

HUMOUR IN BARACK OBAMA'S SPEECH: A CONVERSATION ANALYSIS (CA)

Niken Fatma Putri, Filia
Universitas Indonesia (UI), Depok, Indonesia
E-mail: niken.fatma@ui.ac.id

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Abstract

Evaluation and critics are two essential aspects in assessing a perfect performance. Public speaking is a platform to convey critics as well as evaluations publicly. Critics and Evaluation is an embodiment of check and balance in a democratic nation. Barack Obama attends White House Association Correspondents Dinner annually as a sign of USA democracy establishment. This event is a mark of good relationship between government and mass media correspondents. This study finds critical and evaluative humorous utterances as Obama's tactical strategy to deliver his critics and evaluation. This research is qualitative research that uses *conversational analysis* (CA) as the method. The data were transcribed by Jefferson transcription system (2020). It has an aim to examine implicature theory (Grice, 1975) further in humour. This study shows that pragmatical utterances, that are conveyed in humorous concept, need a construction of common understanding, named as *common ground*. *Turn taking* is seen from speaker's speech and various responses of audiences such as laughter, applauses, or short verbal responses. These responses become essential part of discourse constructions in seizing its goal, to criticize and evaluate colleagues' performance.

Keywords: *Humour; Turn taking; Evaluative; Common ground; Public speaking*

1. Introduction

In a democratic country, role of media, represented by correspondents, has become essential aspects to maintain the running process of democratic governmental system by *check – balance* concept. Barack Obama, US President, has conducted an annual dinner event for White House correspondents, to appreciate the role of the media in guarding democratic life in the United States. This event was attended by correspondents, politicians, and some public figures with various backgrounds, such as social and economy. Thus, attendees of this event are parties with power. This is the reason how this semiformal event was having a sharp and on-point speech, brought by speakers, aimed to criticize, and evaluate the performances of related parties in a semiformal delivery, with humorous critical and evaluative statements. Responsible freedom of speech is the foundation of various pragmatic utterances used by speakers to convey critics and evaluation of various social aspects such as economy, politics, mass media and others.

Barack Obama's public speaking style at White House Correspondents Association dinner is different from his other public speaking style. It was seen from (1) Interactive

Elements, (2) Dictions that direct a sharp interpretation of audience (3) Institutional Chance, that makes his speech styled differently. It was a semiformal state event with a unique nuance. This study tries to find the role of humorous critical and evaluative speech as a pattern of speech between the speakers and audiences in constructing the discourse. This will be broken down into three sub questions. (1) Does the participants' background influence the tenor of this discourse? (2) How was the interactions of speaker and audiences maintained? (3) How does modality play the role to convey pragmatic meaning of the utterances?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Humour

Some humours are intended to break *Grice's* maxim (Gamage & Makangila, 2019). They are intentionally violating maxim to create metaphor or hyperbole then consumed as verbal humour (Grice, 1975). Humour could be formed as a verbal humour such as satire, irony, or sarcasm. Attardo (1994) states that there are six parameters of verbal humour that will determine how humour works, they are (1) Language, diction or wording influencing the information delivery in humour. (2) Narrative strategy, humour will be strategic if it is organized narratively such as conversation, question – answer dialog or even a narrative. (3) Target will deal with the object of humour, it does not always need to ridicule them (4) Situation, humour should stand in certain situation (5) Logical mechanism, to meet laughter rationalities of each participants need to play a role. (6) Script opposition, as it plays with logic and concept of opposition needs to be activated in understanding the jokes.

2.2 Turn-taking

Turn taking is a concept of human communication (Levinson, 2016). It explains how a communication could be done by giving a turn to the others in responding previous utterances. This response significantly contributes to a form of communication. Conversation analysis (CA) mentions not only turn taking but also word selection that will empower how communication works (Schegloff, 2002)

2.3 Implicature theory

Grice (1975) states that utterances within a conversation are often spoken beyond what is said by the narratives. It indicates that there is another meaning that could be assumed and predicted based on its context. This implicature theory is the base of this study as related into pragmatics elements in a public speech discourse. That is assumed to construct the discourse.

2.4 Previous Studies

The study of Barack Obama's speech has been discussed previously in various discussions. Ye (2010) analysed Barack Obama's victory speech using an analysis of interpersonal metafunction. It assesses that the positive declarative clauses help to convey positive information to the audiences, more than that the use of pronoun *we* or *you* will create intimate dialogic statement. This research dived into Swiss German sign language interaction. Kharismawan (2017) analysed filler in Barack Obama's speech, this study managed to prove that filler has its functions as related to some types of it. Groeber and Berger (2013) examined that human's interaction could be analysed on holds. Duration of holds in human interaction indicates speakers' understanding then appeals to analysis of

turn *taking* in a conversation. Mondada, (2019) analysed that silence and hand gesture contributed to form an illocution in each participant's mind of trading activity. Multimodality takes an essential contribution toward a successful semantic comprehension between speakers in a conversation as nonverbal communication. It extends the study of turn taking in CA. Previous studies show that human interaction is engaged to nonverbal signs that could significantly construct a well – established conversation. They also show that Obama's speech has some strategy in communicating its aim. As humorous utterances used to evaluate and criticize are rarely to be discussed, thus this study takes the hook.

3. Research Method

This study explains Obama's speech using conversation analysis (CA) by Schegloff (2002). Obama's speech with humour is a form of critics and evaluation conveyed in conversational way that later will be explained further. CA will help to analyse how Obama as the speaker interacts with the audiences then it influences the conversational framework. This study is qualitative research (Creswell, 2014) which defines research that focus on characters and pattern explanation of group or individual in social phenomenon. Data source of this research is Obama's speech at White House Correspondents Association Dinner in 2016. Then, it is transcribed by Jefferson transcription system (2020). The data are gathered from the transcriptions of critical evaluative humorous utterances along with audiences' responses to see the *turn – taking* phenomenon in this state speech (Obama, Barack Husein, 2016). Research is then continued to analyse the pragmatics meaning of utterances to see the structures of the humour and how the delivery is impacted to a conversational framework in public speaking discourse.

SYMBOL	DESCRIPTION
(.)	A micropause - a pause of no significant length.
(0.7)	A timed pause - long enough to indicate a time.
[]	Square brackets show where speech overlaps.
> <	Arrows showing that the pace of speech has quickened.
< >	Arrows showing that the pace of the speech has slowed down.
()	Unclear section.
(())	An entry requiring comment but without a symbol to explain it.
Underlining	Denotes a raise in volume or emphasis.
↑	Rise in intonation
↓	Drop in intonation
→	Entered by the analyst to show a sentence of particular interest. Not usually added by the transcriber.

CAPITALS	Louder or shouted words.
(h)	Laughter in the conversation/speech.
=	Will be at the end of one sentence and the start of the next. It indicates that there was no pause between them.
:::	Colons - indicate a stretched sound.

Table 1. Symbol of transcription in Jefferson Transcription System (2020)

4. Results and Discussions

As communication could be done both verbal and non-verbal, every gesture that is shown in a communication process will send a signal to form a communication itself. Public speaking is often known as one-sided communication since no verbal communication from the audiences is shown as a response like most conversation. Yet, this study sees different point of view. A public speaking is a conversational process that does not always require verbal response. Thus, nonverbal responses such as applauses or laughter are becoming the sign of audiences' agreement or acceptances of the meaning conveyed in speaker's utterances. This research discusses further about (1) form of critical – evaluative humour (2) register of utterances to see the power of each party (3) *turn-taking* analysis in framing a conversational discourse.

4.1 Register Analysis

According to Halliday and Hasan (in Lukin, et al., 2011), in an interactive conversation, the success of meaning delivery from speaker to the receiver could be seen by register analysis. There are three scopes of elaboration in analysing a discourse register, they are field, tenor, and mode.

4.1.1 Field

This speech is delivered in a state event which has an aim to appreciate the works of white house correspondent for the past year. This speech is all about evaluating, criticizing, and appreciating their works along with other respective figures. As it is a state speech, this discourse is delivered in an official state event where most participants know each other as they have same the background or bump to each other in daily work. They share the same value and store the same knowledge.

1. *President Obama: It is an honour to be here at my last -- and perhaps ↑the last -- White House Correspondents' Dinner.*
2. *Audiences: ((Audiences laughed & gave applause)) You all look great (2.5) > The end of the Republic has never looked better! <*

Transcript 1.1.

Based on the transcript above, it seems that this state event is an arena of Obama's farewell speech for his past period. This is reflected from adverb of place *here* as it refers to the event, and then followed by an adverbial phrase, *at my last*, which indicates the speakers last moment. Then it is continued by stating a sarcasm *and perhaps ↑the last -- White House Correspondents' Dinner*. It is conveyed in a raising tone to emphasize verbal humour delivered. The meaning is caught well, judging from the response of the audiences.

They share the same understanding of sarcasm mentioned by the speaker. Assuming that the next leader will not appreciate the works of correspondent as he is, sounds humorous to the audiences.

4.1.2 Tenor

It is aimed to analyse the relation of the speaker and audiences. Each of participant has their own bargaining position as attendee of the event. However, Obama as the speaker is assigned to deliver a welcoming remark for all. The relation could be found as style of language being analysed.

3. *President Obama: Eight years ago, I was a young man, full of idealism and vigor (1.0) and I look at me now. I am gray and grizzled > just counting down the days 'til my death panel<*

4. *Audiences: ((Audiences laugh))*

Transcript 1.2.

Obama puts off his honorific terms by saying informal metaphor such as *gray, grizzled* to deprecate himself. More than that, he continues his deprecating joke by explaining what those term mean, *> just counting down the days 'til my death panel<*. This utterance shows that he is aged by the time he rules the country. This diction narrates informal message toward audiences, which respond it by laughter. A humor is confirmed. Obama places himself as an object of humor then this language style, even though all audiences know that he has the most bargaining position in that field. This contradictory phenomenon indicates the relation of the speaker and audiences is made to be horizontal rather than vertical.

4.1.3 Mode

An analysis of mode should be started by seeing type of the discourse. This discourse is planned as it is arranged to be delivered in special occasion such as a state event. The discourse is public speaking with all the humor that is arranged to point out the works of correspondents as well as public figure. The construction of the discourse happens to be critical, evaluative yet appreciative, but it is also aimed to be delivered semi formally, thus the scaffolding of the discourse should be maintained. This discourse is started by the humor lines then brings the evaluative meaning within. This discourse is spoken – planned, then the tone is playing a role to convey the meaning of jokes as a sign.

5. *President Obama: I do apologize. I know I was a little late tonight. I was running on CPT (3.0) which stands for, Jokes That White People Should Not Make. ((president laugh lightly then smile)*

6. *Audiences: ((Audiences laughed & gave applause))*

7. *President Obama: It's a tip for you, Jeff [Mason].*

8. *Mason: Got it*

Transcript 1.3.

The transcript above shows a slight clue that the jokes are planned and scripted as the speaker says *It's tip for you, Jeff [Mason]*, the nickname is mentioned to lessen the formality of the speech and indicates that credit of humor goes to Jeff or Mason as the last name.

Analysis of register shows that semantically this discourse is delivered to be less formal and slightly breaks the protocol of a state event. However, it seems legal to be done as the aim of the event is celebrating the hard works and doing a year recap of the performance. The analysis of field, tenor, and mode proves that the discourse is successfully conveyed; the purposes of the discourse meet the theme of the event. More than that, the relation of speaker and audiences is made to be less formal. It is also well-planned as it hits the background of participants that unites the understanding of verbal humorous utterances.

4.2 Critical - Evaluative Humor

Humor is a strategy of speaker to lessen formality of utterances. Speaker has an aim to appreciate, criticize or even evaluate the works of related parties. Thus, humour was implemented to be the strategy of speaker to deliver the meaning in less formal way. Transcript 1.3 shows that a critical statement that was mentioned by the speaker was a joke yet criticize current phenomenon about racism.

9. *President Obama: I do apologize. I know I was a little late tonight. I was running on CPT (3.0) which stands for, Jokes That White People Should Not Make. ((president laughed lightly then smile)*

CPT is known is a geotechnical test that stands for Cone Penetration Test (Geotech Data, 2013). The speaker mentions that he is late since he joins this test. However, he explains more that CPT that he mentions is colored people time or phenomenon that currently exists in society as a form of racism. This term is used to portray that African – American people are used to be late and not being on time. It is explained in the next utterances saying *which stands for, Jokes That White People Should Not Make*. This statement is trying to point out the controversial joke that delivered by Hillary and Bill De Blasio. This utterance is set in the beginning of speech and has an intention to be a joke. CP time or colored people time will be a joke if it is mentioned by colored people but would be a racist statement, if it is mentioned by white people. The speaker uses polysemous abbreviation to exceed participants' expectation and create a critical joke that tries to criticize most common racist term among society. This is a confirmed joke, as it is seen from the response of the audiences.

10. *Audiences: ((Audiences laughed & gave applause)).*

Logical mechanism of this narrative meets the audiences' laughter and mean to be a humor (Attardo, 2004). Dictions and situation are set by the polysemous abbreviation and semi-formal state event that is attended by the participants that share similar background and knowledge or understanding. Critical evaluative humor happens to be conveyed in this type of circumstances. The speaker depreciates himself to criticize negative stereotype among societies, later known as self – deprecating joke. This type of joke could be one of strategy in communicating an evaluation of an object. It could also be seen that critical evaluative humor is constructed by layers or known as compound sentences.

4.3 Turn – Taking Analysis

This discourse happens to be a conversational as the discourse involves interaction and communicative language to be conveyed. Conversation could happen

verbally or non-verbally. This research will focus on how nonverbal gesture could legitimate the meaning of pragmatic utterances as well as significant element to construct the discourse.

Laughter is a sign of humor acceptance, either it is made or naturally conveyed; laughter, smile, applause, or other nonverbal gesture could indicate that the receiver understands the utterances as a joke. Obama, as the speaker of the speech, uses humorous statements to point out some phenomenon to evaluate, criticize or appreciate works of correspondents. Uniquely, it is found that nonverbal gestures shown by the audiences is a legitimacy of meaning delivered.

11. *President Obama: So, time passes. In just six short months, I will be officially a lame duck, which means Congress now, will flat-out reject my authority.*
12. *Audiences: ((Audiences laughed dan gave applause))*
13. *President Obama: And ↑ Republican leaders won't take my phone calls. And this is going to take some getting used to, it's really going to (1.0) it's a curve ball! ((Obama smiled))*
14. *Audiences: ((Audiences laughed))*
15. *President Obama: I don't know what to do with it. ((President Obama smiled))*

Transcript 2.1.

Obama uses self – depreciating joke as he criticizes how a senator behaves to non-bargaining positioned person. The speaker uses a metaphor of lame duck with stress tone on it. It portrays the situation of Obama as former president that will criticize many things yet could not reach senators' attention, thus he will voice up his idea with noise such as lame duck. This pragmatical meaning delivered in metaphor catches audiences' attention and understood as a joke by activating the logical mechanism of real lame duck and applying them to a figure such as Obama. The legitimacy of meaning is conveyed by next clauses, *Congress now, will flat-out reject my authority*. This rejection will not happen if he is not a lame duck. It is seen that the laughter comes after the lines then it makes the speaker stop and let the response fill the room. It is a significant contribution to construct the discourse or reach the goal of discourse, criticizing related parties. Line 10 is linked to line 9 as a union of a humor concepts. This thematical joke continues to line 11 that explains what rejection means; *Republican leaders won't take my phone calls*, with raising tone. More than that honesty is mentioned as how the speaker feels in the next utterances, *it's a curve ball! ((Obama smiled))*.

The speaker remains silent and let the audiences responded by laughter in line 12. Line 12 is linked to line 11 still related to line 9 and 10. This engaged line between one another reflects turn taking of this discourse. That even if it is only a laughter or applause, it considerably determines how speaker will continue the thematical jokes or verbal humor. It is seen from the continuing joke in line 13 as seeing the response from line 12 and related utterance, *I don't know what to do with it*. Objective pronoun *it* refers to the curved ball feeling. Interconnected lines, nonverbal response that determines the continuity of thematical joke are evidence of turn taking happened in this type of discourse. Laughter and applause are embodiment of the audiences' understanding of delivered verbal humor. This embodiment is a matter as it is a critical and evaluative humor that has unique purposes to be delivered.

5. Conclusion

The study shows that it is required to have laughter or smile to confirm that the joke

has been delivered successfully. This nonverbal gesture is essential element of this type of discourse. Laughter brings pragmatical meaning to legitimate the humor. It is an embodiment of confirmation in continuing the speech. Thus, it is also a sign of turn taking that manages to happen in this conversational discourse. This finding strengthens simple turn taking concept by Sacks, et.al. (2014). Most public speaking is maintained to be one sided and less interactive. However, Obama as the speaker aims to have more interactional engagement without having question to audiences that requires audiences' direct answers but using joke or humorous verbal utterances to keep audiences engaged.

Common ground is needed to understand the jokes. The register analysis shows that the participants share similar knowledge and background which help in absorbing the jokes well. Thematical humor is needed to create a critical evaluative humor. It is a good strategy of communication to appreciate and evaluate an object such as works or phenomenon with less tension. It somehow brings more understanding to the urgency of the critics or evaluation in different way.

Organization of the discourse is supposed to be planned and arranged in order to seize certain purposes in speech delivery. The well – maintained discourse will lead to successful construction of communication. Diction, situation, and style of delivery are influential to establish good constructions of the discourse.

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