



Analyzing the Incongruity Theory of Humor: George Carlin's Stand-up Comedy as a Case Study

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Abstract

George Carlin was one of the brilliant and thought-provoking comedians of the US. Known for his inspiring ideas on politics, language and religion, Carlin satirized American culture, making from stand-up comedy a powerful discourse that transcends the entertainment level and speaks on behalf of the people. He dedicated most of his comedy to depicting the many socio-political and cultural inconsistencies of his nation. Carlin's routines are replete with profuse humor criticizing people and beliefs by juxtaposing conflicting and incompatible ideas. There exist many linguistic and cognitive mechanisms engaged in the creation and appreciation of humor in stand-up comedy. According to the variant theories of laughter, mainly the incongruity, the appreciation of humor presupposes the detection of some inconsistency. This article explores the aspect of incongruity in Carlin's comedy and how he makes the most of his language proficiency to entertain spectators. By analyzing extracts from his shows, it argues that this comedy genre can unmask social imbalances and criticize political injustice.

Keywords: Incongruity; Humor; Comedy; Stand-up; George Carlin.

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1. Introduction

In joke telling and stand-up routines, comics rely on the contradicting remarks revealed in the punch lines of their stories. Funny punch lines are mostly the outcome of intelligibly coherent build-ups. The process of humor creation is based on a combination of several linguistic techniques practiced and developed by performers of this genre of comedy. These linguistic features include repetition, punning, wordplay and hyperbole, among others. This fact validates the assumption that funniness in stand-up comedy does not necessarily require a specific stage persona or theatrical embellishments. Yet, funniness relies mostly on the comedian's use of several linguistic instruments to create and uncover contradictions. The comedic style of every performer rests on how s/he brings various linguistic mechanisms into play to elicit laughter responses among the audience. The central objective is to carry out an analysis of Carlin's comedy, mainly how he exploits language proficiency to trigger laughter (using overlapping scripts and unexpected endings). Before any analysis of the concept of incongruity and its possible manifestations in stand-up comedy, it is crucial to wave fundamental interrogations concerning its previous definitions and interpretations. The study at hand transcends all prior delimitations of the term, mainly the ones presented by [1], who restricted the term to linguistic dimensions. The following examination goes beyond this layout and advocates that any attempt to trigger laughter on stage includes the use of incongruity. Consciously or unconsciously, comedians resort to numerous strategies to make people laugh. Figurative language, puns, wordplay and other verbal and non-verbal instruments are interchangeably utilized by comedians to stimulate positive feedback. Apart from this linguistic approach, which essentially departs from the juxtaposition of scripts and contradicting words to create some inconsistency, this attempt seeks to explore further levels, specifically those based on the comedian's reaction to different socio-political matters. The comedian's primary responsibility on stage is to elicit laughter, but each comedian differs from another considering the means by which s/he achieves it. Humor has always been a means through which different people express their societal discontent and political views. When on stage, comedians seize the opportunity to avow their political opinions and social criticism departing initially from their environmental surroundings. By and large, comedians question and challenge political decisions, social inequalities and cultural exclusion. The comic's professional responsibility is to remind the audience of the various incoherencies in their daily conducts through the process of indirectly questioning their beliefs and criticizing their practices. Although they are in dire need of the spectators' sympathy during their shows, comedians must be brave enough to challenge the basic myths people sustain about how extraordinary their lives are. Simply put, while people are unable to justify some cultural arrangements and social attitudes due to political obligations or religious forces, comedians can prove the opposite through the process of unmasking inequality and joking about the agreed-upon cultural norms and social statuses. Incongruity takes place whenever comedians attempt to offer useful solutions and suggest new visions concerning how things should be in contrast to how they are in reality or when they use language proficiency to challenge perceptions. The creation of humor covers all assays to challenge people's comfortable perception of things and question how they exercise their daily practices.

1.1. Humor in Theory

The first philosophical debate on the nature of humor took place in Athens between Plato and his pupil Aristotle. Plato's groundbreaking book *The Republic* and Aristotle's monumental treatise *Poetics* set a fertile ground for

the subsequent discussions among philosophers and art critics about the very nature of humor. Any philosophical analysis of laughter and humor should include accounts of Plato and Aristotle, two leading contributors to the understanding of the phenomenon of humor. Plato warns against inserting humor-related material in the curriculum of education for his Republic guardians [2]. He goes even further to call for the omission of many extracts from Homer's epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, which praise humor and value laughter as "quencher for gods." He suggests eliminating those lines from Homer, where he says that "unquenchable laughter arose among the blessed gods as they watched Hephaestus bustling about the house" (83). In other words, he argues for excluding laughter-provoking lines of poetry, which depicts people and gods as being excessively indulged in mirth. In this dialogue, Plato sets up the fundamental rules required for educating the guardians of his ideal society. He asserts that being a guardian means that one should be endowed with a set of criteria, such as using reason to control emotions. Laughter, argues Plato, may produce violent emotions and loss of control over oneself. Therefore, guardians should not be 'lovers of laughter'; they should present a good model for future generations. Aristotle maintained a similar argument about entertainment and laughter when he portrayed comedy as "an imitation of people who are worse than the average" (83). The description given to the ridiculous in comedy, he adds, is a kind of ugliness at which we laugh derisively. In [3], Plato makes his teacher Socrates speak about humor and laughter as an amalgam of pain and pleasure. He argues that laughter results from some feeling of superiority over competitors. In other words, superiority is based on ridicule, which means that what pushes people to laugh at others is their inability to behave in an ordinary way like other people. The object of amusement or the victim of laughter, according to Plato, is always an inferior person. Advocates of the superiority theory have received scathing criticism because their theoretical stand seems inadequate to justify many other humor situations. As a response to the previous theoretical claims, a respectful number of philosophers introduced the release and the incongruity theories. The relief or the release theory is based on the idea that laughter releases nervous tensions. According to [4], laughter is a physical activity through which the body liberates negative and nervous energy. He opines that "when we feel intense pain, an affected limb may move involuntarily, as the face contorts and we may vocalize our anguish. Joy and fear also are manifested physically; laughter is a physical manifestation of the release of nervous energy" (711).¹ Similar to Spencer, Freud sees laughter as an exit for psychic or nervous energy. He proposes three types of humor situations: Joking or wit, the comic, and humor [5]. In each of the three situations there is an accumulation of psychic energy. This energy is discharged in the muscular movement of laughter. On the one hand, the amusement associated with the comic derives from the saving of energy required for thought. On the other, the pleasure associated with humor comes from psychic energy used to repress hostile emotions. Joking, then, serves as a safety valve for forbidden sentiments and thoughts. It is only the pleasure of humor that may free people from expected suffering. Incongruity is essentially based on the idea that humor is found primarily in an intellectual perception of some absurd contradiction between conflicting expectations and outcomes. Experiencing some superiority is neither sufficient nor necessary to trigger laughter. However, seeing someone suffering from pain would drive us to experience sorrow more than amusement. Laughter derives from people's intellectual recognition of a contradiction or incongruity. One perfect example of such a point is found in jokes based on wordplay and unexpected endings. Francis Hutcheson, along with Immanuel Kant, Arthur

¹ *The British Medical Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2621 (Mar. 25, 1911), (710-711).

Schopenhauer, Soren Kierkegaard, René Descartes, and others are among the supporters of the incongruity theory. Most of the circumstances in which others witness powerlessness and misfortune are not viewed as funny [6]. A crime or a horrifying disaster afflicting another person does not necessarily trigger laughter. He affirms that it is not the handicap of others or some feeling of superiority that generates humor. It is the ability of the human mind to bring together a group of ideas and images which can beget conflicting thoughts. An incongruity is some kind of uncommon or surprising juxtaposition of events, objects, or thoughts. The essence of funniness is not obligatorily the accidental mistake of the object of laughter. Schopenhauer, a nineteenth-century German philosopher, theorizes humor as a conflict between thought and perception. He maintains that laughter usually takes place when our actual image of things is being deceived by an unexpected reality [7]. The reality we are confronted with is the source of humor because it creates incongruous shifts in our minds. He stipulates that “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity” (95). It is Schopenhauer’s view that there are two methods for understanding reality: through abstract concepts and through sense-perception. Humor derives from a perceived conflict between thought and perception. Laughter is the acknowledgment of an incoherency between one’s intellectual expectations and what is sensed by the senses to be the case [8]. A similar theoretical view has been expressed by Kant although the concept of incongruity to him varies from that of Schopenhauer, at least to some extent. Kant argues that the pleasure we experience in humor gives a wholesome shock to the body [9]. He provides an elaborative explanation stating that the pleasure found in jokes is based on intellectual frustration rather than intellectual contradiction. Frustration, according to Kant, is the appropriate term to be associated with intellectual expectations: “laughter is the expression of a kind of pleasure that derives from seeing thought frustrated by perception when expectation is contradicted by reality” (8). Kant focuses on the physical dimension of humor more than the mental one. The former is manifested through a certain ability of thought, as the engine of the physical action to expose organs to various motions. The body’s fluidity in moving from one thought to another is but a reflection of the flexibility of thought. He adds, “For if we assume that all our thoughts are, in addition, in a harmonious connection with some agitation in the body's organs, then we can pretty well grasp how, as the mind suddenly shifts alternately from one position to another to contemplate its object” (205). Although humor derives from the play of ideas, it is only our state of well-being and good health that guarantees our amusement. When receiving humor, people develop a set of expectations of how the story will end, but at the punch line all these expectations vanish [10]. Kant considers thought the engine of human senses and it is also responsible for various emotions. When these emotions are contradicted with a given reality, they finally create some frustration in mind and thought. While Kant focuses on the physical side of amusement, Hazlitt transcends this view to stress the mental aspect of it. First introduced by [11], the Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH) is exclusively considered the first theory with a linguistic dimension. Its main concern is verbal humor, especially written and spoken narratives or jokes with an introductory script and a punch line. It is meant to account for native speakers’ humor ‘competence’² [12] because native speakers can tell whether or not a joke or a text is funny. The linguistic script is defined as an organized chunk of

² The term competence is first introduced by Chomsky to denote the idea that only speakers of a particular language who can tell if a sentence belongs to the set of grammatical sentences and funny in the same time. Appreciation of funniness within a text depends on different variable among which is the grammaticality of the text itself .

information that surrounds the word; it is a sort of cognitive knowledge about the word not only as a lexical unit, but it covers every knowledge about the word as it exists in the world. Raskin suggests two essential conditions to produce humorous texts. He maintains that, “the text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different [semantic] scripts, the two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite [...] and the two scripts with which the text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part on this text” (99). In general, humor is evoked when the end of the joke presents some conflicting information compared to the ideas introduced previously, as in the following joke example: “Is the doctor at home?” the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. “No,” the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. “Come right in”. This joke contains two essential scripts. The first one belongs to the patient and the second one belongs to the lover. It is only the insertion of the word ‘whispered’ by the joke teller before the lover’s script that makes the joke meaningful. The shift from the first script to the second one is made smoothly by the ‘whispered’ reply of the ‘young and pretty wife’. Her reply makes sense in the script of the lover, whereas in the patient’s one, listeners never pay attention to such detail. Raskin elaborates more on this argument by presenting expanded analyses of other jokes, examining in each one of them how scripts both overlap and oppose each in different texts. However, it should be noted that the previous condition of opposition alone never guarantees the funniness of a specific text. The existence of two scripts opposing each other never guarantees humor because there are other variables that govern its production. One cannot merely juxtapose two incongruous things and call them a joke: the essence of the humorous is governed by finding a clever way of making them incongruous and humorous at the same time. To fulfill such an objective, Raskin presents various types of script opposition. A first list includes dichotomies such as: good/bad, life/death, obscene/non-obscene, money/no money, high/low stature, normal/abnormal, possible/impossible, actual/non-actual. Humor arises from that quick and sudden encounter of two ideas that do not fit with one another. A view that is explicitly expressed by Nerhardt [13], who views humor as the “consequence of the discrepancy between two mental representations, one of that is an expectation and the other is some other idea or a percept” (47). He emphasizes in his work that once recipients discover an incongruity in the joke, they immediately react to it with laughter. Joining Kant’s view of the main source of laughter, he thinks that everything intended to cause laughter must be something foreign and ridiculous. The ridiculous object in terms of incongruity, which emerges from the disappointment of a strained expectation, is the heart of humor. Regardless of the considerable amount of literature written on the incongruity theory, there undoubtedly exists more space for novice researchers to intervene with their academic initiatives to carry out more investigations on the nature of incongruity to explain the essence of humor, mainly in stand-up comedy. The argument advocated in this article draws initially on prior philosophical and theoretical stands. Nevertheless, incongruity here shall surpasses all that has been proposed earlier as it carries out an in-depth examination of new levels of incongruity by analyzing humorous excerpts from Carlin’s stand-up comedy. While initial analysis of incongruity defines it as the ability of humor creators to play with words to surprize receivers with inconsistent puns that surprisingly challenge their earlier vision of the world, the current version, however, transcends the linguistic layout, mainly the one stressed by Raskin and Attardo, and covers the ability of humorists to juxtapose familiar and ordinary experiences, actions, and practices in a way that they appear incongruous and hilarious.

Strictly, the real essence of the theory should not only be restricted to the violation of the receiver’s expectation via introducing some sort of surprising wordings or puns, but it should also take into consideration the ability of

humorists to render the ordinary life of people unordinary and call their quotidian practices into question, which most of the stand-up comedians actually do. It is not just the act of inserting some incompatible words at the end of every joke to deceive the receiver's expectation. It is the activity of, first, grouping a set of familiar and harmonious experiences and, second, introducing them as incongruous to one another by means of exaggeration, irony, and other techniques of humor creation mastered by stand-up practitioners. In other words, it is the humorist's capability to make the audience see what is correct as incorrect, normal as abnormal, true as false, white as black and eventually logical as illogical. A comprehensive understanding of incongruity should eventually transcend the traditional view that incongruity is a mere technique or a tool that humorists may resort to whenever they like to make their audience laugh. Incongruity reshapes people's vision of things through its critical and opposing dimensions of social practices, political opinions, and religious beliefs.

1.2. Analyzing Incongruity

Based on the various manifestation of this theoretical stand, the appreciation of any type of humor entails identifying some sort of contrariety [14]. For humor to take place, the audience needs to easily observe or perceive some incompatibility revealed by the text of humor or its denotation, as in the following joke example, Yesterday at school we celebrated my classmate Marcellina's birthday so I gave her a cherry and she kissed me to say thank you. Today I gave her a water-melon... But she didn't get it!

To understand and get the essence of humor in this joke, it is required to assign two incompatible interpretations to its text. The first one is an innocent and nonsexual implication revealed by the joke's set-up and the second one is sexual, emerging directly in the second script of the joke or the punch-line. This is the first level of contrariety in the joke. Lexically speaking, there are no antonyms in the joke, but the general build-up of its text systematically alludes to an easily perceived contrariety. A thorough analysis of certain aspects of these words undoubtedly proposes some hidden levels of this contrariety. Sexuality is implicitly manifested through the use of two different types of fruits: a watermelon and a cherry. Contrariety is achieved and supported by the features of seizing, weight and, with a lesser degree, color. While the speaker gives a small and light gift and gets a kiss, a big and heavy gift like a water-melon should automatically stimulate much more than a kiss. relationIf an easy and a quick detection of contrariety is what governs the appreciation of humor in a joke or any other type of comic production, then comedians need to be more selective in terms of the patterns they put in opposition to one another. Stand-up comedians use different methods when it comes to writing their bits. Unlike the double structure that is based on two opposing scripts: a set-up and a punch line, the form of the stand-up monologue is structured in different ways. Watching Carlin's routines, for instance, and paying attention not only to his separate gags but to the overall structure and flow of his bits, one may touch the intelligence embedded in his incomparable style. Carlin is among the few comedians in the US who used his provocative style of comedy and black humor³ to address different political matters and challenge the state's propaganda. Although his humor instigated controversy among the general American public, Carlin's thought-provoking views remarkably

³ Also called black comedy and dark humor, it is a type of humor that jokes about serious and painful topics, such as war, death and human suffering in general. The terms dark and black normally refer to the miserable aspects of human life or experience. Ironically, comedians use this genre of criticism in order to reflect on the inconsistencies of life.

contributed to culture and humanity in America and the rest of the world. His comedy managed to cross borders and to influence non-American people worldwide through the many translated versions of his sketches on the internet. He became a reference of wisdom and a pioneer of awareness among educated people. His comic quotes are strongly present in social media, offering a hefty dose of laughter, derision and reassurance. He dedicated his comedy to unveiling the contradictions and inconsistencies inherent in different life spectrums, negotiating untouched and sacred issues similar to religion, politics and language. Shock comics like Carlin use the stage to offend everyone in society, including laypeople and everyone responsible for corruption and disorder. His remarks on society, culture and language are sometimes out of the ordinary but he never hesitates to voice them on stage. While the whole community, for instance, rejects violence against women and considers rape as a crime that comedians should not joke about, Carlin plainly expresses a different point of view: A lot of groups, a lot of people in this country wanna tell you how to talk, tell you what you cannot talk about. They tell you that you can talk about something but you cannot joke about it. You cannot joke about it because it's not funny...like rape: you cannot joke about rape, rape is not funny. I say F*CK you. I think it is hilarious how do you like that (audience laughter)⁴. The humorous in this extract resides incumbently in how the comedians express their surprising line of thought, which wholesomely contradicts the general norms of the group. Although the role of comedians should not be restricted to or understood as that of challenging the general conventions, Carlin's declaration is blankly expressed without any censorship, in a democratic nation that grants its citizens the right to express themselves with fewer restrictions. Needless to say that not all comedians are granted the same space of liberty to express their thoughts the same as Carline does, which means that they should embrace other methods and pursue different processes to voice their attitudes. Carlin's relies heavily on rallying listeners around the focal struggles and issues in his society, like freedom of speech, racism, war and hegemony. His technique is effective because he draws on people's experience with the media and his interpretation of the political dimensions of worldwide American propaganda. In another sketch on war, Carlin declares that, We (Americans) like war, we like war [laughter], we're war like people, we like war because we are good at it [loud laughter]. You know why we are good at it because we got a lot of practice [loud laughter]. This country is only two hundred years old and already we have ten major wars [laughter]. We have an average of a war every twenty years in this country so we are good at it and it is a good thing we are [whistles]...we cannot educate our young people, we cannot get health care for old people but we can bomb the shit out of your country alright [loud laughter], especially if your country is full of brown people [loud laugh], oh we like that, don't we [whistles] That's our hobby. That's our new job in the world is bombing brown people [applause and whistles].⁵ Carlin's first commentary in his famous routine "we like war" clearly demonstrates his thought-provoking point of view concerning America's warlike tendency toward what it considers its traditional enemies. He did not comment on the country's intention to defend itself from opponents, but he criticizes its overindulgence in war to the extent that it renders Americans 'war like people'. Elements of surprise and exaggeration, which are the chief ingredients of incongruity, are highly present in the above sketch. One is to be courageous enough to surprise his listeners with such a heavy accusation. According to Carlin, a country with an average of a war every twenty years should be classified as a war-like nation and its people are nothing but

⁴ Owlwhite87. 'George Carline About Rape'. Online Video Clip. YouTube. YouTube, 1 May 2013. Web. 1 September 2018

⁵ Carlin George. "George Carline: We Like War" YouTube, commentary by Jammin'in New York , 5 September. 2013, youtu.be/fgAVpPNusTs.

lovers of war. The passage contains several aspects of incongruity as it tries to assemble many incompatible ideas and conflicting units in one language entity to create very funny jokes, especially when he declares that America cannot afford to educate young generations and guarantee good health insurance for old people. The same country is always ready to spoil big amounts of money in killing and ruining lives of innocent people somewhere else. The incongruity in Carlin's comedy manifests through the truths the comedian tells and the scary evil he unmasks about the real identity of his nation in contradiction to what its media propagates. Based on Raskin's semantic theory of verbal humor (SSTH), the above text is funny because, if analyzed in terms of one funny entity, there exists a 'script overlap' in the whole body of the funny text. This overlap does not necessarily mean that the words involved in humor creation are lexically antonymous. It is the whole block of words of the first script that should guide listeners or readers to an idea that is incompatible with another idea expressed by another body of words in the second script. As Dynel [15] puts it "The script encodes semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it and is defined as a cognitive structure internalized by the native speaker that represents the native speaker's knowledge of a small part of the world" (176). This statement confirms the idea that a script-overlap is better understood by the native speaker of the same language because they are endowed with the inherent mechanism to decode the underlying linguistic chunks of that script. Besides, some familiarity with the events taking place in a particular environment guides receivers into grasping the implicit information conveyed via funny messages.

Raskin provides a scrutinized examination of the (SSTH) considering it a linguistic analysis of his version of the incongruity. The central hypothesis of the (SSTH), according to Raskin, is as follows:

(107) a text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the conditions in (108) are satisfied.
(108) (i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts (ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite in a special sense defined in Section 4. The two scripts with which the text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part on this text. According to (107), therefore, the set of two conditions in (108) is proposed as the necessary and sufficient for a text to be funny. (99) Incongruity is better understood linguistically with the (SSTH) although the latter focuses only on the analysis of jokes, but it can be applied to different humorous texts such as stand-up comedy. Still, it should not be denied that stand-up comedy itself should be text-based before it is orally uttered or verbally articulated. Hence, the above text consists of many overlapping scripts of which every script is the set-up or the punch line of another one. The script 'we like war' initiates the funny monologue and attempts to rouse some background knowledge about war in the hearer's mind. This phrase is the joke's set-up because it provides some significant information by telling listeners that the idea of the coming monologue revolves around the subject of war. This script holds an oxymoron of two opposing words 'like' and 'war' and can be wholly understood as an incongruity. It is an incongruous declaration because it associates « like » verbiage associated with positivity and benefits with the word « war » which is typically associated with negativity and harm. Therefore, it is high time for him to profess on behalf of the rest of the community that Americans do like war. Incongruity resides in the performer's capability to render serious issues (like war and death) funny and aptly joke about them in front of the public. The normal order of things stresses the fact that people should and must hate war. But to instigate some inconsistency, the comedian initiates his monologue with a surprising declaration, which is "we like war". The two antonymous words 'can' and 'cannot' serve the contrariety in the next script and facilitate its resolution.

Comparison is among the techniques used by comics to highlight the commonalities and differences existing between two or more things. The intended message in Carlin's sketch is to reveal the moral corruption embedded in the political agendas of a country that is ready to supply big budgets for military services instead of educating its people and fighting social inequalities. For the comparison to be valid and appreciated by an audience it must be logical and based on common realities. Dynel puts shared knowledge at the heart of every successful type of communication between interlocutors. Speakers are advised to gauge their misinterpreted remarks as having serious and far-reaching implications to which listeners are not familiar. They should eventually be able to switch into a more sophisticated and playful mode of communication. Most Americans possess minimum knowledge of the history of their nation. They can react on what takes place around them. Contrarily, non-Americans are supposed to show less reactivity concerning what takes place in the US. As Dynel puts it, "real language data adduce evidence that human communication is replete with dubious cases and ambivalent communicative situations, irrespective of the level of familiarity between interlocutors, their mutual knowledge and common ground" (234). In other words, Comics are asked to put into consideration the fact that not all people can resolve an incongruous remark. There has been an academic debate recently as to what extent an incongruity alone is adequate for funniness. Among the persisting questions is what may happen if it is very easy or extremely difficult for listeners to resolve it. According to [16], "The usual statement of the incongruity-resolution (IR) model postulates that humour is created by a multistage process in which an initial incongruity is created, and then some further information causes that incongruity to be resolved" (1). This assumption explains that comedy does not only rest on the ability to present strong incongruities to an audience. The latter should be able to understand and resolve them first. This section suggests that any humorous situation or passage can be examined and analyzed in terms of having two main parts that are somehow incompatible. The introductory part is usually referred to as the set-up, and the second one is called the punch line, which may take the form of one word or a group of words. Ritchie suggests that, The set-up has two different interpretations, but one is much more obvious to the audience, who does not become aware of the other meaning. The meaning of the punch line conflicts with this obvious interpretation, but is compatible with, and even evokes, the other, hitherto hidden, meaning. (2) The punch line works more at the cognitive level as it enables our minds to allocate certain connections with the body of the joke, based on the information made available, and consequently achieve the intended response. However, the IR framework hinges sometimes on the ability of listeners to understand the ambiguity embedded in the words provided by the comedian. [17] Summarizes the measures required for humor to take place and for an incongruity to be resolved by the audience as follows:

This view of humour, in which incongruity resolution is both necessary and logically prior to the humorous effect, is predicated on the assumption that the punch line is sufficiently over-specified to force the listener to abandon a preferred interpretation in favour of a less likely one. (5) Accordingly, the effect expected from the joke ending rests on the accuracy of information presented in the set-up and the ability of receivers to dissect the intended message. The punch line, thus, should not be very simple or too difficult so that the audience gets humor. Another factor that is often discussed as being a significant ingredient in the process of incongruity resolution (IR) is predictability. Ritchie claims that there cannot be any violated expectation if there are no predictable results from the beginning. Jerry Suls (in Retchie 1999) adds that "Incongruity of the joke's ending refers to how much the punch line violates the recipient's expectations" (4). Hence, a quintessential condition

for the appreciation of incongruity is primarily based on the relative connectivity of the ending results with the expectations provided in the set-up of the funny text or joke. The punch line, “especially if your country is full of brown people”, is a strong joke ending that elicits a loud laughter response among the audience because it meets all the above-mentioned conditions. There is some background information and shared knowledge between speaker and audience concerning America’s opponents who are ‘brown’ people (using Carlin’s nomenclature). By using the word brown instead of black, the comic creates an element of surprise on the part of the audience. Carlin intends to use a rather soft and smooth expression instead of the familiar word ‘black’. However, the ‘incongruity resolution principle’ is achieved in this remark because the audience is aware that the word ‘brown’ has an implicit racist connotation more than what the original word ‘black’ may declare, and cannot, therefore, serve as an alternative. By the humorist’s profession that his country masters nothing but killing innocent people, mainly brown ones, he exercises a type of humor called self derogation, humor that departs from the deprecation and the criticism of the self. Indeed, being incongruous is somehow understood, throughout this article, as an invitation for comedians to think outside the box and be more controversial. Yet, this is not the intention here; some caution is mandatory, mainly that no matter how liberal society may appear, there are always uncountable moral barriers and off-limits. A quick scan of the comedic map in the US shows that many are stand-up comedians who practice the genre of shock and thought-provoking comedy, ranging from the founders of this style, Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor and Carlin to their predecessors Wanda Sykes, Eddie Griffin and Dave Chappell, to mention but a few. Similar to the effect of surprise, Shock is among the necessary conditions of humor incongruity, chiefly in stand-up comedy. However, the overuse of such type of humor can result in undesirable consequences, mainly if the comic discourse is linguistically aggressive and morally unacceptable. Carlin was subject to harsh and public criticism in 1972 after launching his famous routines “*Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television*”. Jerry Corley (2014)⁶, a former comedian and comedy teacher, states that “That bit not only got Carlin arrested but also got WBAI, an FM radio station in New York City, cited by the FCC for broadcasting “obscene” material”. Nevertheless, Corley proceeds, this sketch was one of the momentous bits in the history of the US because it challenged the linguistic conventions and the status quo, changing the decency laws in the following years after its release. Incongruity in Carlin’s comedy is built on uncovering maximum paradoxes and contradictions. One manifestation of this aspect is based on his view of religion, for example, which may seem bizarre to the public because Carlin does not believe in the existence of God and all religious and ideological claims are false allegation and their purpose is to control and shape the human mind. According to Carlin, Religion has actually convinced people that there is an invisible man [laughter], living in the sky, who watches everything you do every minute and every day, and the invisible man has a list of ten special things he do [sic.] not want you to do loud [laughter] and if you do any of these things he has a special place full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish [laughter] where he will send you to live and suffer and burn, and choke and scream and cry forever and ever till the end of time [loud laughter]. But he loves you [loud laughter and applaud] This sketch represents an excellent example of incongruity that makes fun of a revered topic in America and elsewhere. Unlike other people, namely those who believe in God, the comedian presents himself as someone who thinks outside the box,

⁶ “Master Word-Play Like George Carlin.” Stand Up Comedy Clinic, 14 Dec. 20
<https://www.standupcomedyclinic.com/master-word-play-like-george-carlin/>.

revealing all sorts of contradictions and corruption embedded in religion. Incongruity, however, is that he challenges their thoughts, providing tangible arguments to what he proclaims. Although Carlin's idea is threatening to the audience because it instigates a kind of repugnance against religious people, spectators join his line of thought and respond with laughter and applaud, demonstrating a complete sympathy with the comedian. Incongruity provides new patterns as alternatives to what people have ideologically accumulated through certain practices, but these new patterns should trigger laughter. Carlin's act, in this case, perfectly transcends this layout. It is not about being superior or ridiculing certain settled standards. It is about uncovering the inconsistencies and the contradictions inherent in belief and behavior. For Carlin, God cannot punish and love at one time. As stated earlier, the elements of shock and surprise are crucial for the laughter response and incongruity resolution. Carlin's repetition of some specific words and phrases such as 'invisible man', 'special', and the conjunction 'and' serve his comic strategy of being too direct to his audience. He supports the build-up of his routine by repeating a list of phrases with similar connotations to jock his audience at the end. This strategy of repetition is common in stand-up comedy as it enhances narrative fluidity. Performers usually resort to it to manipulate and stress either the importance or the triviality of an idea or object. Putting a sequence of words such as fire, smoke, burning, torture and anguish together is meant to elicit feelings of fear and anguish in the minds of listeners and to get them ready for the punch line (but he loves you). Carlin's style of performing stage comedy is unique because he plays on his remarkable pace of speech and intelligent selection of words. The audience needs to focus on every single remark said throughout the whole show; otherwise it is hard to grasp the intended message due to the particularities embedded in the comedian's word streaming. This type of stand-up comedy needs a lot of practice and intellectual aptitude. To conclude, the comedian's monologue plays a significant role in how the audience reshapes a considerable amount of mental representations. Normally, human beings possess millions of intellectual representations in their minds. The stable ones, argues Francisco Yus⁷, acquire certain legitimacy because of the possibility of communicating them to other individuals of the same group or community. These are finally referred to as cultural representations, which can be transmitted from one generation to another or across the population (e.g., modern clothing styles and fashion trends). Comedians, however, seek to challenge and question the mythical and imaginary dimension of these ideologies (like those of religion mentioned above) through exposing them to concrete tests and rational assessments. Theaters represent comedy venues in which people assemble to assess the quality of their mental concepts as opposed to the approaches suggested by the comedian. Stand-up comedy is an artistic production that seeks to evoke new mental representations via the process of negotiating existing ones. It is finally by using incongruity that comedians achieve these contrastive dimensions and, thus, establish new modes of life.

⁷ Yus, Francisco. "Dave Allen's Stand-up Monologues: An Epidemiological Approach." *Academia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/2014718/Dave_Allen_s_stand-up_monologues_An_epidemiological_approach. Retrieved 13 November 2019.

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