

Figurative Language Used in Bo Burnham's Stand-Up Comedy Titled *What*.

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to find out the types of figurative language and the function of the figurative language used in Bo Burnham's stand-up comedy titled "what.". The writer conducted this study using the theory of types of figurative language and functions of figurative language by Harris (2018). The writer conducted the study using a qualitative approach method in which he collected and analyzed the data himself. Findings reveal that the figurative language used in "what." comprises simile, metaphor, personification, and allusion, serving to clarify content, provoke interest, and establish associations. This study also found that the types of figurative language used in stand-up comedy depends on the compatibility of the type with the comedic material and the timing and pacing of the performance. It is also found that multiple types of figurative language can appear in a single utterance as it adds layers and creates engagement. It is suggested that future studies consider other forms of humor or alternative theories of figurative language to further diversify and enrich the field.

Keywords: figurative language; stand-up comedy

INTRODUCTION

Stand-up comedy, a popular form of entertainment, engages contemporary culture by featuring a solo performer spontaneously delivering jokes to an audience (Zoglin, 2021). It fosters collaboration and engagement while focusing on sociality, providing a valuable space for the interplay of public and private cultures (Mauss, 1954, as cited in Macrury, 2012, p. 3). A key aspect of stand-up comedy is the use of figurative language, which according to Harris (2018), includes: simile, analogy, metaphor, catachresis, metonymy, synecdoche, personification, allusion, eponym, apostrophe, and transferred epithet. Figurative language enables comedians to create engaging, imaginative, and humorous content (Putri, et al., 2016, p. 127; Maulana & Mubasyira, 2021, p. 17). By employing these devices, comedians describe situations or concepts amusingly, presenting unexpected comparisons or exaggerated scenarios that resonate with audiences.

For example, Mitch Hedberg humorously uses a metaphor to compare a broken escalator to a functional staircase (Hedberg, 2012), highlighting the absurdity of labeling escalators as "out of order" when they still serve their primary purpose. Similarly, Jim Gaffigan employs a simile by comparing a Hot Pocket to a "pop-tart filled with nasty meat" (Gaffigan, 2010), emphasizing its unappetizing and low-quality nature. Using figurative language helps comedians establish their comedic identities and contributes to engaging and humorous performances.

Interestingly, many stand-up comedians also act as entrepreneurs, taking on various roles such as acting, producing, and directing while promoting and managing their performances (Stebbins, 1990, p. 132). Bo Burnham, a YouTube star-turned-comedian with a net worth of \$4 million (Celebrity Net Worth, n.d.), exemplifies this entrepreneurial spirit. He has successfully built a career as a comedian, writer, actor, and director by controlling various aspects of his profession, from creating content to marketing and promoting his work.

Bo Burnham's notable works include comedy specials *Words, Words, Words* in the year 2010, *what.* in the year 2013, and *Make Happy* in the year 2016, which were well-received by audiences and critics alike. Additionally, he ventured into filmmaking with the critically acclaimed movie *Eighth Grade* in the year 2018 and released multiple comedy albums, such as *Bo Burnham* in the year 2009, showcasing his talent as a songwriter and performer. Burnham's ability to diversify his talents and navigate the entertainment industry demonstrates entrepreneurial characteristics.

This study explores the role of figurative language in stand-up comedy, using Bo Burnham's "what." as a case study. Released in 2013, *what.* combines stand-up comedy, music, and theater, focusing on themes such as self-reflection, societal critique, and the human condition (Burnham, 2013). With 25 million streams on YouTube and an IMDb rating 8.3 (IMDb, n.d.), "what." offers a wealth of material for analyzing figurative language types and functions in stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedy was generally likable in the public eye as many often enjoy the entertainment based on research done by Afidah and Wahyudi (2014, p. 171). Wawrzyniuk (2021, p. 86) also found that stand-up comedy's popularity continuously rose from its initial popularity 80 years ago.

Understanding the use of figurative language in stand-up comedy is crucial for appreciating the art form and enhancing knowledge of the communication techniques employed by comedians to entertain and engage audiences. By examining the types and functions of figurative language in Bo Burnham's work, the writer aims to understand how comedians use these devices to entertain, engage their audiences, and create memorable moments in their performances. The findings hopefully would contribute to the field of comedy research and the appreciation of the art form.

METHOD

In this study, the writer employed a qualitative research method. The data source for this research was Bo Burnham's utterances in the stand-up comedy titled *what.*. The data consisted of utterances containing figurative language from this stand-up comedy. Several steps were taken to collect the data. For the first step, the writer watched the video then downloaded the video for re-watching purpose. The next step is to get the transcription for the video. As there is no accuracy on the caption for the video, the writer downloaded the transcription of the video from Scraps from the Loft (Burnham, 2013/2017) then manually cross-checked the transcription with the video. The writer then followed the next step, dividing the transcription into utterances, back sounds, and audience reaction. Each utterance containing figurative language then will be represented with a single digit numbering system. The digit represented the chronological order of the appearance of the utterance containing figurative language.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

In this section, the writer presents the findings of the research. The findings reveal the types of figurative language and the function of the figurative language used by Bo Burnham in the stand-up comedy. For the purpose of effectiveness and efficiency, explanations regarding the types of figurative language used and its function will be combined in a single paragraph.

A. Simile

Simile can be defined as a comparison between different objects that have similar properties or characteristics (Harris, 2018, p. 85). Harris (2018) also states that simile commonly functions as an artistic effect as well as a clarifier of an idea using unique properties to attract attention (p. 85).

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- Data 1
“And he looks like the genetic product of a giraffe having sex with Ellen DeGeneres.”

Bo Burnham uses a simile to humorously exaggerate the similarities between his physical appearance and a hypothetical offspring of a giraffe and Ellen Degeneres. He achieves this by using "like" as a comparison tool. This comparison emphasizes his tall and slender physique, as well as his facial features that bear a resemblance to those of Ellen Degeneres. This simile is used to clarify his appearance to the audience, with the comparison helps him create a vivid yet absurd image to the audience, provoking a humorous element from the image.

B. Metaphor

Metaphor is an assertion that a subject is an idea or image using an imaginative method (Harris, 2018, p. 91). Harris (2018) also states that it is crucial to remember that metaphor provides a stronger image than analogy or simile as it asserts that the subject is the image portrayed (p. 94).

- Data 7
“I am the earth she is the glorious sun”

Bo Burnham uses a metaphor to describe his admiration for a woman, comparing himself to the earth and her to the glorious sun. He directly equates the two subjects by saying, "I am the earth, she is the glorious sun." The comparison implies a relationship of dependence and attraction, as the Earth depends on the Sun for its warmth, light, and existence. Burnham elevates the woman's status and implies that her presence would enrich his life by likening their relationship to celestial bodies. Bo Burnham uses metaphor here as a clarification tool, clarifying his feelings towards the woman. As a clarifier, this utterance does not really serve as a humorous context but rather a tool for the audience to grasp the intended meaning of the context.

C. Personification

Personification imaginatively gives an inanimate object human attributes and/or characteristics (Harris, 2018, p. 106). Harris (2018) also states that abstract concepts are often paired with personification as abstract concepts are difficult to grasp. However, with the help of personification, the audience is given an easier idea to comprehend. The word usually starts with a capital letter to help the audience recognize the personified abstract (p. 107).

- Data 3
“Just picture a depressed onion cutting itself.”

In this instance, Bo Burnham makes an onion seem human by giving it human characteristics. He says the onion is "depressed" and "cutting itself," behaviors and emotions typically associated with humans. This description creates a powerful and contrasting image of a sad onion that is causing harm to itself, highlighting the destructive nature of sadness. The personification is used to provoke interest to the audience by portraying an onion with human-like capability to draw the audience attention and curiosity on the message the context wants to say. This absurd image portrayed through the personification invites laughter from the audience and pull the audience's attention to the performance.

D. Allusion

Allusion refers to a well-known person or event to highlight a point in a discussion (Harris, 2018, p. 113). An allusion must possess three characteristics to highlight the point (Harris, 2018) effectively. Those characteristics are familiarity, endurance, and focused attribute (p. 114). Harris (2018) suggests that allusion functions as a tool to create an association between ideas to the audience with imaginative qualities as well as aesthetic purposes (p. 115).

- Data 1
“And he looks like the genetic product of a giraffe having sex with Ellen DeGeneres.”

In the context of the utterance, Bo Burnham was introducing himself to the audience. Bo Burnham uses an allusion to associate his visage with a well-known figure. Ellen DeGeneres is well known for her time as a host in her show, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. Bo Burnham referenced Ellen DeGeneres to highlight his facial features and appearance that resembles Ellen DeGeneres. Here, Bo Burnham creates association between his visage with the well-known celebrity, Ellen Degeneres to the audience. Humorous elements can be derived through the unexpected association, thus inviting laughter and amusement.

E. Multiple Types of Figurative Language in a Single Utterance

Typically, a single utterance features one type of figurative language. Nonetheless, in certain scenarios, more than one type may be present in a single utterance. This is exemplified in Bo Burnham's stand-up comedy show, "what.", where two specific combinations of figurative language are employed: firstly, a blend of simile and allusion, and secondly, a fusion of metaphor and personification.

A. Simile + Allusion

One of the combinations of the types of figurative language in a single utterance is a combination of simile and allusion. Bo Burnham used this combination in one utterance (data 1) during the stand-up comedy titled *what.*.

- Data 1
“And he looks like the genetic product of a giraffe having sex with Ellen DeGeneres.”

In Data 1, Bo Burnham made use of a simile as well as an allusion. This utterance is an example of a simile because it contains the word "like", which is the defining element of a simile, and the simile is being used to compare the appearance of Bo Burnham to that of a hypothetical genetic kid that may have been produced by crossing a giraffe and Ellen DeGeneres. The comparison in this situation develops an image of the hypothetical appearance in the mind of the audience, which further enhances the experience of the audience in understanding the joke by an exaggeration of the image in a way that the audience can grasp easily. In this instance, Bo Burnham also employed allusion by referring to a well-known celebrity by the name of Ellen DeGeneres as well. The audience may have noticed that Ellen DeGeneres and Bo Burnham have a striking resemblance to one another, and this allusion is making that connection. The audience is able to find amusement in the similarity between Bo Burnham's appearance and something that they are familiar with, which in this instance is the well-known person, Ellen DeGeneres. This is due to the fact that Bo Burnham's facial characteristics and overall appearance rather closely resemble those of Ellen DeGeneres if she were a guy. As this utterance contains both simile and allusion, the utterance can function to clarify and create association to the audience.

B. Metaphor + Personification

Another form of combinations of the types of figurative language in a single utterance is a combination of metaphor and personification. This combination was used in one utterance (data 23) in the stand-up comedy titled *what.*.

- Data 23
“The streets dicing our town into neat, unfair portions.”

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This utterance was made by Bo Burnham in Data 23 and included both metaphor and personification. The utterance made by Bo Burnham may be interpreted as a metaphor due to the fact that he implies that the streets divide the community into unequal segments. A negative connotation can be derived from the phrase, and it also generates a notion that the listeners can contemplate from hearing the unequal divisions. Through this metaphor, Bo Burnham poses a challenge to the audience, asking them to consider the degree to which the scenario being described in the metaphor is similar to the situation and experience that happened around the audience. The term "dicing," which adds a human quality to an inanimate object, is an example of the personification that may be found in the utterance. The audience is given something to ponder as a result of the personification of the roadway that serves as a divider for the town, such as whether the separation of the town is beneficial and whether or not there is a purpose for the partition of the town. As this utterance contains both metaphor and personification, the utterance can function to clarify and provoke interest to the audience.

DISCUSSION

In this section, the writer presents the writer's discussion regarding the findings from the study. The discussion discusses the reason why Bo Burnham uses limited types of figurative language, and the reason why Bo Burnham uses multiple types of figurative language in a single utterance in the stand-up comedy titled *what*.

A. Limited Use of Types of Figurative Language in the Stand-Up Comedy

This section explains why only some figurative language was utilized in Bo Burnham's stand-up comedy titled *what*, while the rest were not. In this section, the writer figured out reasons why certain figurative language is utilized while other types are not by Bo Burnham in his stand-up comedy titled *what*.

- Accessibility and Directness

Generally, a stand-up comedian's material should be easy for the crowd to understand. However, stand-up comedy materials often force the audience to think through intricate stories or jokes. Thus, those who enjoy the jokes understand the jokes (Greene, 2012, p. 138), as an audience responds once the joke is told, not before (Roy, 2010, as cited in Greene, 2012, p. 138). This means that people from all walks of life should be able to understand stand-up humor. Because of this, comics try to connect with the crowd and make them laugh as much as possible, no matter their background or age while provoking their intellect through jokes. Greene (2012) states that when comics started their stand-up comedy bit, a term to refer to the jokes and story the comics deliver, they challenged the audience to keep up intellectually with the bit of the show (p. 138). When the bit is over, the audience will experience relief in successfully solving the challenge proposed by the comics. Sigmund Freud (1905, as cited in Greene, 2012, p. 138) suggests that this relief allows the audience to release energy through laughter. Certain types of figurative language may require a certain level of knowledge or intelligence to understand fully. An example of a hard-to-understand type of figurative language is the transferred epithet. A transferred epithet is a noun modified by an adjective that cannot commonly modify said noun (Harris, 2018, p. 118). Thus, the audience must possess certain knowledge of nouns and adjectives to understand that the nouns were modified by adjectives that normally cannot modify them. Catachresis is another example of figurative language requiring a certain level of knowledge or intellect. Its definition of an assertion of an idea is marked by its use of grammatical fallacy (Harris, 2018, p. 95). Suppose the audience does not possess adequate knowledge of grammar. In that case, they may miss the grammatical fallacy in the catachresis, resulting in them not fully understanding the text. Given the wide range of backgrounds and ages of a stand-up comedy audience, the comic would not risk using figurative language that the audience might not understand or that the audience might not be able to understand. Stand-up humor relies on being easy to understand and familiar, and thought-provoking. Therefore, Bo Burnham uses language that the audience can understand quickly. He uses short, clear language that many people can easily understand.

He also tries to avoid figurative language that requires specialized knowledge, can confuse, and needs long explanations to make an immediate impact (laughter), such as: transferred epithet and catachresis.

- Timing and Pacing

As an entertainment, there certainly will be the timing of the entertainment itself. Therefore, pacing and timing in stand-up comedy are important. Timing and pace bring out the humor or comedy the comedian wants to show. “For the professional comic, the timing within the structure of the joke is crucial” (Macks, 2000, p. 25, as cited in Attardo & Pickering, 2011, p. 234). If the joke time is not right, the audience might not get the humor or comedy and will not be amused. A steady pace and rhythm are also important because they affect how entertained or bored the audience will be by the show. Brauman (1986, as cited in Attardo & Pickering, 2011) suggests that suspense must be introduced to the narrative by presenting the audience with curious information while withholding the full explanation of its implication (p. 236). Because of this, certain types of figurative language that need a lot of build-ups and/or explanations, such as analogy or complex metaphor, can throw off the time and pace of a performance, which could make the audience bored or even miss the joke. Figurative language that does not need much description is better, such as simile, personification, or allusion, as it is easier to understand, and the audience can figure out what it means immediately. Due to Bo Burnham’s bits being often faster than the other comics’ bits in general, he tries to avoid using figurative language that requires lots of build-ups and explanations not to mess up the timing and pacing of his bits.

B. Multiple Types of Figurative Language in a Single Utterance

This section aims to explain the existence of overlapping types of figurative language in a single utterance in Bo Burnham’s stand-up comedy titled “what.”. In this section, the writer gave reasons why some utterances spoken by Bo Burnham in his stand-up comedy contained more than one type of figurative language.

- Add Layers to the Jokes

Bo Burnham is well-known for his unique comic style by incorporating music and theater into his humor, including the stand-up comedy “what.”. Layers of humor are uncommon and are usually done through an unexpected twist to catch the audience off-guard. Through layering, Bo Burnham creates anticipation and engagement from the audience and finally delivers a punchline that defies the audience’s expectations. Attardo (2001) suggests that ambiguity plays a certain role in humor. Ambiguity plays a part in adding layers to a joke, as ambiguity makes the joke open for interpretation, further adding layers to the existing joke. From the analysis, the writer found that in Data 1, Bo Burnham used simile and allusion in the same utterance. It can be taken as an example that Bo Burnham added a layer to his joke, with one-layer functioning as a clarifier for the audience through an unexpected and absurd comparison to generate a humorous image for the audience. Meanwhile, another layer functions as a tool to create an association in the appearance of Bo Burnham with a well-known individual that is unexpected and that the audience finds amusing.

- Engagement

Bo Burnham used multiple types of figurative language to create an engagement with the audience in his stand-up comedy titled “what.”. Greene (2012) argues that stand-up comics often tell intricate stories that force the audience to think and that the audience can enjoy the joke when they understand it. Kant (1790, as cited in Greene, 2012) argues that there needs to be something absurd to incite laughter. Greene (2012) supported this argument by saying that comics often bring the audience's attention to thoughts that the audience has had before but cannot turn into a joke. The comics were able to build a joke through the audience's thoughts and connect the joke with the audience. Bo Burnham did this as exemplified in Data 23, where he engages the audience through a metaphor of streets dividing a town to stimulate the intellect and help create anticipation in the audience's mind through imagery. This engagement provokes the audience's

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mind to think and process the joke cognitively, further pulling the audience into the joke. Bo Burnham also adds a humorous aspect in Data 23 through personification, where the audience can connect to the joke and create a sense of discovery and enjoyment from understanding the joke.

CONCLUSION

Bo Burnham used Simile, Metaphor, Personification, and Allusion in the stand-up comedy. The select types of figurative language used by Bo Burnham were important as they enhance the comedy and humor of the stand-up comedy through enhancing the clarity of the humor, provoking interest to the audience, and creating association for the audience. The writer suggests further research on this field of study with different context and medium. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate audience reaction and the impact of the delivery on the effectiveness of the figurative language.

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