactional function and the interactional function (Halliday, 1970:140). Wells and MacFarlane (1998: 265) confirm that the prosodic features of Standup comedy need to be studied not only in the context of their immediate interactional environment, but also in the context of the linguistic variety in which they occur. This is something that has been previously established by other researchers. Comedians and audience members engage in a process of negotiation, during which, at each possible conclusion point, comedians have the choice of continuing with the show, or they do not; and (prospective) audience members have the option of joining the show, or they do not. As a result, another angle from which to examine the function of prosody in Standup comedy is to consider it in terms of the total prosodic traits it possesses. This means that a comic must generate the first stressed word of his or her turn exactly at the instant at which a next beat is produced by the rhythm of the speaker who came before them. This is true in both British and American English. The application of prosodic elements from one turn to the next is not restricted to the rhythm of the speaker's speech.

Reed (2006:34) explains the tendency of speakers to match or complement prosodic patterns in their own prosody using the term "prosodic orientation." When they respond to anything, such as a query, an agreement, or a return greeting, comedians typically utilize particular intonation contours. For instance, they may use these contours to answer the inquiry. Both rhythmic integration and prosodic orientation demonstrate, first, that comedians are aware of prosody, and second, that prosody can function as a form of alignment between two oral narratives, independent of the words that are being used. This is shown by the fact that comedians integrate rhythm into their routines and that they orient their prosody in a particular way.

Noting the significance of Speech Act Theory, Al-Hindawi et al. (2014: 27) note that Speech Act Theory is a credible pragmatic idea that has been endowed with studies from its beginnings in 1962 to the present. According to Al-Hindawi (1999:6), "as opposed to linguistics, which has long been concerned with the study of form, the research of meaning has been left to linguistic philosophers." Linguistic philosophers, on the other hand, focused on referential meaning and the truth or falsity of propositions. Despite the fact that this approach was prevalent in philosophical circles throughout the 1930s, Wittgenstein (1958) criticized it later with the motto "meaning in use" and the notion that utterances could only be explained in reference to the activities in which they play a role.

Seven years after Austin (1962) created the speech act theory, Austin's student Searle (196933:) developed the SAT and gave it its ultimate formal structure. Searle makes a distinction between two different types of rules that govern speech actions (henceforth speech acts), namely constitutive rules and regulative rules, in his work (ibid.: 33). However, according to Searle, there are a few distinct categories of speech actions. These categories include representatives, directives, commissives, declarations, and expressives (1976:8). According to Levinson (1983:240) and Mey (2004:122), with representatives, an interlocutor either commits himself to the reality of the assertions being made, or they do not commit themselves to whether or not they consider the statements to be true. In directives, the speaker attempts to persuade the listener to take certain action. It is an illocutionary force that causes the hearer to act in a certain manner. The speaker's desires are communicated through directive acts, and the hearer is expected to help the speaker bring the world fit with the words (Yule,1996: 54). For example, please join us for dinner on Friday. While commissives require the speaker to undertake some action. According to Yule (1996:54), the speakers utilize commissive to commit activities that will take place in the future. According to Leech (1991:106), it might take the form of a promise, a vow, an offer, a sworn statement, or a threat. For example, I'm going to study for tomorrow's test.

As for declaratives, utterances are the ones that are responsible for the current condition of affairs. By making the declaration, the speaker has the power to change the outward appearance, status, or condition of an object or situation (Leech,1991:105). For example, I pronounce this amusement park opened. Expressives convey a psychological attitude or mental to state of affairs (Yule,1996:53). It is capable of conveying a wide range of sentiments, including congratulating, apologizing, wishing, greeting, and thanking (Sitorus,2019:13). For example, Wow! That was a brilliant idea.

In order to achieve its goals of entertaining, informing, and criticizing social problems, standup comedy attempts to attract listeners' ability to laugh at the phenomena in question. These three goals of standup comedy have the ability to be accomplished through any one of the five forms of illocutionary acts, which are declaratives, representatives, expressives, and directives and commissives (Putri and Murni, 2012:7).

Moreover, Grice (1975) distinguishes the following pragmatic maxims in his Cooperative Principle:

A.   Maxim of Quantity: 1. "Make your contribution as informative as required". and 2. "Do not make your contribution more informative than is required".
B.   Maxims of Quality: 1. Be truthful., 2. "Do not say what you believe to be false." and 3. "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence."
C.   Maxim of Relation: 1. "Be relevant."
D.   Maxims of Manner:

1."Be perspicuous.", 2. "Avoid obscurity of expression.", 3. "Avoid ambiguity.", 4. "Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)." and 5. "Be orderly."

Grice (1975) proposes that communication takes place unconsciously following these maxims. It is noteworthy that Grice distinguishes instances where the maxims are flouted, opted out, or violated (Armijo et al. ,2012:26-27). Cutting highlights four different practices that are considered to be non-observing of maxims: opting out, violating, infringing, and flouting (2002: 36-41). When the speaker fails to follow the maxim, this is referred to as non-observance of the maxim.

The integration of both phonological and pragmatic theories is referred to as phonopragmatics. It is the study of the pragmatic theory of pronunciation and the sounding aspect of speech. The study of the functional properties of phonetic units of both levels makes it transparent and accessible for understanding the relationship between the parties involved in communication, the intentions of their statements, as well as the emotional background and atmosphere of the act of communication (Ilinichna, 2018: 336-337).

Methodology

One of the forms of spoken language, oral narratives feature a wide variety of essential traits that set them apart from written language. These characteristics distinguish spoken language from written language. The organizational structure of oral texts is the first type of general feature that must be considered. Brown (1991:15) notes that "speech is less richly ordered than written language, including less densely packed information, but containing more interactive indicators and planning fillers."

Chafe explains that narratives are composed of chronological or structural elements such as "abstract, orientation, and resolution" (1980). The first element is called abstract. It is defined as a short summary of the whole story usually told in a few idea units. There is no abstract in the informant's narrative because he starts telling the story as soon as he finishes his introduction. The second part of the narrative is the orientation. It establishes spatial and temporal orientation. The spatial and temporal orientation has been previously exemplified. In addition, this narrative does include a very complete introduction before the speaker starts telling his brother's danger-of-death experience. This short introduction is followed by the complex events that tell the action of the story. Another element is the resolution, that is, how the story reaches its end.

Therefore, one of the tasks in order to analyze a spoken text (oral narrative) is to divide it into its intonation groups; that is, the basic elements of consciousness that are used by the narrator to successfully transmit a message. These idea units can be identified taking into account *intonation*.

In this study, the researcher adopts an eclectic model throughout the analysis of the present data. According to the study 's aims, the model above has been constructed to help analyze the collected data. It is founded on the premise that standup comedy narrative is a multidimensional practice that can be evaluated at several levels.The aforementioned models are supposed to be the model for this study. It contains Rutter's (1997) structure of standup comedy, Oliveira's (2000) prosodic features of oral narratives, Hidalgo's (2017) phonetic-functional interactive approach, Wennerstrom's (2001) discourse functions of intonation, Searle's (1969) model of the classification of speech acts *Speech Act: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* such as representatives, directives, expressives, commissives, and

declaratives. Simultaneously, it includes Grice's (1975) CP model *Logic and Conversation*. The eclectic model is used to analyse the oral narratives which include ,namely, Kevin Hart - I'm scared of ostriches , Joe list - New York subway | the stand-up show with Jon Dore , Dave Chappelle's son meets Kevin Hart | Netflix is a joke, Doug Stanhope on greatest joke ,Greg Giraldo -the fattest country in the world, Chelsea Peretti - the fat guy double standard ,Iliza Shlesinger - the reason women are always tired, how Jenny Slate survived her haunted house i Netflix is a joke , Naomi Ekperigin-it takes a team to get engaged and Tig Notaro tells a personal story about Taylor Dayne - the after-hours stand-up series | team coco. The eclectic model is presented in the following figure below which shows its different components:
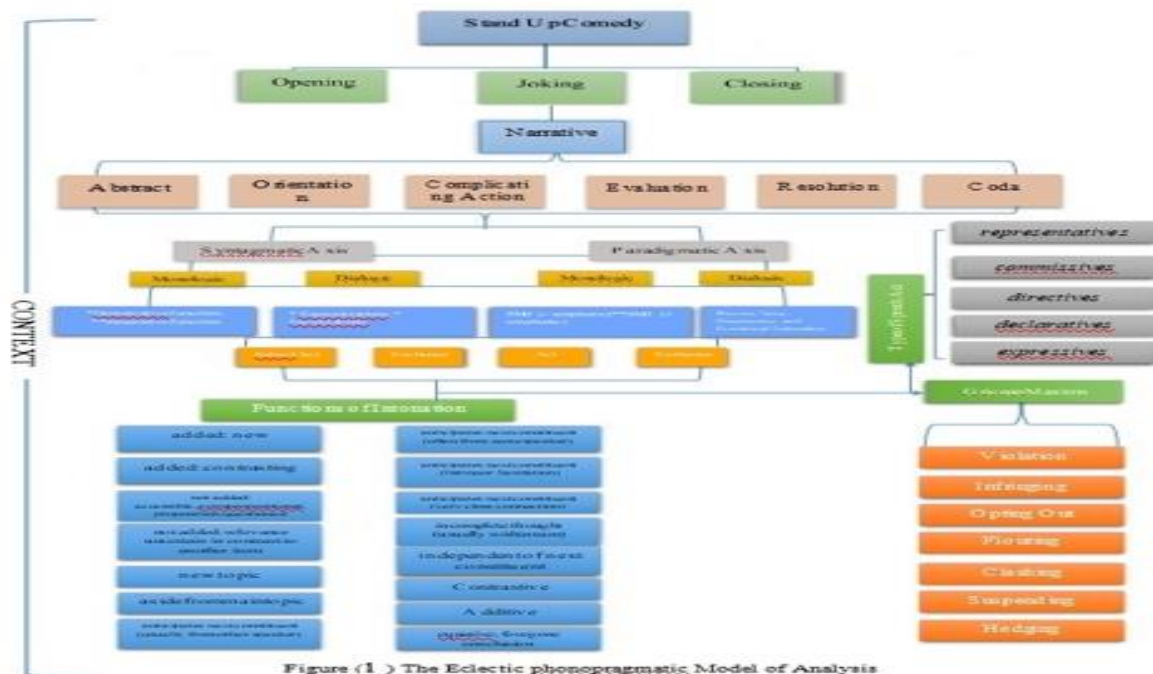

Figure (1) The Eclectic phonopragmatic Model of Analysis

The data of the research are representative of live stand-up comedies, which are comedy routines performed in front of an audience by one comedian (male or female). Recorded videos, which may be seen on websites such as www.youtube.com, serve as the major source of the data for this study. The transcripts of standup comedy may be obtained on the website www.scrapsfromtheloft.com are the secondary source of the data. The oral narratives that are retrieved for this study provide an explanation of a certain subject or story, such as racism, personal experience, social relationships, and politics.

The study follows certain criteria as it discards any oral narratives that do not indicate a series of "discrete, chronologically and non-randomly arranged units," , they must be broken down into separate pieces. Oral narrative- to be manageable- need to be "brief" (no more than three minutes). This research only investigates data (acts) that are followed by feedback (laughter, cheer, applause, humming, etc.). The scheme of data analysis qualitatively and quantitatively. On the other hand, quantitative analysis utilizes methods that collect data in numerical forms such as intensity, frequency and speech rate which are given by dB and Hz respectively. Moreover, the following steps are followed in analyzing the data; selected recorded videos are downloaded and converted into wave. and mp3. formats to be suitable for Praat software analysis; Each audio file is segmented (manually) using Praat by marking the comedian's utterances; An annotation of the audio files is applied and matched to the chosen oral narratives; All the oral narratives are divided into abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda. The oral narratives elements are divided into intonation

groups; The unit of analysis of this study is the intonation group in oral narratives from the American stand-up comedies. The study focus is the oral narrative in jokes, not the performance of the standup comedy such as gesture, facial expressions, etc.

Data Analysis

Sample of Analysis

Table (1) *Sample of Analysis*

Acoustic Analysis

Praat screenshot — 12. TextGrid Kevin_Hart_Extract — with transcription:
miː maɪ ˈleɪdi went Maui wʌn taɪm wen Maui ʃiːz laɪk ˈbeɪbi wiː ʃʊd gəʊ swim wɪð ðə ˈdɒlfɪnz

Narrative Analysis		No. of Acts	Frequency / Intensity	Speech Rate	Intonation / Function of Intonation	Speech Act type	Gricean Maxim (Pragmatic)
Abstract	me my lady went Maui one time when Maui she's like baby we should go swim with the dolphins	3	188 / 70	0.223	Additive	Representative, commissive	-
Orientation	I'm like no I told you how I feel about the dolphins I don't want a swim dog she's like come on stop acting like that let's swim the dolphins I like you know what let's turn it off and something happened to me it's gonna be on your conscience now we go to swim the Dolphins they got the Dolphins are like this little tank right it's like eight dolphins I see an old lady on the back of a dolphin these little boys I'm like you know what babe I might have been overreacting get the camera take some pictures of me on back at the dolphin	11	259 / 69	0.47	New topic	Representative, directive	Maxim of quantity
Complicating Action	I was excited right I get in the water I'm on back a dolphin there strucked he says soon asyou grab the dolphin fin the dolphin gonna start taking you around so I'm never you ready grab his fin soon as I grab my dolphin fin my dolphin went straight to the bottom of the tank he went straight down right now because I was scared I didn't let go I held on and you know you scared you start to mentally create stuff in your own mind	8	217 / 70	0.53	anticipates next constituent	Expressive, expressive	Violation of Quantity maxim
Evaluation	I was like it's obvious that I gotta race his dolphin he doesn't like black people that's obvious he didn't cut a deal with a shark to bring him a black piece of meat something bad about to happen rightand let go I get to the top I start snapping on the instructor	6	195 / 69	0.84	Added: new	Commissive	Violation of Maxim quality
Resolution	I was like nobody just saw dolphin number eight missing huh nobody noticed I was going for like 30 seconds get on have a bell and nothing that you ring he's trying to kill me he took me to the bottom of the tank to meet with sharks okay I'm the only black guy in this damn tank you didn't notice that I wasn't going around huh you see this old lady and his little boy but nobody noticed the black swirl missing nobody noticed it	8	382 / 67	0.46	not added: relevance uncertain in contrast	Representative, commissive	Flouting the maxim of quality, relevance
Coda	he was like whoa whoa calm down its three feet just stand up and I was like what what he's saying I didn't even realize that I was walking and talking at the same time but it was the races dolphin I'm tell you how I was raised as dolphin cuz I do not golfing buddy well when I got off the water I looked at him and he looked at me like nigga nigga I said what did you just what I mean cattle how y'all been a great crowd	12	307 / 71	0.32	Contrastive	Directive	Flouting the maxim of quantity

Discussion

In the above narrative, the abstract has an additive function of intonation through low tonal level to report the story. A representative speech act of reporting "me my lady went Maui one time", a directive speech act of requesting "we should go swim" and the comedian abides to the cooperative principle are seen. The orientation contains high tonal level to report which are used to provide a new topic. The comedian violates the quantity maxim by mentioning too many details to help the joke delivered to the audience. Two speech acts; a representative of reporting to state his feelings about the way he sees dolphins "I told you how I feel about the dolphins" and a directive speech act of requesting "stop acting like that" in which his wife asks him to behave in good manners and be brave with the dolphins are seen in the narrative. Additionally, the speaker provides more information than is needed and violates the maxim of quantity.

In the complicating action, it anticipates next constituent function of intonation within the intonation group which is delivered to the listeners through high tonal level to express excitement. Thus, these help the comedian to deliver an expressive of pleasure to show his excitement "I was excited" and an expressive speech act of displeasure as in "I'm never" . The comedian also violates the maxim of quantity at the same time because he provides more information than is needed.

In the evaluation element of the narrative, the intonation group consists of mid tonal level to show promising. It delivers a new function of intonation which indicates an addition to the narrative. Moreover, a commissive speech act of promising "I gotta race his dolphin" and a violation of manner maxim are seen above. The violation happens as the comedian tells his narrative with unclear language.

In the resolution part, the comedian employs high tonal level for reporting within the intonation group. A representative of reporting "I was like nobody just saw dolphin" and a commissive speech act of threatening "he's trying to kill me" with the flouting of maxim of quality is also employed because the dolphin does not intend to kill him (he provides falsified information). This kind of flouting happens as the speaker exaggerates in his description. This derives relevance: uncertain in contrast to another item function of intonation. While the coda has a contrastive function through high tonal level with a directive speech act of asking "calm down". These elements lead to the flouting of the quantity maxim as the comedian, here, mentions too many details.

Statistical Analysis

In this study, the two qualitative and quantitative are integrated together to have a mixed approach in the study of stand-up comedies. Following the completion of the phonopragmatic analysis, the emphasis of this section turns to the statistical analysis, which serves to provide a quantitative basis for the conclusions of the phonopragmatic analysis. Basically, the purpose of this statistical analysis is to provide objective answers to the questions raised by the study, fulfill its aims, and validate its hypotheses. The results of the statistical analysis are presented in figures that are structured in a manner that corresponds to the presentation of their constituent parts in the eclectic model. The presentation of the figures that are associated with them takes place in the following order.

1. Oral Narrative Elements

The elements of oral narrative seem to have the same frequency within the oral narrative itself. Yet, the abstract and coda show the lowest rates with 16% for the abstract and 8% for the coda because they are optional in some oral narratives. This is clearly shown in figure (2) as follows:
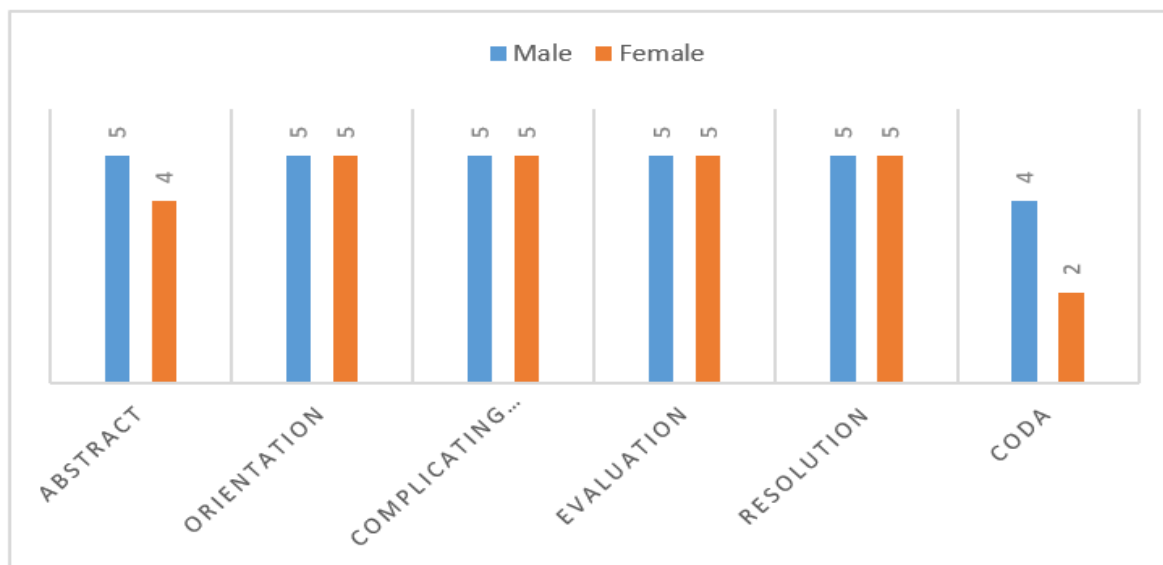

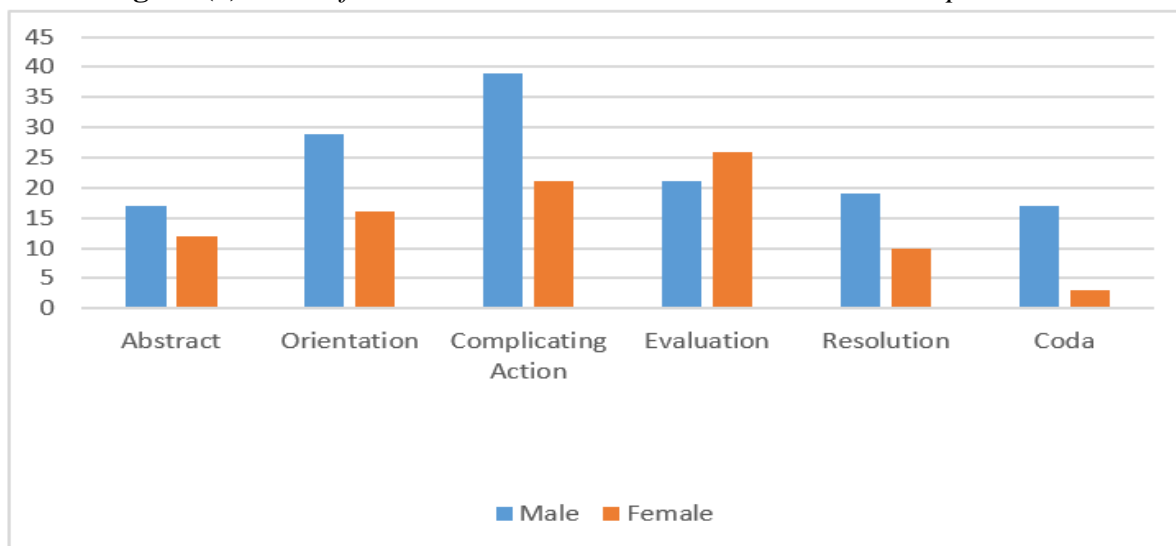**Figure (2)** *Rates of Oral Narrative Elements in American stand-up comedies*

Figure (3) *Rates of Acts in American Oral Narratives*

Acts in Oral Narratives

Within the oral narrative, the complicating action shows a high percentage of 28% for male and the highest percentage 30% for female. 12% is the percentage for the abstract element, 4% is the percentage of coda element for female. These two percentages are the least frequent in the analysed data. This is clearly shown in figure (3) as follows:

Intensity in Oral Narratives

Maximum Intensity is 84 dB for male American comedian and 82dB for American female comedians, while minimum intensity is 30 dB for male American comedians and 24 dB for American female comedians. The dominant type of tonal levels is the high one. Most of the acts show high tonal level in American stand-up comedies. This is shown in figure (4) as
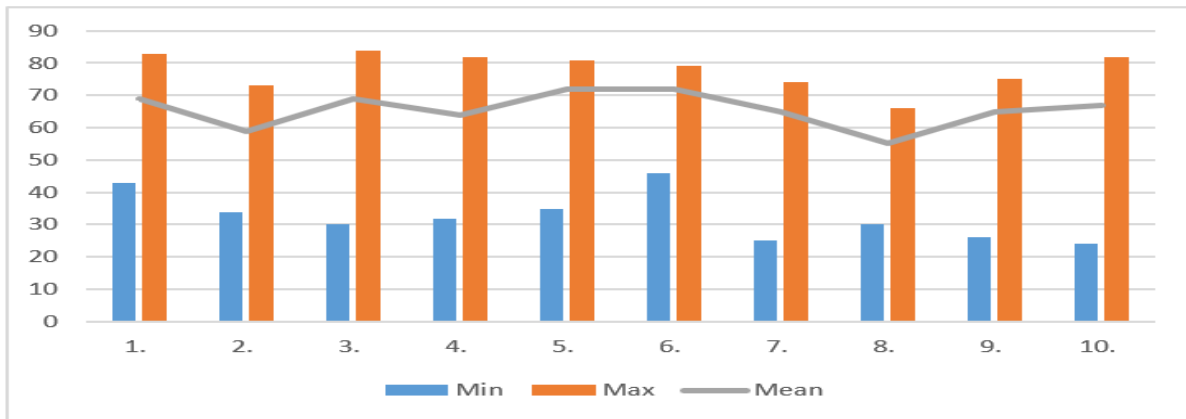
follows:

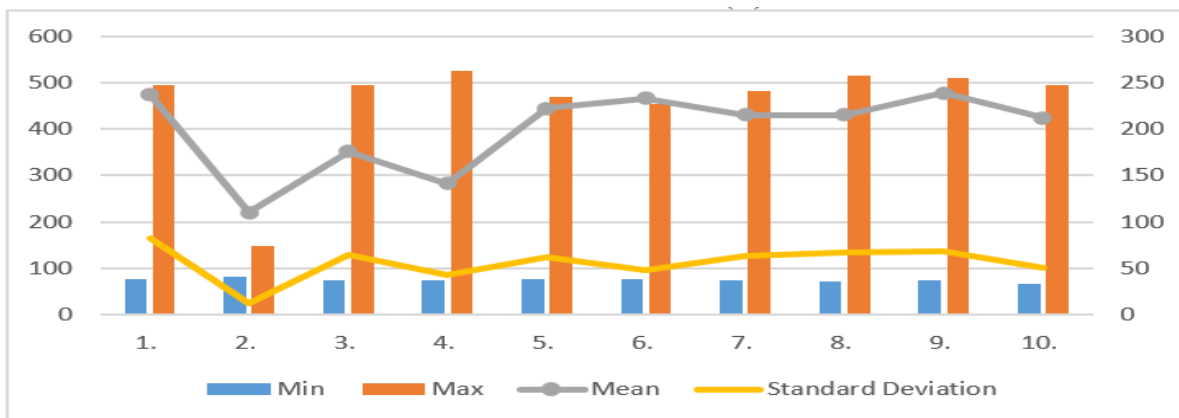**Figure (4)** *Rates OF INTENSITY in American Oral Narratives*

Figure (5) *Rates of Frequency in American Oral Narratives*

2. Frequency in Oral Narratives

In the American stand-up comedies, maximum frequency is 525Hz for male comedians and 515Hz for female comedians. Minimum frequency is 74Hz for male comedians and 67Hz for female comedians. This is shown in table (5) as follows:
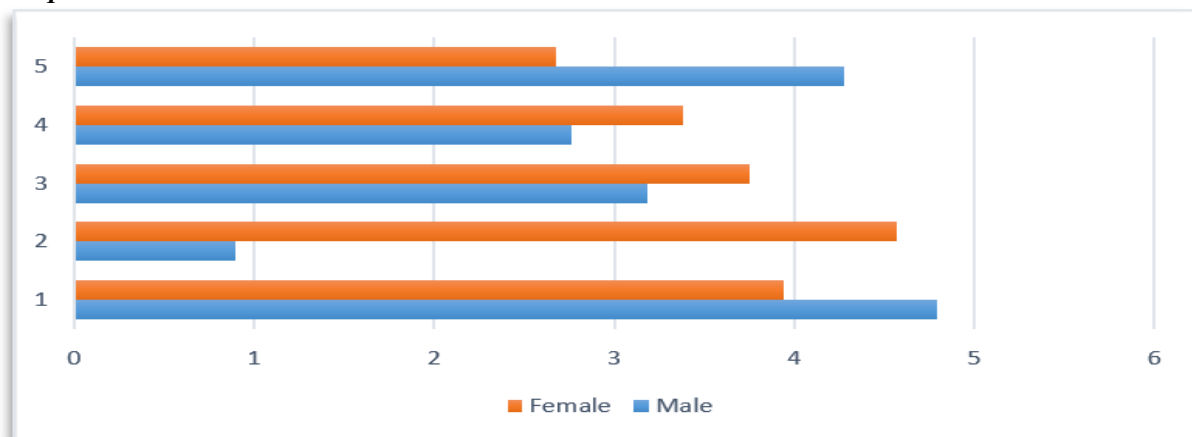
3. Speech Rate in Oral Narratives

Figure (6) *Rates of Speech Rate in American Oral Narratives*

Within speech rate, American male and female comedians show normal and slow speech rate which is between 4.79-0.90. It can be shown in figure (6) below:

4. Functions of Intonation

In the functions of intonation, American comedians show use of contrastive function of intonation with 20% percentage, while other functions such as anticipates next constituent (usually from other speaker), anticipates next constituent (often from same speaker), equative; foregone conclusion and new topic show a percentage of 14.3% percentage of the overall functions of intonation.
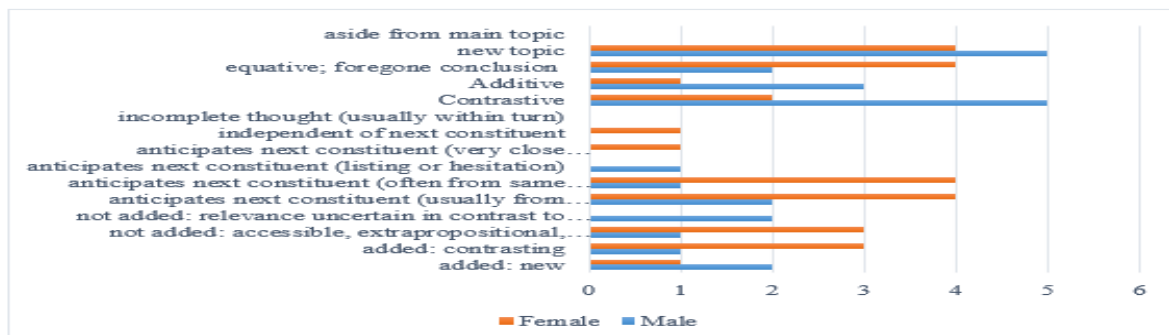

Figure (7) *Rates Functions of Intonation in American Oral Narratives*

5. Speech Acts in Oral Narratives

As for the speech acts, representative speech acts show 51.3% percentage of speech acts for male American comedians and 46.4% percentage of speech acts for female American comedians. Also, expressive speech acts show 21.6% speech acts for male American comedians and 32.1% speech acts for American female comedians.
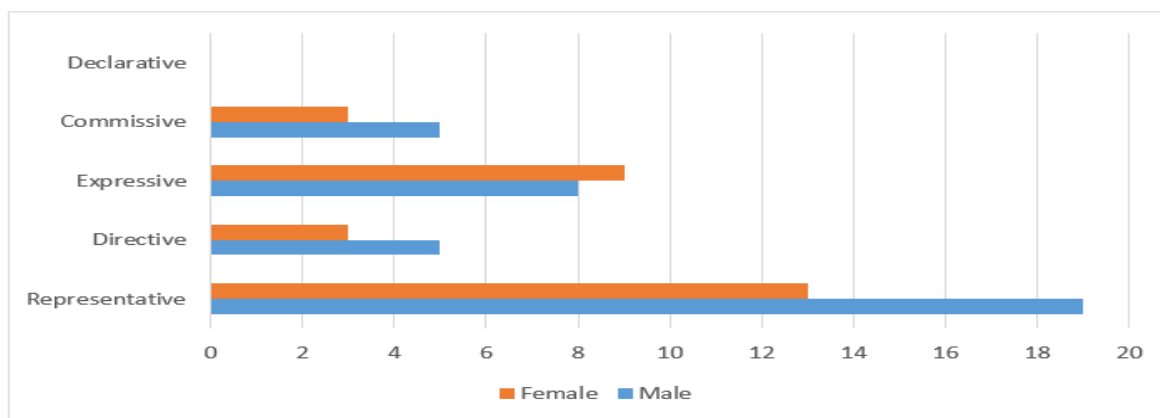

Figure (8) *Rates of Functions of Intonation in American Oral Narratives*

6. Conversational Maxims

The below figure (8) exemplifies that in conversational maxims, observance of the maxims is 30 % of the overall data for male and 25.9% for female. The maxim of quantity violation is 16.6% for male and 22.2% for female. Flouting quantity maxims is 20% percentage for American male comedians while it is 33% percentage for the American female comedians.
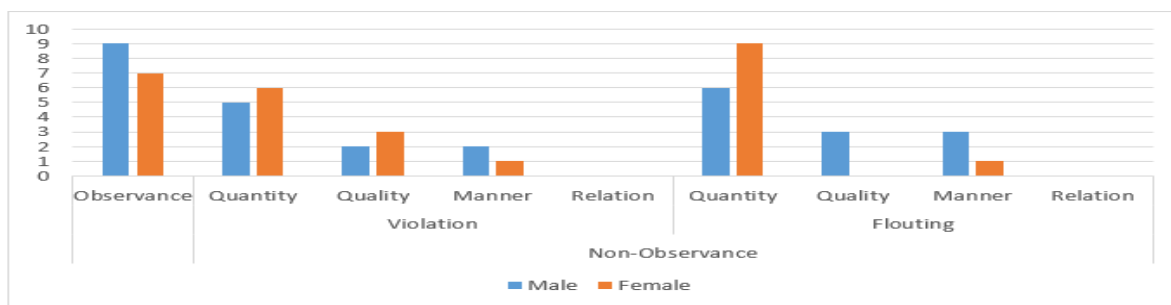
Figure (9) *Rates Conversational Maxims in American Oral Narratives*

Conclusions

After analysing the data which are ten American oral narratives from stand-up comedies and setting the results of the analysis, conclusions are drawn to verify the validity of the hypotheses of the study. Therefore, the results of the phonopragmatic analysis allow drawing the following conclusions:

1. The abstract and the coda are the least frequent oral narrative elements and show less employment of the acts within American stand-up comedies as they are optional elements. They are either present or not within the oral narrative in American and stand-up comedies. The other elements such as orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution is equally employed by American standup comedians.

2. American comedians show a preference toward the use of high intensity to have an effect on the audience and load their messages with the appropriate illocutionary force. Additionally, both show a tendency to the use of high frequency especially when delivering expressive speech acts. They raise their voices and use a high tonal level to deliver an emotional message.
3. American comedians use high frequency and high intensity which are associated with the contrastive function of intonation in oral narratives. The anticipation of next constituent (usually from other speaker) is also extensively employed by both the American comedians to deliver their stories (oral narrative).
4. The representative speech act is the most dominant category used in American stand-up comedies, with a frequency of (32) and a ratio of (49.2%) in American stand-up comedies. Since the comedian tries to say or describe a state of affair when narrating his experience, also to impart a piece of information to the audience. It is suitable for narrating the series of events to grasp the attention of the audience and deliver the joke within.
5. The fifth category of speech act, which is the declarative speech act, is less used in American SUCs since it is highly used in the legal and institutional contexts and not in telling stories.
6. The most non-observed maxim is the maxim of quantity in American stand-up comedies, the quantity maxim is heavily violated and flouted to generate conversational implicature, the total frequency (11) with a ratio of (31.4%). Since comedians exaggerate in their description of the events, flouting the maxim of quantity is prominent, consequently, generating conversational implicature. Moreover, the maxim of quantity is the second maxim that is flouted with (15) times with a ratio of (68.2%)

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