
**STREAMING LAUGHTER: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS ON VERBAL HUMOR
IN KEVIN HART'S STAND UP COMEDY SPECIAL *ZERO F**KS GIVEN***

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ABSTRACT

A novel coronavirus was found on December 2019. WHO named the disease caused by this virus COVID-19. The respiratory virus has been spreading rapidly, causing a global pandemic. To prevent infection, governments all over the world compel their citizens to maintain physical distance and stay at home. Having to do all activities, including working and studying, from home and not being able to gather with family and friends, who do not live in the same household, took a toll on people's mental health. They thus relied on entertainments accessible at home to avoid boredom and stress. An entertainment medium seeing a significant increase in users is streaming services. Besides offering post-launched movies, TV series and TV show, every streaming service nowadays also produces original contents. Netflix, for example, created a stand-up comedy special starring Kevin Hart, called *Zero F**ks Given*. The researchers thus aim to analyze the verbal humor Hart uses to incite laughter. The data are collected by watching the show on Netflix website and note-taking its subtitle. Using descriptive qualitative method, this research employs Richard Shade's theory on humor classification as well as Herbert Paul Grice's theory on implicature. The findings show there are only 7 out of 12 verbal humor types, with satire being the most frequent one. Additionally, Hart uses conversational implicature more as it is greatly suitable with satire in inciting laughter.

Keywords: *implied meaning; satire; stand-up comedy; streaming service; verbal humor*

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INTRODUCTION

A novel coronavirus, later identified as SARS-CoV-2, was found in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. Three months later, World Health Organization (WHO) named the disease the virus causes COVID-19. The respiratory virus spread rapidly, causing a global pandemic. To prevent infection, governments all over the world imposed a lockdown on their citizens, compelling them to keep a safe physical distance and stay at home (Adhitya, 2020, p. 11).

All activities, including working and studying, are conducted from home. Gathering, both publicly and privately, is restricted. People are not allowed to gather with family and friends who do not live in the same household. This restriction took a toll on their mental health. To spend time, kill boredom and avoid stress, they thus depended on entertainments accessible at home as the main distraction. One type of entertainment with easy home access is streaming services.

In contrast to print and broadcast media, which are scheduled periodically, the contents on streaming services are available at all times (Alexander, 2021). Since they are not based on time slots, the audience can enjoy the contents any time they like. With an internet connection, the contents can be s from any part of the world (Adhitya & Wulandari, 2020, p. 182). The number of streaming service users then increased significantly during the pandemic (Curry, 2021).

In the beginning, streaming services only provided various post-launched programs that the audience had already been familiar with and in love with, such as movies, television series, and television shows. However, due to steep competition, every streaming service nowadays also offers original contents. For example, the world's largest paid streaming service, Netflix, produces a stand-up comedy special. Starring an American comic, Kevin Hart, it is entitled *Zero F**ks Given*.

Directed by Leslie Small, the show is set in Hart's own living room. He makes his family life during the pandemic the primary topic. He tells about his life during quarantine, his current wife and ex-wife, as well as his children. He also talks about sex life for men over 40s, group chats with his male friends, and his reaction when tested positive for COVID-19.

The show was first released on November 17, 2020. In just four weeks, it had been watched by more than 21 million accounts worldwide (Semon, 2020). Critics argue that it is "like no other", with him having "zero filters" and making "zero apologies" (VanArendonk, 2020). Although it seems to discuss light humor surrounding familial themes, issues about race, sexuality, class and politics in the United States can also be felt in the show.

Unfortunately, Hart's humor is not always met with laughter. While he made many of the audience laugh out loud, many others were also taken aback by his comedy. His comedy is considered sexist,

homophobic, racist and elitist. In the 2010 TV special *Seriously Funny*, he said “One of my biggest fears is my son growing up and being gay. That’s a fear.” (Andrews, 2019).

Not only the humor in his performance, but his old tweets have also caused him a great deal of trouble. In 2011, Hart tweeted,

Yo if my son comes home & try’s 2 play with my daughters doll house I’m going 2 break it over his head & say n my voice ‘stop that’s gay’.

The tweet resurfaced in 2018 and forced him to step down as the host of the 91st Oscars ceremony (Fortin, 2018). Despite often being the object of cancel culture, Hart is undeniably a successful comic.

Stand-up comedy, hereinafter abbreviated as SUC, is a solo performance by a comedian standing on a stage telling funny stories. The material of SUC is composed of a series of humor based on the comedian’s experiences, observations or opinions (Mintz, 1985, p. 73). Every SUC humor consists of a set-up and a punch-line. Aiming to build the audience’s expectations, a set-up is ordinary utterances, which are not yet funny. Meanwhile, a punch-line is the climax breaking their expectations with unexpected turns (Dean, 2000, p. 54). A comic can perform for 10 minutes to 1 hour in one SUC session by raising one or several themes tied by a silver lining in the material.

Furthermore, this article aims to analyze the humor that Hart uses to incite laughter. Does he still use degradatory remarks that he was cancelled for? What kind of humor does he use in *Zero F**ks Given*? What is the meaning implied in his humor?

Hart’s humor has been the subject of research several times. Puspasari & Ariyanti

(2019) analyzed his 2010’s *Seriously Funny* and 2013’s *Saturday Night Live* performances. They compared his humor to Abdul Arsyad’s on 2014’s Stand Up Comedy Kompas TV Show 4 and 8. They found that, despite their different nationalities, Hart and Arsyad employed the same joke-telling technique and topic of being the minority in their respective country. Meanwhile, Serrano Egas (2020) studied his humor on *What Now?* and *Let Me Explain*. She concluded that he uses African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to reaffirm the higher position of the African-American community and to denigrate Caucasians. After conducting thorough searches, this article is the first to study Hart’s *Zero F**ks Given*.

In answering these questions, the humor in the show needs to be classified. This article then employs Richard Shade’s theory on humor classification. Shade (1996, p. 2) divides humor found in daily lives into verbal, figural, visual and auditory humor. Since SUC is delivered orally, the humor in it falls under verbal humor.

According to Shade (1996, p.14), verbal humor is defined as the type of humor in the form of language features instead of drawing, clowning, or sounding. Verbal humor can rely on incongruity implemented through confusion, contradiction, understatement, exaggeration, surprise or reversal. Verbal humor is broken down into 12 types (Shade in Cendra, 2016, p. 10-7; Shade in Baskara, 2013, p. 14-23).

Pun, also known as wordplay, is characterized by the use of words that are pronounced or spelled similarly, but possess different or even contradictive meanings. An example is,

A bicycle cannot stand on its own because it is two-tire.

The phrase 'two-tire' has similar pronunciation and spelling to 'too tired'. This similarity causes confusion which then triggers laughter.

Riddle is composed of puzzling facts, thus requiring the audience to think aloud as if they are solving an enigma. An example is,

What is bright orange and sounds like a **parrot**? A **carrot**.

The color of a carrot is orange, and its pronunciation sounds similar to 'parrot'. However, since a parrot is a bird that not only can make sounds, but also can mimic human talk, the verb 'sounds' in the question can refer to 'what can make a sound like a parrot', and not 'what sounds similar to how the noun 'parrot' is pronounced'.

Joke is generated by encompassing words, idioms, and metaphors with multiple meanings, resolving ambiguity, perceiving incongruity, or undergoing an unexpected change. Based on its linguistic feature, joke is divided into five types.

Phonological joke uses words that have similar phonological structures. An example is,

One should care where a **bean** soup has **been**.

The noun 'bean' can be easily misheard as the auxiliary verb 'been'. The similarity in the phonology causes humorous incongruity.

Lexical joke uses words that can form multiple different meanings. An example is,

What has **18 legs** and **catches flies**? A **baseball team**.

The intended answer is a caterpillar with eighteen legs that eats off smaller insects, such as flies. However, the given answer can

also be correct since there are nine players on a baseball team. Thus, there are eighteen legs, and one of their jobs is to catch the flying ball thrown either by the players on their own team or the opposing team.

Surface-structured joke uses words by focusing on their surface structure. An example is,

What kind of flower like to be kissed? A **tulip**.

The flower 'tulip' is pronounced similarly to 'two lip'. The answer can be an alternative because of its grouping as a phrase.

Deep-structured joke uses words by focusing on their interpretation. An example is,

What animal can jump higher than a house? Any animal because **houses cannot jump**.

The answer is based on Joe's interpretation of the question solely on the noun 'house', disregarding its notion of the height of a house. It can be that he misunderstands or he offers an alternative. Either way, the answer is humorous.

Metalinguistic joke uses words to focus on their surface structure rather than the deep structure. It thus pays attention to their linguistic feature instead of their interpretation.

What's the end of everything? The letter **g**.

The answer is humorous because it employs a literal take on the noun 'everything' that ends with the letter 'g', instead of giving a philosophical answer.

Irony is achieved by grouping contradictive words in a sentence or utterance. The contradiction lies between

what is said and what is done, as well as what is expected and what is carried out. Below is an example of irony. An example is,

The **doctor** hopes you fall **ill**.

The **police** hopes you become a **criminal**.

The **lawyer** hopes you get into **trouble**.

The **priest** wants you to **commit sin**.

The **coffin maker** wants you **dead**.

Only a **thief** wishes you **prosperity** in life!

The humor can be felt as the righteous trait of the profession contradicts the situations that need to occur for them to have the job. On the contrary, what is deemed bad is in favor of other people’s well-being.

Parody is created by humorously modifying well-known stories, plays, poems, songs, speeches, movies, or ads while preserving some of their core elements. It is often used to mock the original work. An example is “Stay Home Vogue”, Chris Mann’s parodic rendition of Madonna’s “Vogue”.

Original Version

Look around, everywhere you turn is
heartache

It’s everywhere that you go (Look
around)

You try everything you can to escape

The pain of life that you know (Life that
you know)

Parody Version

Look around, everywhere you turn is

Covid

It’s everywhere that you go (just look
around)

I know you’ve tried, everything you can
to escape

**This social distance shit show (what a
shit show)**

Mann uses the song’s original form but changes some of the lyrics to fit into the global pandemic’s current phenomenon.

Satire is employed for veiled criticism. The humor is the result of either exaggerating or understating facts. An example is,

An old lady was sent on a 10-day cruise paid by her son. She wrote to complain: “The food on this ship is absolutely awful. And such small portions!”

The humor lies as the lady complains about something she did not pay for. Moreover, the complaint narrows down to the small portion of the food expected from gourmet cuisine, like those served on cruises.

Sarcasm is generated by ridicule, insult or scorn. It differs from satire as it is harsher, thus able to hurt other people’s feelings. An example is,

“You have been **working hard**”, I said as I looked at the **empty page**.

The teacher uses the utterance as a jibe toward the student because those who work hard will not have empty pages on their assignments.

Limerick is characterized by a five-lined verse with AABBA rhyme. Derived from Irish song, its original lyrics are modified to create humor.

A **chef** spent too long in the sun
All the time he was having fun;
But the daylight soon closed,
And the sunburn exposed
He was well and truly **well-done**.

The chef sunbathes longer than he should have to result in his skin becoming ‘well-done’ as if it was a steak.

Anecdote is generated by the embellished depiction of either a real or fictional event leading to a humorous point. It thus often takes the form of a narrative text.

Who’s Counting?

Napoleon was involved in conversation with a colonel or a Hungarian battalion

who had been prisoner in Italy. The colonel mentioned he had fought in the army of Maria Theresa. “You must have a few years under your belt!” exclaimed Napoleon. “I’m sure I’ve lived sixty or seventy years,” replied the colonel. “You mean to say,” Napoleon continues, “you have not kept track of the years to have lived?”

The colonel promptly replied, “Sir, I always count my money, my shirts, and my horses – **but as for my years, I know nobody who wants to steal them, and I shall surely never lose them.**”

The colonel does not count his age because he thinks that it cannot be stolen, unlike his material possession.

Farce is marked by boisterous jokes making fun of certain events with absurd plots that can seem impossible. An example is the movie *The Hangover* (2009), which tells about four men going to Las Vegas for a bachelor party. When they wake up, Doug, the groom-to-be, is missing. They must find the groom before the wedding day, but they have no recollection of what happened the night before.

Tall tale is depended on the over-exaggeration when telling facts and events surrounding characters, setting and plots in a story. An example is Paul Bunyan folklore,

Even as a baby, Paul Bunyan was mighty big. How big? Well, he was so big that his parents had to use a **covered wagon for his cradle.**

As you might imagine, young Paul Bunyan had a big appetite. He gobbled up **five barrels of porridge** a day, and his parents had to milk **four dozen cows** every morning and evening just to keep his baby bottle filled.

There are many over-exaggerations found in the intrinsic elements of the story. The bold

phrases show the use of hyperbole to draw the characterization.

Wit is composed of sharp words to create an intellectually humorous effect by causing sudden changes in perceiving a topic. An example is,

It’s raining for the third straight days in a row. My wife looks really depressed. She keeps staring through the window. If the rain does not stop tomorrow, **I’ll have to let her in!**

Without complete reading, the humor that lies in the end might not be felt as the passage appears to be going in a direction, but twisted to another.

While Shade’s type of humor is used to classify Hart’s humor, its meaning is analyzed using Herbert Paul Grice’s theory on implicature. Grice (in Haugh 2002, p. 118-20) states that “implicature itself is meant to cover a number of ways in which literally unsaid information can be conveyed”. He refers ‘implicature’ to what is used as the implication, while ‘implicatum’ to what is implied. Implicature is broken down into two types (1995, p. 25-6).

Conventional implicature is the additional meaning obtained from the words used. An example is,

Layla is **poor** but **happy.**

The conjunction ‘but’ implies the contrast between being poor and being happy. Poverty, which should be a sad condition, is not an obstacle to happiness.

Conversational implicature is the additional meaning obtained from conversations or utterances that appears to be saying one thing but actually implying something else. An example is,

Sue : “What’s the weather going to be like today?”

John: “You should bring your umbrella.”

The appropriate answer to Sue’s question is either “Yes” or “No”. However, John gives a new statement that does not directly answer the question. By suggesting that Sue bring an umbrella, John implies that the weather is cloudy with a probability of rain. Nevertheless, the meaning of the answer can still be understood because it still fits the context of the question.

Both theories are employed to analyze Hart’s humor in *Zero F**ks Given* through a descriptive qualitative method. The primary data are sourced from the content on Netflix website (Hart, 2020). The data are in form of words, phrases, clauses and sentences that Hart utters. The data are taken by watching and re-watching the special, followed by note-taking the subtitles. The authors make use of the audience’s laugh as a mark of humor. Each datum is tagged by the time it is uttered during the duration of the special.

The secondary data are taken from books and academic journals about SUC, verbal humor and implied meaning. Magazine articles and video interviews about and/or by Hart are also collected. The data are then interpreted by the writer as the human instrument (Adhitya & Wulandari, 2021, p. 31).

DISCUSSION

Hart utters his humor in *Zero F**ks Given* in the form of monologue. The utterances are classified into the verbal humor types based on the humor theory. The verbal humor is then interpreted using the

implicature theory in order to reveal the meaning implied by the SUC materials.

The Type of Verbal Humor in *Zero Fks Given***

Out of the 12 verbal humor types that Shade proposes, there are only seven types that Hart uses in the special. Satire is the verbal humor type that appears the most, with 44 data. Hart mainly uses satire by providing criticism. However, satire can invite laughter when targeted cleverly. It can be seen in the following datum.

News flash. I had it! That’s right, I had the ‘VID. The ‘VID-19 was in my system. I had it in the beginning when it wasn’t cool, when it wasn’t a trend.

(02:54-03:06)

Hart satirizes people who twistedly boast when they get positive COVID-19 and exhibit their test results. This verbal humor is categorized as satire. Although he criticizes, his criticism is not directed at a specific target. Since the goal is general, this satire feels non-offensive.

Compared to satire, sarcasm is considered harsher, thus having greater potential for the target’s hurt feelings. However, Hart conveys his sarcasm in a comical style. The second most used verbal humor type by Hart is sarcasm, with a total of 10 data. It can be seen in the following datum.

Ladies, you don’t know how to not give a f*ck, that’s your problem. If you guys could match a man’s not-give-a-f*ck energy, oh, my God, the world would be a better place.

(33:34-33:43)

The target of Hart’s sarcasm is more specific, which is directed at women. Prior to uttering the sarcasm, he said that when a man turns 40, he does not pay attention to anything

anymore. He continues with sarcasm because he is annoyed as women always demand attention.

Comics often perform their materials by using parody when performing. Hart is no exception, as four data of parody are found throughout the special. It can be seen in the following datum.

Greeters are amazing people. The job is actually required. I get it. I've actually been hit with some amazing greetings in my time. I went to Walmart, I got hit with a greeting so fantastic one time ... I don't even know where he came from. He just slid in my POV. I walked in. He was like, "Welcome to Walmart. You here to get you some stuff?"

(22:28-22:48)

Hart parodies the welcoming clerk at Walmart. He mimics the clerk's gesture and greeting with hyperbolic impersonation. Uttering verbal humor while imitating acts that are familiar in the audience's minds will easily incite laughter.

Although SUC is not impromptu, the materials are delivered like they are unscripted. Many comics thus rely on personal experience in crafting their humor. However, they are narrated in such a way as to be funny. This type of verbal humor is called anecdote. There are four data of anecdote found in the special. It can be seen in the following datum.

I went to McDonald's... This is a true story. I start f*cking the Big Mac up. Smashing it. It's all over my face, everything. I'm happy as hell. I turn to my left, it's a woman outside the window taping me. She said, "Got go to McDonald's. I'm at the drive-through, right? I want a Big Mac Meal. I haven't had one in so long. I'm so excited for this f*cking Big Mac. Oh, my God, I can't wait to get this Big Mac. I get the

Big Mac. I'm so excited. I pull over in the parking lot. I start f*cking the Big Mac up. Smashing it. It's all over my face, everything. I'm happy as hell. I turn to my left, it's a woman outside the window taping me. She said, "Got your ass". I got nervous.

(09:27-09:59)

Hart tells his experience when an unknown woman was recording him while he was voraciously eating a burger. Although the anecdote is factual, there are still parts that are exaggerated, such as his enthusiasm which is used as a set up in the composition of the above humor.

Laughter can also break out of something ironic. There are four data of irony in which Hart uses two contradictory statements to construct his humor. It can be seen in the following datum.

José decides to say something else. "It's okay, man. This is crazy, man. I know." "Imagine how I feel, man." "I can't believe I'm wiping Kevin Hart's ass, man." "This is crazy." "It's my first famous ass, man."

(1:05:49-1:06:08)

Hart recounts a situation where he lost his tactile senses throughout his body. Driven by shame, he could still feel his arse touched by a male nurse. Ironically, the contradiction lies in the nurse's pride for being able to rub Hart's arse, even though he felt embarrassed and uncomfortable because another man was touching his intimate part.

Since the topic of the special that Hart brought up revolves around his family, he also recounts an altercation with his father as the only form of farce. It can be seen in the following datum.

You guys got me living my life like a successful drug dealer. It's a true story. True story. There was a time, if you

wanted to come to my house to talk to me, you had to get naked. “Get in the f*cking pool. How else would I know that you’re not wearing a wire? E!? People? Who the f*ck is you with? Came here for a story for the tabloids. I don’t trust you, Dad.” “I’m your father.” “Shut up, b!tch!”.

(11:43-12:06)

Hart tells a story of when his father visited his house. His biological father was asked to take all of his clothes off to ensure he was conspiring with the press. As a farce, the telling of the event is humorously exaggerated as it sounds too far out of logic to actually take place.

Besides his father, Hart also includes stories about his daughter. He recounts what his daughter said as the only form of joke. It can be seen in the following datum.

Daughter told me she likes this boy named Matt at her school. “Dad, I like this boy named Matt. Oh, my God. He’s so cute. He makes me laugh. I want him.” “What the f*ck does that mean? What does that mean? “I want him.” What the f*ck are you saying, little girl?”

(14:32-14:47)

His daughter has a crush on one of her schoolmates and she innocently says, “I want him”. Due to its multiple interpretations, the meaning of the sentence becomes ambiguous because it is said by a child. Hart exploits the ambiguity of this sentence to make it a deep-structure joke.

It can be seen from the data for each verbal humor type, Hart uses those seven types because they can be composed with a brief material. Meanwhile, the other five types that he does not require an abundant material as the set up before reaching their humorous climax with a punch line. Pun and

wit do not require a comprehensive set up, but the wordplays are often difficult to catch onto the audience, thus requiring repetitions that can be time-consuming. In addition, these two types of verbal humor are not Hart’s preference, as he tends to use a self-deprecating style.

The Implied Meaning of Verbal Humor in Zero Fks Given**

The meaning implied by Hart’s verbal humor is classified into two types. Firstly, conventional implicature can be grasped by understanding the use of certain words. One of the conventional implicature data found is that Hart uses his children’s complaint. following children complain about. It can be seen in the following datum.

They called me from the amusement park. They were with their cousins, they FaceTimed me. I answer their FaceTime. I could tell that they were weak. Malnourished, they hadn’t eaten in hours, I could tell. They had the white shit in the corner of their mouths. They could barely stand. “Dad! We’ve been in line for hours, we haven’t rode anything. We got the fast pass, but it’s not fast at all.”

(28:13-28:44)

Hart’s children have gotten used to him renting out an entire theme park, so they do not have to queue to get on the rides they want. However, when they went with their mother, who was already Hart’s ex-wife, they were only given special tickets, making them still wait in line. The conventional meaning of the utterance is marked by the conjunction ‘but’ in showing the contradiction between the adjectives ‘fast’ and ‘not fast at all’.

Secondly, conversational implicature can be grasped by understanding

conversation. An utterance in a conversation might appear to be saying one thing, while it means the opposite. Apart from his children and father, Hart also uses his wife in one of the conversational implicature data. It can be seen in the following datum.

“We argued in the morning and I left. It was 7:00 a.m. She called me, I’m in the car. She was like, “You probably getting your dick sucked.” At 7:00 a.m.? What b!tch is that ambitious that’s out here at 7:00 a.m... sucking dick? What type of daywalker do you think I’m dealing with? Jesus Christ! A 7:00 a.m. dicksucker on the loose, that’s got you worried?”

(37:17-37:38)

Hart tells a fight between him and his wife because he often leaves their house early in the morning. She suspects that he will cheat on another woman. Instead of trying to reassure his wife in a straightforward manner that he is faithful, he explains that no woman gets up that early for him to cheat with. The response that does not respond directly is the use of conversational implicature for the purpose of humor. Throughout the special, Hart uses more conversational implicature than conventional implicature.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing and interpreting the data, the conclusion of this article can be drawn as follows.

- 7 of the 12 verbal humor types Hart uses, namely satire, sarcasm, parody, anecdote, irony, farce and joke, are used because they are able to be successfully delivered in concise materials that can save time.
- 3 of the 5 verbal humor types that Hart does not use, namely riddle, limerick and tall tale, do not appear at all because they require an abundant amount of materials from the set up to the punch line in order to successfully incite laughter, thus taking a lot of time.
- 2 of the 5 verbal humor types Hart does not use, namely pun and wit, do not appear at all because they tend to be intellectual, which is different from Hart’s self-deprecating style.
- The verbal humor type that appears the most often is satire, while the implied meaning type that appears the more often is conversational implicature. The reason is because the implied meaning generated from the conversational implicature is greatly suitable for satire.

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