IT’S NOT FUNNY: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SEXISM IN STAND-UP

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IT’S NOT FUNNY: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SEXISM IN STAND-UP

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................3

LITERATURE REVIEW ..................................................................................................5

BACKGROUND ..............................................................................................................14

DATA & ANALYSIS .....................................................................................................16

CONCLUSIONS ............................................................................................................26

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................29
Introduction

Over the past several years, there have been reports on numerous news outlets and social media platforms of various individuals in the public eye who are accused of sexual misconduct. From Hollywood to the White House to the Catholic church, there are cases of male public figures who have been reported to have sexually harassed or assaulted individuals; figures like Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, Ira Silverstein, Charlie Rose, Bryan Singer, the list goes on into several hundred who have been accused just in the last three years (Carlsen, et al 2018). With the Brett Kavanaugh case still on many Americans minds, it is evident that something has to be done. This led me to wonder what I might do, as a human being, an anthropologist, a peace and conflicts scholar, someone who has always had passion for social justice, and as a woman.

Throughout my studies, the question of whether human beings are innately violent has been brought to my attention in multiple different contexts. For example, studies in biological anthropology uncovering the social patterns of our relative forest apes, including chimpanzees and bonobos, anthropologists better understand the social behaviors of human beings. By studying the various ways in which human beings interact, both in social patterns, and language patterns and variation, researchers uncover truths about human beings and their aptitude for violence.

Sociological and cultural linguistics have uncovered truths about human interaction, social structures, and cultural practices. In a study by Anthropologist Clayton A. Robarcheck (1979), which I will discuss more in-depth as part of my analysis later on, examines the peaceful society of the Semai of Malaysia, Southeast Asia. In his study, he looks at the types of linguistic features, but also the importance of speech to Semai people. Through research such as Robarcheck’s and other linguists, the answer to whether human beings are innately violent, or at least how one society can avoid violence, can be revealed.
For my research, I have aimed at doing the reverse of Robarcheck’s studies; instead of studying a peaceful society to uncover truths about humanity, I will be studying a violent society to uncover truths, namely US American society. In this thesis, I will be doing a discourse analysis of two stand-up comedians over the course of their careers as comedians, these two being men who have been confirmed to have, or convicted for, committing acts of violence and sexual assault against multiple women. I ask: What can we learn about the relationship between violent acts and language through an examination of the speech of these two men? I chose stand-up comedy as my ‘field’ for researching violence because it is a unique platform that often reflects social norms and ideals, acting as a sort of mirror, and acts as a real time study which is beneficial to sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropology research. Using the cases of comedians Louis C.K. and Bill Cosby, one admitting to acts of sexual violence, the other imprisoned for sexual violence, I will argue that it is not always possible for the absence or presence of violent language to indicate whether an individual is violent or not. Rather, I will find that with C.K. and Cosby, while the latter being the more subdued and the former being the more vulgar, the language used by both comedians is still reflect of Western social ideals such as sexism. The comedian Hannah Gadsby in her award-winning comedy special Nanette articulates that “a joke is simply two things, it needs two things to work; a set-up and a punch line. And it is essentially a question with a surprise answer” (Gadsby 2018). Throughout this thesis, I will also attempt to show how, with the present political climate along with movements such as #MeToo, there is a prudent shift occurring in stand-up comedy away from the traditional and toward comedic story telling. I argue, however, that this reformation cannot occur without the analysis of the old ways of comedy.

My methods for the analysis of these two comedians and the presence of violent language will be as follows: I will first look at various clips of standup comedy shows performed by both
comedians over the course of their career. I will then dissect and home in on instances in their shows where they either explicitly talk about women and sexual relationships with women (this is more common with Louis C.K.), or more passive or even metaphorical instances for their relationship with women (which is more common with Bill Cosby). I will then give some general background on Louis C.K. and Bill Cosby, the allegations made and the confirmation to some of those accusations. I will then explain the level of relatability in both comedians over time, and how this relatability ties them together as comedians, and then explain how their actual vernacular and discourse surrounding women makes them different. I will use their relatability and discourse surrounding women to argue that violent language, or a lack thereof, does not always indicate violent actions. Finally, I will discuss the importance of this research and how it can be applied to further research in both the fields anthropology and peace and conflict studies.

Literature Review

1. Seth Holmes and Symbolic Violence

In his ethnography *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States* (2013), Seth Holmes goes into explicit detail on both the experiences of Oaxacan migrant farm workers on a Washington state strawberry farm, and his own experiences. This ethnography is an accumulation of in-depth research, both from his own studies, both medical and anthropological, and different social and anthropological theories. Holmes draws on his M.D. to see the effects that farm labor has on the body and uses his background in Anthropology to understand the wear and tear as from both strenuous work and structural and symbolic violence. Holmes discovers that some of the most damaging forms of violence against the migrant farmworkers is not by any direct physical abuse, but the systematic acts of violence, both structural and symbolic. Holmes uses Pierre Bourdieu’s term ‘symbolic violence’, which he defines as the “internalization and
legitimization of hierarchy” (Holmes 2013, 89). He explains this internalization is violence because it is the reason why individuals in a society perceive social structure and inequalities as natural and, therefore, indiseous. Holmes uses an anthropological notion of ‘embodied anthropology’ to further comprehend and study the various ways in which the migrant farmworkers experience life as a migrant farmworker, from the actual manual labor, to healthcare (or a lack thereof), to living arrangements and socialization. Holmes describes ‘embodied anthropology’ as the use of one’s body and mind as a medium of studying the informant’s world. Throughout this text, Holmes draws on his auto-ethnographies from his travels across the border to further illustrate that migrating to the US for many Mexicans is not a choice, but rather their only option for survival.

For my own research, I will be using symbolic violence since it is a framework that can help dissect the perpetuation of gendered norms in everyday discourse. Holmes does a fantastic job at applying such terms and structural violence, symbolic violence, and habitus in a way that is applicable and understandable to the reader. Holmes has a very distinct writing style which allows the reader to comprehend his ethnographies content easily, while also using explicit anthropological vernacular in his writing. Holmes use of his journals throughout his ethnography gave a different tone than other ethnographies I have read, which I think will be useful in my own writing, which is drawing on personal anecdotes and my own understanding of how sexism and gendered norms has affected my own life, and the women in my life.

While Holmes does a thorough analysis in his ethnography of race, age, immigration status, socioeconomic class, he lacks in his content of gender inequality. He touches on gender only a few times throughout, and I would argue that this ethnography would have benefitted from a chapter on intersectionality and how gender is a factor of structural and symbolic violence for migrant
workers as well. In my own research, I will be drawing on Kimberle Crenshaw’s (1989) term intersectionality to better understand the multidimensional aspects of personhood and how different identities can marginalize a person depending on which marginalized identity is being targeted (Crenshaw 1989).

II. Mary Bucholtz on Discourse and Conversation Analysis

Linguist Mary Bucholtz (2003) provides a useful model for using discourse analysis as a method for studying gender in language, and how to apply that methodology to gender studies. Bucholtz defines discourse in a formal linguistic way, comparing it to syntax and morphology, that if morphology is “the level of language in which sounds are combined into words, and syntax is the level in which words are combined into larger units”, then that makes discourse the “level in which words are combined into sentences” (Bucholtz 2003, 44). She also gives an alternative definition, plainly putting discourse as language in context, ergo how it is used in society. Bucholtz assesses that the study of discourse and gender has no explicit guideline for how to approach discourse and gender together, however, she uses a qualitative approach to discourse analysis primarily. Bucholtz names four different research traditions of discourse analysis, for which I will be focusing on the first: the anthropological tradition which focuses on cultural practices, including ethnography of communication and interactional sociolinguistics, for which I will be focusing on the former.

Bucholtz does a well-rounded analysis of all forms of discourse and gender studies, critiquing and pointing out the positives of each framework. She gives a wide range of examples of each, drawing in specific experts in each field. Bucholtz is detailed yet concise in her writing, and explains different concepts thoroughly, giving a lot of useful information for this thesis. Bucholtz has a substantial section on critical discourse analysis, that I will also be using as a framework,
which draws on Marxist and post-structuralist theories of language and studies the production and perpetuation of ideologies in language.

III. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Intersectionality, and Other Feminist Theories

Since my research is surrounding women and the sexist speech used when referring to women that is found in comedy, I found it important to include a discussion of women with a multitude of identities. Human beings, as a species, are complex and multidimensional, especially when one considers the complexity of an individual’s identity. Each individual has a multitude of identities, for which some can change within a lifetime, or even in a matter of a few days. There becomes the issue, however, that one’s identity is not solely based on their own perception of themselves, but also upon the world’s perception of that individual. For my research, I will be focusing mainly on the identity that is perceived by the world, not an individuals’ self-identification.

A person’s identity, as supposed by the community of that individual, dictates a significant amount of their position in that community. If a person is perceived to be an immigrant, or a woman, or homosexual, or a Christian, there are certain implications for that in a set community. The issue here, however, is that one person can be an immigrant, while also being a woman, a lesbian, and a Christian. These social identities determine how other people, and the institutions this person exists within, either accept or oppress that individual. Because my research is on comedians from the United States of America, I will be focusing on feminist theories that were constructed in the same community of practice.

There are two fundamental theorists that have played a significant role in my construction of critical feminist thought: bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw, professor at UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School, coined the term intersectionality, which I will be
discussing in the majority of this section. The concept is essential for any anthropologist who wishes to understand the complexity of social identities as a whole.

Gloria Jean Watkins, known by her pen name bell hooks, an author, feminist, social activist and professor at University of Southern California, also plays a significant role in the foundation of my research. Her book *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (2015) is an inspiration to many and discusses topics for which she builds off of in later works, including but not limited to the idea of the “white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy”. This term that bell hooks coins is used to “remind us continually of the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality” (hooks 1997, 7). The following is excerpt is from her book, where she criticizes white feminists for further reproducing the systems of oppression that they claim to reject:

> Although white feminists denounced the white male, calling him an imperialist, capitalist, sexist, racist pig, they made women’s liberation synonymous with women obtaining the right to fully participate in the very system they identified as oppressive (hooks 2015, 188-189)

This theory will assist in describing the ways in which society in the U.S. is multifaceted and often, these ‘systems of domination’ work together to oppress various people in different ways.

Another social theorist who describes the complexity of social identity is educator and author Jackson Katz, Ph.D., who co-founded the Mentors in Violence Prevention, a program designed to prevent gender violence. Katz discusses in a Tedtalk the struggles of using the term gender, or race, or sexuality by illustrating that a person of the dominant group is ignored when using such terms, “as if white people don’t have some sort of racial identity […] as if heterosexual people don’t have a sexual orientation” (Katz 2012, 1:26). This is crucial to talks of identity since ignoring the dominant group as an identity in and of itself only further maintains and reproduces these systems of dominance, this white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy we exist within. By ignoring
the dominant group as an identity, it subverts any chance of equality and retribution for those who have acts of violence committed against them by individuals and institutions.

The work of both Katz and bell hooks leads to an important term for my research, namely intersectionality. Crenshaw coined the term in a paper entitled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989). In this paper, Crenshaw argues that the violence that Black women experience is not simply because they are Black, or the fact that they are women, but because they exist as a combination of the two. Crenshaw uses her law background to recount instances in which antidiscrimination law lacks a multi-axis framework to view instances of discrimination. She does an immensely thorough job at describing each case and giving context to and critiquing the different ways in which feminist theory and antiracist politics also uses a single-axis framework. Continuing on with themes from the work of both hooks and Katz, Crenshaw also states that there is “the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (Crenshaw 1989, 139). Throughout this article, she reiterates that human beings are multidimensional, and this single-axis framework that is still being used to describe the experiences of multidimensional persons, distorts their experiences and misses a key part of oppression.

In many different fields, especially in the social sciences, there are a multitude of blind spots which make the study of the human person only partially achievable, this single-axis framework of human identity being one of them. In order to study women and their experiences to the fullest extent, I need to first take into account the varying experiences of the women of different social identities, especially those identities that are different from my own. My only critique of this article is that Crenshaw focuses only on Black women, and does not discuss the other identities that can
intersect with the identity of Black women, including, but not limited to also being queer, Muslim, immigrant, lower class, differently-able bodied, etc. I do not heavily critique this, however, mostly because the issue of single-axis framework used to examine issues of Black women could create a whole book of content, but also since she specializes in race and gender in her law practice.

III. Elaine Chun’s Analysis of Margaret Cho

Linguist Elaine W. Chun (2004) examined comedian Margaret Cho and her use of “Mock Asian” in her stand-up comedy. Her work aims to understand the “multiple meanings of a linguistic practice that is sometimes controversial” (Chun 2004, 264), namely a stand-up comedy show by a Korean American comedian who uses the so called ‘Chinese accent’ to mock. In this article Chun looks at two of Margaret Cho’s performances, namely Drunk with Power (Cho 1996) and I’m the One that I Want (Cho 2001), for which Chun goes through and types the instances of Cho’s use of Mock Asian through phonetic, phonological, syntactic, lexical, and discourse features. Chun uses the term Mock Asian to describe the instances of the ‘Chinese accent’ used by Cho when portraying a character of a stereotypical Asian identity. Chun’s goal is not to “label Cho’s practices as exclusively either racist or subversive,” but rather she seeks to “understand the multiple meanings of a linguistic practice that is sometimes controversial” (Chun 2004, 264).

Chun does a good job at giving solid background into linguistics, as well as studies similar to her own. At the very start, Chun gives significance to her article in the first sentence of the introduction, giving both context and legitimacy. She links Mock Asian to Jane Hill’s (1998) use of Mock Spanish to illustrate how racialized these patterns of speech, the so called ‘Chinese accent’, truly are. Chun describes how voicings of Mock Asian are not the same as Mock Spanish, for which she notes can be found in advertising and public speeches, Mock Asian is either very frowned upon or too subtle to be characterized as Mock Asian (she gives the example of ‘well-
meaning’ non-Asian adults saying *nihao* or *konnichiwa* towards those of Asian descent) (Chun 2004). Chun also references works by sociolinguists Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu, specifically she mentions Bourdieu’s theory on *habitus* (Chun 2004).

Chun makes the assumption for this paper that Cho’s performance, and others like it, depend on certain “ideologies of membership and language practice” that are depended on by speakers in everyday context (Chun 2004, 265). These consistencies are vital to Cho’s performance so that her audiences can construe her practices as amusing, but more significantly, so they are viewed as legitimate. This is important to my research because it shows how the audience is in charge of what the comedian is allowed to say, not by any written rule, but by social acceptance. The comedian is seen as a legitimate source for commentary or use of a certain topic when they are perceived to follow certain standards of what a typical member of a particular community looks like, which is often based on stereotypes (Chun 2004). Chun’s understanding of comedy helps with my comprehension of the comedian/audience dynamic and how complex and important that relationship is.

My biggest complaint of this article is how it starts out. It took several attempts at reading and rereading the first two pages to fully understand exactly what it was she was referring to in her studies. This would not have been a problem for someone who is both a linguist and who is familiar with Margaret Cho’s standup, the latter being the larger issue for myself. One of the bigger issues is her lack of clear definition of *Mock Asian* which she uses almost every other sentence and is the purpose of this article. She does give some indication of what she means when she refers to as Mock Asian in the introduction, but this still does not make it clear what specifically she was referring to. Chun also leaves out a definition in her abstract, nor does she name which comedian
she is studying either (although the title does contain ‘Margaret Cho’, it would be beneficial to name Cho in the abstract).

The examples that Chun uses throughout the article are in-depth and beneficial, especially with her use of charts of phonological, phonetic, and syntactic features, which help with visualization. Chun’s analysis is well rounded and detailed; she is critical and concise, while maintaining an understanding of Cho and her quest for dismantling of Asian marginalization in the United States. Chun calls out Cho for using Mock Asian, catering to racist stereotypes often held by European American audience members (Chun 2004). At the same time, Chun acknowledges that Cho is attempting to disassemble the marginalization of Asians.

Something I admire about Chun is her intentional use of language throughout this article, not just with her linguistic vernacular. In every instance where she brings attention back to Cho being Asian, she adds the line “according to most racial ideologies” to emphasis the identity aspect of Asian-ness. She is taking out the assumption that Cho identifies as Asian, although it would not be absurd to assume such a thing. Nevertheless, Chun is drawing attention to the point of ‘Asian’ being a label often times pushed upon an individual of East Asian descent, and seldom given to those of South of West Asian descent. I will be drawing mostly from her critiques of Cho’s mock Asian as being problematic for its reproduction of stereotypes.

Chun concludes that identity and social positioning play a large role in what is considered legitimate comedy. She found that the issue the audiences perceiving Cho as a legitimate user of mock Asian is it reinforces stereotypes and ideologies of what being Asian looks like (Chun 2004). And while Cho is actively poking fun at societal and American cultural ideologies, namely racism, she is still reinforcing these same ideologies to some degree. This understanding of such a
relationship is vital to my research; the ways in which stand up, especially that of such a famed 
comedian, can reinforce socio-cultural ideologies, even those they are trying to push back against.

**Background**

Bill Cosby and Louis C.K. are two comedians who have been accused and are confirmed 
to have sexually assaulted several women. By sexual assault, I mean sexual misconduct of a sexual 
nature, or rather some form of physical, sexual act, that was done toward peers and colleagues. In 
the following section, I will be addressing each comedian, the accusations made against them, and 
the outcome of these cases. In doing so, I will be laying out the purpose for choosing such 
comedians in my analysis of their comedy shows as examples of how physical violence can be 
linked to verbal violence.

An article written by Carly Mallenbaum, Patrick Ryan and Maria Puente from USA Today 
lists the sixty accusers of Bill Cosby and their reactions to his prison sentence. Model Pamela 
Abeyta who claims to have been drugged in 1979 and woke up “in Cosby’s bed with two other 
naked people” (Mallenbaum et al, 2018). When I say allegations, it is not for a lack of belief in 
these women and their stories. However, many of these assaults did occur twenty, thirty years ago 
and no longer have physical evidence to prove they happened necessarily. Former bartender Janice 
Baker-Kinney, who testified against Cosby during the trial in April 2018, was also drugged and 
raped.

Jewel Allison, a poet, author, and graduate from New York University, wrote an article for 
the Washington Post about her experience, why she stayed silent, and what encouraged her to 
finally come forward (Allison 2015). She explains that the reason why she never came forward 
originally because she “didn’t want to let black America down” (Allison 2015). This article really
points to the difficulties surrounding sexual assault and rape. In another article from the Washington Post, Andrew Van Dam reports that only “about 0.7 percent of rapes and attempted rapes end with a felony conviction for the perpetrator” (Van Dam 2018). This miniscule number is only a fraction of a fraction, since the number of sexual assaults that are actually reported is only about twenty-three percent (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, 2019).

Cosby became one of the less than one percent in 2018 when he was convicted for the sexual assault of the former Temple University employee Andrea Constand back in 2004, for which he was sentenced three to ten years in prison (Bowley et al, 2018). I contend that this sentence was only possible because of the five additional women who testified, along with the numerous others who came forward, which would not have been made known if it weren’t for the scale of the trial in the public eye.

Not long after news broke of the first Harvey Weinstein accusations, five women, mostly comedians, came forward about their own sexual assault stories; this time they were reports of comedian Louis C.K. (Grady 2018). These women all have a theme in their stories, making it difficult to deny their potential credibility. Two of the women, Dana Min Goodman and Julia Wolov, reported to the New York Times that in 2002 C.K. invited them to his room after their show for a night cap. When he asked if he could take out his penis, the women passed it off as a joke, but he proceeded to take out his penis, strip completely naked, and start to masturbate (Ryzik et al, 2017). All of the later accusations surrounded accounts of him masturbating, whether over the phone or in person, with or without consent. C.K. denied commenting at first, but he eventually broke down and wrote out a statement in which he confirms their stories. He wrote, in part:

These stories are true. At the time, I said to myself that what I did was O.K. because I never showed a woman my dick without asking first, which is also true. But what I learned later in life, too late, is that when you have power over another person, asking them to look at your dick isn’t a question. It’s a predicament for them.
power I had over these women is that they admired me. And I wielded that power irresponsibly. I have been remorseful of my actions. And I’ve tried to learn from them (C.K. 2017).

I appreciate that he came forward and turned these women’s allegations into confirmed accounts, helping to change and move past the stigma surrounding sexual assault and rape. When women come forward with such accounts, they often get reduced to ‘accusation’ or ‘story’.

I chose the instances of Louis C.K. and Bill Cosby for this thesis because there is proof to the words of women, that they are not ‘making it up’ for attention or fame. Additionally, because I now know that these men have committed acts of sexual assault, I can make a more precise analysis of these men and attempting to link violent language and violent acts.

Data Section and Analysis

1. Peace is Possible

In their critique of biological determinism, or the idea that human behavior is driven entirely by genetics, anthropologists Signe Howell and Roy Willis (1989) write “it is undeniably the case that in Western society, aggression is regarded as part of human nature. But perhaps this tells us more about Western society than about human nature” (2). This conclusion can be further made clear by the research of Clayton A. Robarcheck, an anthropologist who studies various peaceful societies. Robarcheck’s research shows how beneficial it is to study societies more peaceful than our own to understand that human beings are not innately violent, at least not entirely; it is evident that language, however, plays a fundamental role in a society’s ability for peace, or lack thereof (Robarcheck 1979). Robarcheck spent several years living with and studying the peaceful society of the Semai Senoi people of Southeast Asia. In his research, Robarcheck revealed that Semai people only rarely experience conflict, including physical violence and that this lack of physical violence is reflected in their language through X and Y. From a young age, they are taught that
anger is synonymous with death, and to avoid all conflicts in most cases. If there is a conflict between two people, or two groups, they are all brought together in the becharaa, which seems to be a blend between a committee meeting and a therapy session. The becharaa is where these individuals work out their issues and “is not finished as long as the conflict can still bring out any emotions in anybody” (Sørensen 2007, 405).

Robarchek’s research suggests that the way in which the Semai language describes anger, violence, and conflict is not the same as in Western resolution literature (Sørensen 2007). The significance of such a case is that Semai people are a unique instance in which the discourse surrounding conflict is fundamental to the absence of conflict in their society; they discuss their conflicts away until there is no longer conflict, and therefore have no need for violence.

While sexual violence and physical violence amongst others as a result of conflict are two different cases of violence, they both have one thing in common, as do all forms of violence: justification. In order for any act of violence to appear legitimate or socially acceptable, one must be able to justify it, usually through some variation of the idea that the ends justify the means. For example, murder is almost always seen as immoral, but often this is only the case for those considered within the community and does not apply to outsiders. Other special cases for murder may include the legitimate execution of criminals, or murder as self-defense. The reason why murdering outsiders is often not viewed as immoral is because outsiders are dehumanized. Dehumanization has been a successful tool in propaganda campaigns for more than one hundred years, allowing politicians to push their agendas and manipulate individuals to do their bidding, such as posters used in the Yellow Peril in the Western world (Kim 2013). Dehumanization is effective and enables individuals to look past the person in their victims and allows them to commit
acts of violence; a key aspect of dehumanization as a tool for manipulation can be found in the discourse and rhetoric used.

1. Comedians and Relatability

A fundamental part of comedy as a major entertainment venture has to do with a certain level of relatability; if the comedy isn’t relatable, it isn’t seen as funny and therefore is not a successful piece of comedy. This is not always the case, as is the instance of English comedian James Acaster (2018), who makes a lot of jokes on the basis of not being relatable, but then again it is often his quirkiness that makes him relatable to other quirky and standalone individuals. Regardless, most comedians err on the side of caution when it comes to choosing their comedic content and pick jokes that can get the most laughs from the greatest number of people and so they pick relatable topics. American Studies scholar Lawrence E. Mintz, (1985) explores the importance of comedy, specifically standup, in determining what social norms ought to be. In his brief history of standup comedy, he mentions the works of anthropologists Mary Douglas on public joking in Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology (1978) and Victor Turners on plural reflexivity in “Frame Flow, and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality” (1977). He applies Douglas’ work in regards with her view of the joking activity as rite and anti-rite, “or as public affirmation of shared cultural beliefs and as a reexamination of these beliefs” (Mintz 1985, 73). Mintz continues to explain the following:

She notes that the structure of jokes tends to be subversive; in other words, jokes tear down, distort, misrepresent, and reorder usual patterns of expression and perception. Yet she also agrees with Viktor Turner that the experience of public joking, shared laughter, and celebration of agreement on what deserves ridicule and affirmation fosters community and furthers a sense of mutual support for common belief and behavior (hence rite) (Mintz 1985, 73)

Mintz continues to explain Turners’ concept of “plural reflexivity” which can be applied to describe the relationship between the comedian and the audience in which the comedian can push
boundaries as far as the audience will allow, which is true for any form of art. In a sense, standup comedy is both policed and polices others, while also remaining relatable to the audience. Mintz’s thoughts, along with these anthropologists’ research, exposes the complexity of standup comedy; standup has a purpose beyond making people laugh. I would argue that all forms of comedy, to some extent, act as a way to open a discourse about the amazing and most horrendous aspects of life in a humorous manner. Unlike TEDx, news shows, or YouTube commentary, comedy brings up a topic in a lighthearted way in order to open dialogue without feeling too heavy, and often makes the audience think about a topic or aspect of life in a different way than they normally would. Comedians, however, cannot speak about just any topic, at least if their goal is to evoke laughter. A comedians’ topic must be carefully chosen; it must mean something to that comedian and to their audience, additionally, the comedian must find a way to approach discussion of this topic in a way that the audience will find humorous. The two comedians I will be focusing on in this thesis will be no exception.

There is, however, an issue with these comedic rules. These guidelines make it so that the comedian must, in some respect, reflect the ideals of their society or culture. The comedian is allowed to poke and prod at those social norms that are shifting or becoming less ideal but are not allowed to question or make fun of those norms which that society holds dear. This indicates that any joke which is successful, i.e. results in laughter, is one which the group, the society, or culture, deems acceptable to be discussed in a joking manner. The implications of this are that the topic is either not deemed serious or stagnant enough, or it is considered to be one that needs to be reconsidered by the general population.

I mention these issues with the rite, the “public affirmation of shared cultural beliefs”, and the anti-rite, or the “reexamination of these beliefs” because they reveal something about the comedian
and the audience (Mintz 1985, 73). This is important to my examination of Bill Cosby and Louis C.K., especially in his standup special *Louis C.K.: Shameless*, because of what both comedians are allowed to discuss in their standup specials. Louis C.K. begins his standup special ‘strong’ with a crass bit about wanting to beat his supposed friend to death with a pipe and proceeding to “jerk off on his corpse”, he then starts a bit on Hitler (C.K. 2007). C.K. continues the joke about his annoying friend who mentions that if this friend had a time machine, he would go back and kill Hitler. C.K. proceeds to say that he would not kill Hitler, he “would’ve raped him” because as C.K. explains, “if he would have been raped by me, he never would have pulled any of that stuff, man” (C.K. 2007). C.K. states that if someone had asked Hitler if he wanted to invade Poland, after being raped by C.K., Hitler would have simply replied “No, I’ll take a shower. I don’t feel good” (C.K. 2007).

This joke is problematic not simply because he is making a joke about raping someone, which is grotesque and heinous, he is also using vocabulary that is reflexive to that of rape culture. As Sharna Olfman, professor of clinical and developmental psychology at Point Park University in Pittsburgh, puts it, rape culture is “a culture in which rape is pervasive, prevalent, and normalized through societal attitudes about gender, sex, and sexuality” (Olfman 2009, 9). With his use of ‘I don’t feel good’ as a comment for someone who has just experienced sexual assault, he is delegitimizing the trauma that the act of rape has on its victims; in this simple phrase, Louis C.K. is completely ignoring the long term affects that sexual assault has on its victims and it is not okay. This phrase is reflexive of not only the values in rape culture, but also his own values. Through this statement, I would argue that he is justifying sexual violence against others not because sexual assault is deemed okay, but because it is viewed as ‘not as bad’ as victims report it to be because
it is only viewed in terms of its immediate affects. Louis C.K. takes this joke a step further with this statement:

I’m not condoning rape, obviously. You should never rape someone. [short pause] Um, unless you have a reason, like you want to fuck somebody, and they won’t let you. In which case, uh, what other option do you have? (Louis C.K. 2007)

While I acknowledge that this comment is a joke by a very crass comedian who is known to say the most outrageous jokes in an attempt to have to evoke shock from his audience, I was also dumbfounded by the amount of laughter this whole joke induced from the audience. There are several factors that may play into the reaction that this joke aroused; the misunderstanding of what constitutes rape, the lack of an understanding of the affects sexual assault has on its victims, i.e. an ignorant audience. I would also like to add that this type of comment is present throughout this special. It is not so much what he says, but that he is even making a joke about rape at all. Perhaps I would feel differently about such jokes if he had never committed acts of sexual violence.

At one point and time, I was a fan of C.K.’s comedy, at least how he was on more restricted platforms such as on late night talk shows or Saturday Night Live. After reading articles about how he wrote a post on social media admitted to committing the acts those five women came forward with, it is hard to believe that he truly understands the effect sexual assault has on its victims and what is classified as consent.

This ignorance parallels with a study published by Psychologists Sarah R. Edwards et al. (Edwards, et al. 2014), which aims to find answers to the high rates of sexual assault on college campuses in the United States. In this study, the researchers distributed surveys to eighty-six college males to determine their views on rape. When asked whether these men had ever intended to rape a woman if there would be no consequences, such as institutional or legal repercussions, 13.6% admitted they would. While this number should be zero, it is a relatively realistic number
considering the number of actual rapes that occur on college campuses. However, when they were asked whether they would act on “intentions to force a woman to sexual intercourse”, 31.7% of men said they would (Edwards, et al. 2014). This suggests that a potential 18% of these men do not know that rape is forcing an individual to have sexual intercourse, which is only an addition to the supposed grey-area that is what qualifies as consent. While this study is limited in its number, it does point to problems within rape culture and its understanding of what is classified as rape, other forms of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and the lack of acknowledgement of power relationships that are present in patriarchal societies. This study also brings light to the fact that these men do not understand that there are still consequences to rape, whether they are directly upon themselves or not. The themes from this study correspond with the dialogue throughout Louis C.K.’s standup special *Louis C.K.: Shameless*, and what seems to be a lack of an understanding for what classifies as sexual assault, and the implications sexual assault has.

As I mentioned previously, I acknowledge that this is a standup special and, as such, should “not be taken seriously”; however, I argue that C.K.’s work should be taken seriously after he has been, in fact, confirmed to have sexually assaulted several peers and colleagues through the years. And while none of what he articulates in this special can draw a direct line to violent sexual acts he may have done, I do hold that what he communicates in his comedy is a justification for sexual violence and disregard for those who have experienced sexual violence of any kind. I conclude that this dialogue may coincide with how he justified the sexual violence he himself committed against his peers and colleagues.

II. The Damaging Effects of Language

It is difficult to draw many parallels between the comedy of Louis C.K. and that of Bill Cosby. Both are renowned comedians, winning multiple awards and influencing many. Both have
had their own television productions and have been very successful, and both have been confirmed to have committed acts of sexual violence against women. In terms of their comedy however— their style, types of jokes, target audience, etc.—seem to be almost at odds. They are, however, two men who were raised in a society in which men hold the power and women do not; a society that values men over women. While C.K. spent some early years in Mexico, both comedians spent the majority of their upbringing in the U.S., framing their vernacular to match that of those in their communities at that time.

In part of my analysis of various Louis C.K. and Bill Cosby’s standup comedy shows, I rely heavily on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and Elaine Chun’s research mentioned previously on mock Asian and its relation to identity theory. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also called the linguistic relativity hypothesis, or linguistic determinism, was built off of works by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, Sapir’s student (Kay 1984). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that the language one speaks either determines or strongly influences thought and decisions (Kay 1984). While Sapir’s and Whorf’s research were surrounding translations and terms for colors, there is a quote by Sapir from his 1929 work "The status of linguistics as a science", Sapir explains that “no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached” (Sapir 1929, 209). If at least a relaxed version of linguistic relativity is to be accepted, then it would follow that some of the thought processes of human beings are influenced by the native language of that person, meaning the language that person speaks creates the lens for which that person views the world. I argue that it isn’t simply the language that the speaker uses which influenced thought, but specifically the rhetoric surrounding certain aspects of human existence which influences, and sometimes limits, world view. In this case, the language
these comedians are speaking (English) and the rhetoric surrounding women can influence the speaker and their decisions, and also it is the language that reflects thought. The glue that holds both comedians together is their need for relatability, but also their rhetoric surrounding women. In my research, I watched and analyzed a standup comedy special performed by Bill Cosby called 49 (1987).

In this comedy show, Cosby is appealing to those individuals in the audience who have experienced aging and all of the new, strange, and sometimes frustrating aspects of becoming 49 (or any age over 30). He often makes quips about “becoming” his father. This appeals to the relatability aspect of comedy. Cosby is very good at poking fun at every day experiences and laughing about some of the worst or confusing aspects of life. He usually stays clear from anything remotely controversial in an attempt to convey a positive image of the African American community and often succeeds at this. One of the women who came forward about her experience with Cosby and being sexually assaulted said “I didn’t want to let the black community down” which was a similar theme throughout many of the testimonies of women who came forward with allegations, especially those who identify as African American (Cosby 1987).

In part of his show, Cosby begins to discuss his marriage and his wife. He begins by stating “I want my wife back…”, not because she had left him sometime in the then twenty-three years they were married. This statement eludes to a potential change in her personality that makes her ‘not the woman’ he married (Cosby 1987). He goes on to explain that the best way to have a successful and long marriage is to not be afraid to argue. On some level, I agree; verbal disputes are a part of any relationship and by not voicing feeling and opinions can be toxic. However, there is a different between open communication, even a heated discussion, and the ‘argument’ he performs for his audience. Cosby continues by saying:
Argue, let it out. **First two years of our marriage I had a ball.** Mmmmm I had a ball. ‘Cause I’d look at my wife when I wanted to and I say “roof! ROOF! Roof-Roo!” Tears run down her cheeks and she run upstairs and slam the bathroom door. *Clunk* and I’d sit downstairs and I say “ruh-roof. Ruh-Oooh, ruh-rooroorooof”. I don’t know what happened to her in the third, I don’t know what happened. The communists got to her or something. But I remember distinctly, I looked at her and I said “ROOF!” And she said “HARggggg!” Things haven’t been right since (Cosby 1987).

There are several aspects of this segment that raise a red flag, making it an interesting example of covert sexism.

The first part of this segment, stating he ‘had a ball’, indicating he enjoyed the behavior that followed. This part indicates that on some level, he found pleasure in making his wife cry; perhaps it wasn’t the tears he enjoyed, but that those tears represent the power he has over his wife. The next part of this that I found problematic was the barking. The barking is meant to take the place of an actual argument or yelled statement that he made towards his wife, which resulted in her being hurt emotionally. It not only acts as a filler for actual discourse, but I also argue that it parallels with him being the ‘alpha male’, the one in charge, and therefore with the power. The third part of this segment that was the most problematic was when Cosby suggests that his wife standing up for herself indicates that she has become a communist. Instead of promoting empowerment, he is upset by the fact that his dominance is being challenged, that he no longer has total and complete power. I do imagine Cosby loves his wife on some level and would not explicitly ever say that she has no power and he is the one in charge. Although, how much can someone love their spouse if they have sexually assaulted potentially sixty women while they have been married? The reason there have been numerous articles trying to understand the psychology behind Bill Cosby specifically means that there is no direct right answer for such a question. I do argue that such sexist comments are reflexive of an unhealthy, oppressive relationship and can be just as damaging as physical abuse. It may be that there are no direct consequences found in more
blatantly sexist comments found in C.K.’s comedy, but that does not mean this sexism, that is not immediately obvious, is not something research does not have to worry about.

Covert and overt sexism are used to describe and explain the varying levels of sexism (Swim, Cohen 1997). Overt sexism is the form of sexism that gets most of the headlines and is understood to be sexism; overt sexism is that blatantly obvious dehumanization of a female person. Covert sexism is that form of sexism that goes unnoticed and often unstudied because the damage it causes is not immediately apparent. I argue, however, that this covert sexism is just as damaging as overt sexism, and both forms need to be targeted when fighting to end sexual violence. The overt sexism in Louis C.K.’s standup is obvious to the audience; comments about rape and masturbation, the vulgar and obscene is critiqued as being sexist. The sexism present not in explicit vocabulary necessarily, but in the themes throughout Cosby’s show, the ways in which he talks about women are reflective of patriarchal ideologies and power relationships that can be described as covert sexism. I argue that both covert and overt sexism are used to discuss women in a manner that dehumanizes them, and that it is this dehumanization that acts as a justification for sexual violence. It is difficult to link the discourse these comedians use directly to their heinous actions, but I do argue that it is this justification that ties directly to the potential to commit sexual violence.

Conclusions

The significance of this research is twofold; the importance of studying the relationship between language and violence can better peace and conflict studies, but also the studying of public figures and their actions as normalization of violence against other human beings can further promote change to discourse.
Linguists, being experts in the various aspects of language, have the background and ability to create new tools to be used by the public to better shape the discourse around all peoples, including and especially in the case of the dehumanizing language that is present in American English. The research into violent language is not simply important because it is revealing truths; it is important because it reveals the problem which can lead to further change. While the general population and other scholars can and has created new language to instigate change, as is the case with gender-neutral pronouns for relatives such as the term ‘grandy’, used in place of gendered grandma/grandpa (Brabaw 2017), linguists have the unique ability to create new terms and study their potential effects on the population. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge is wasted; knowledge for the sake of change and the bettering of humanity has a purpose beyond itself. Why study history? Philosophy and economics? I am well aware that the root of philosophy translates to mean ‘the love of wisdom’, but why have wisdom? Why is wisdom important? These, like any field, are important because of advancement of both the field and human beings as persons. To know history is to prevent history; whether you hold the same sentiments as either Karl Marx or Sir Winston Churchill on history, it is evident that while history does not repeat the same exact way, there are changes that must be made in order for the course of history to change as well.

In regard to this specific research and my arguments, it is important for public figures, especially influential men, to be mindful of the vocabulary they use, both for themselves and their relationships with women, but also for their audience. Someone asked me why I despise the rapper Eminem; it has nothing to do with my opinion on the style or sound of his music, but rather the violent word choice he uses in many of his songs. These figures in the public eye need to be held accountable, and also need to keep their followers and fans accountable, because such violent language normalizes violence and justifies violence. In Hannah Gatsby’s special Nannette (2018),
she ends with a very powerful statement that acts as an awakening for comedians specifically, but I think it applies to all of the arts and creative fields. Her ‘call to action’ is as follows:

Comedy is more used to throw away jokes about priests being pedophiles and Trump grabbing the pussy. I don’t have time for that shit. I don’t. do you know who used to be an easy punch-line? Monica Lewinsky. Maybe, if comedians had done their job properly, and made fun of the man who abused his power, than perhaps we might have had a middle-aged woman with an appropriate amount of experience in the White House, instead of, as we do, a man who openly admitted to sexually assaulting vulnerable young women because he could (Gadsby 2018).
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