

# A Pragmatic Approach to the Use of Taboos in Trevor Noah's Stand-up Comedy Routines

## Un enfoque pragmático del uso de tabúes en los monólogos cómicos de Trevor Noah

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**Abstract:** *This paper addresses the intricate task of studying humor considering its dependence on human perception. It focuses on the treatment of taboos within verbal humor, having stand-up comedy as the center of the study. Specifically, it examines how Trevor Noah uses taboos to entertain and produce a comic effect in his stand-up comedy. The examination of the taboo topics showed that 58.1% of the sequences of TREVOR-UP corpus refer to a taboo topic, being the racial, ethnic and minority category the most used by the comedian. It was also observed that dark humor is vastly used by Noah, however, in a lesser proportion to the racial, ethnic and minority taboo. Finally, the use of orthophemistic, euphemistic and dysphemistic communication aided the comedian to show the different facets of his humorous discourse.*

**Keywords:** pragmatics, verbal humor, discourse analysis, stand-up comedy, taboos, Trevor Noah.

**Resumen:** *Este artículo aborda la compleja tarea de estudiar el humor, teniendo en cuenta su dependencia con la percepción humana. Se centra en el tratamiento de los tabúes dentro del humor verbal, teniendo la comedia stand-up como eje del estudio. En concreto, examina cómo Trevor Noah utiliza los tabúes para entretener y producir un efecto cómico en su comedia stand-up. El análisis de los temas tabú demostró que el 58,1% de las secuencias del corpus TREVOR-UP hacen referencia a un tema tabú, siendo la categoría raza, etnicidad y minorías la más utilizada por el cómico. También se observó que el humor negro es muy utilizado por Noah, sin embargo, en menor proporción que el tabú racial, étnico y de minorías. Por último, el uso de la comunicación ortofemística, eufemística y disfemística ayudó al cómico a mostrar las diferentes facetas de su discurso humorístico.*

**Palabras clave:** pragmática, humor verbal, análisis del discurso, comedia stand-up, tabúes, Trevor Noah.

### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to identify what taboos are used by Trevor Noah to entertain his audiences and produce a comic effect through his stand-up comedy shows. In that sense, the study of humor is not an easy task, in fact, it entails hard work and an immense dose of seriousness. Therefore, it depends on multiple factors such as human perception, emotions and cognition. Humor is a daily life reality, present in all communicative contexts, and that penetrates all aspects of social life (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005; Martin and Kuiper, 2016). Blake (2007, pp. 19-21) argues that humor is brief but is nurtured by longer forms

such as parody, irony, satire and sarcasm, which refer to different manifestations and attitudes within verbal humor (Larkin-Galinanes, 2017).

Likewise, Rappoport (2005) argues that humor based on racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes and taboos has always been a touchy topic to discuss, especially in this era of political correctness. However, nowadays we have racial and ethnic humor circulating worldwide via films, stand-up performances, the Internet, and comedy clubs. This aids to the presence of black comedians being the center of these racial and ethnic discussions. That is the case of Trevor Noah, a South African comedian that has found stand-up comedy to be his platform to voice his concerns and points of view of today's touchy subjects such as race/ethnicity, identity, and cultural differences. In that sense, Trevor Noah has been the subject of several studies that have approached his comedy from a variety of angles. There have been studies centered in analyzing his comedy from the racial and ethnic point of view (Blackburn, 2018, 2023; Källstig and Death, 2021; Donian, 2022; Mark, 2022; Nwankwo, 2022), however, not exactly focusing on the expression of taboo and stereotypes, and the rhetoric-pragmatic strategies within his comedy.

Moreover, other studies have placed particular attention to the political impact of Noah's comedy (Al-Mas'udi and Hussein, 2021), and the gender and sex themes (Ratheiser, 2020; Adekunle, 2021) which in turn, are displacing a theme such as race and ethnicity, presumed to be vital in his humorous discourse. In the realm of stand-up, taboos become both the battleground and the playground, where comedians test the limits of social acceptability while simultaneously providing audiences with a mirror to examine their own values and prejudices. A recent study (Shabrina, Ain and Pratama, 2024) analyzed the use of dark humor in Trevor Noah's show *Son of Patricia* (2018), focusing on the humor functions proposed by Attardo (1994). They found that defunctionalization<sup>1</sup> for amusement was the most used function and uncovered how the comedian plays with the language to convey his humorous discourse. Moreover, from discussions on race, gender, and politics to candid reflections on personal experiences, stand-up comedians wield their craft to dismantle barriers and prompt uncomfortable yet necessary conversations. Although, there has been a solid line of studies considering the comedians, their themes, and their strategies to convey humor (Koziski, 1984; Mintz, 1985; Cook, 1994; Gilbert, 1997; Double, 1997, 2005; Limon, 2000; Rutter, 2001; Lockyer and Pickering, 2005; Glick, 2007; Zoglin, 2009), works in which taboos are deeply analyzed in conjunction to the rhetoric-pragmatic strategies are not very common. Despite the fact that we are not entering a new line of studies, the proposal of the current study is to

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<sup>1</sup> Defunctionalization refers to the use of language for play, not for communication (Attardo, 1994, p. 173). "Defunctionalized language is language that is not used for transmission of information (its principal function), but for playful (ludic) purposes" (Attardo, 1994, p. 328).

widen the linguistic field on verbal humor from the construction of the racial/ethnic perspective.

Presumably, the use of themes like race/ethnicity, identity and cultural differences to convey a relatable humorous discourse is recurrent in Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy shows. In other words, the comedian is able to express his individual points of view, acknowledging them as collective perspectives to produce the laughter of the public. On that account, our attention is placed on the limited linguistic studies about the comedian and his use of race/ethnicity to deal with taboos and the strategies used to collectively reach the audience and produce the desired laughter. The above examinations lead me to formulate an important research question that is to be answered by carrying out this study: How does Trevor Noah handle taboo topics? This question aims to determine how this comedian constructs his comedy through taboos and how these are presented and handled in his humorous discourse.

Ultimately, to carry out this study we have proposed to use and analyze a real corpus based on television-mediated stand-up comedy shows, to understand how Trevor Noah conveys his humorous discourse. In the same way, we aim at exploring the different taboos that help the comedian to construct his humorous discourse and how he navigates these topics.

## **2. Verbal humor in the stand-up comedy genre**

### **2.1. Verbal humor and approaches to its study**

According to Larkin-Galiñanes (2017, p. 4) the concept of humor is simply a very modern one, with its contemporary origins in the 20th century. Nonetheless, this statement loses its validity because it has been proven that the phenomenon of humor has been theorized since Plato (Piddington, 1933; Morreall, 1987; Attardo, 1994). Therefore, humor is an essential element of people's everyday life and relationships which occurs across all contemporary media, and in the majority of the institutional formats. It penetrates every aspect of social life and interaction. In addition, it cannot be confined to a particular genre, kind of narrative, location or occasion for it to occur (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005, p. 3). Although the term humor is that complex to define, it refers to a pragmatic and semantic phenomenon based in an incongruence, in other words, it is the result of a comic reality that is presented as unexpected and incongruent to the interlocutor (Linares Bernabéu, 2021, p. 25).

The categorization of the theories of humor has largely relied on interdisciplinarity. Numerous fields such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics have contributed to the study of humor from their unique perspectives. In the conceptualization of the main theories of humor, authors such as Raskin (1985), Attardo (1994), Ruiz Gurillo (2012), and Larkin-Galiñanes (2017) distinguished three main approaches that have tried to explain

humor from its linguistic point of view: the *Superiority Theory* which suggests that humor is a way of expressing feelings of superiority over others; the *Release Theory* that proposes humor provides a release or catharsis for pent-up emotions or tension; and the *Incongruity Theory* which affirms that humor arises from the unexpected or incongruous aspects of a situation or event (Suls, 1972).

Continuing with the scaffolding of verbal humor, a good amount of theories have tried to explain it from a linguistic point of view, however, they all are missing the commitment to complete or enhance previous proposals. Therefore, there is little to zero intention in creating a global model that helps explain humor in all its manifestations (Ritchie, 2018, as cited in Linares Bernabéu, 2021, p. 31). Nevertheless, the following four theories exist to explain verbal humor: the *Semantic-Script Theory of Humor*, the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*, the *Relevance Theory*, and the *Cognitive Linguistic Theory*.

The *Semantic-Script Theory of Humor* (henceforth SSTH) stated that for a text to be considered humoristic had to be compatible with two different scripts and these scripts have to oppose each other (Raskin, 1985, p. 99, as cited in Attardo, 1994, pp. 197-198). On the other hand, the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (henceforth GTVH) encompasses pragmatic, morphological, and phonetic information, claiming that jokes may resemble each other. Moreover, the *Cognitive Linguistic Theory* (henceforth CL) has its central interest in the relationship between language and cognitive linguistic concepts in the humor studies framework (Brône, 2017, p. 250). CL portrays humor as a creative use of language that reflects our experiences and expertise of the world (Veale *et al.*, 2006).

Finally, there is the *Relevance Theory* (henceforth RT) that proposes to identify the “underlying mechanisms, rooted in human psychology, [...] explain[ing] how humans communicate with one another” (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, p. 32). It focuses on the inferences that the hearer (audience/public in a stand-up comedy show) makes as they try to identify the communicative intentions of the speaker (the comedian) (Yus, 2017, p. 189). Furthermore, RT focuses on understanding the explicit information being communicated (*explicature*) and the information communicated implicitly (*implicature*) also accessing contextual intelligence (Yus, 2017, p. 190-192), for what it becomes the model that adjusts better to this study’s needs and intentionality.

Consequently, RT is highly influential in stand-up comedy and in that sense, Yus (2017, p. 195) argues that “[standups] base their effectiveness not [...] on manipulations of discourse-specific inferential strategies [...], but rather on a strategy regarding the *personal* vs. *collective* status of the audience’s mental representations.” This in turn, is aligned with the types of jokes described and means that stand-up comedians dismantle, stir, and shake the audience’s beliefs and the mental representation of particular situations. Accordingly, comedians

are constantly reminding the audience that some beliefs (stereotypical or not, and taboo) regarded as personal are actually collective. Inevitably, in the realization of the collectiveness shift from the personal stance rests the audience's entertainment and amusement that on that account, does not find it offensive but relatable.

## 2.2. The stand-up comedy genre within verbal humor

Stand-up comedy is a form of comedy in which the performance of the comedian is carried out with few or no props to entertain the audience (Yus, 2002, p. 246). In more detail, as described by Brodie "stand-up comedy is a form of talk. It implies a context that allows for reaction, participation, and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking." As the purpose of this form of talk is to entertain, the aim is laughter through verbal play and by using humor (2014, pp.5-6). In this sense, Tsakona (2017, p. 494) agrees with the premise that stand-up comedy is for the amusement of the audience. Therefore, humor in stand-up comedy is an obligatory feature of the genre. Stand-up comedy has been described as the purest form of comic performance, due to the simplicity of the process between the comic and the audience. The format of the genre encourages critical thinking and analysis of the meanings and messages received.

### 2.2.1. Characteristics of stand-up comedy

Stand-up comedy responds to a narrative or argumentative structure (Ruiz Gurillo, 2019). All the monologues in the corpus are filmed shows and/or short youtube videos, therefore, the structure of them vary to those presented in live venues or as live performances. According to Ruiz Gurillo (2013a, p.149), the stand-up comedy performed in a televised setting has a defined structure which includes an introduction, a body of the show, and a closing. The shows in the TREVOR-UP corpus were first live performances, however, access to them was through an audio-visual medium. Therefore, the analysis of the corpus is done considering film stand-up comedy structure, outlined by Ruiz Gurillo (2019).

In the introductory part of the stand-up show, as Rutter (1997) refers to, the comedian is presented, and the audience applauds to welcome them. The usual welcoming has its typical phrases and it does not usually include the comedian addressing himself as the audience knows him already. Following the introduction, there is the body of the show which is composed of several sequences. Linares Bernabéu (2021, p. 75) refers to humorous sequences as a series of interventions which discuss a particular theme and that are interrupted by the audience's laughter and applause. The sequences are composed by a *setup* and *punchline*. The *setup* is the first part of the jokes, having the function to set up the laugh for the audience and it is where the comedian explains the context of

their sequence to the audience, essentially, not to laugh. On the other hand, the *punchline* is in charge of the laughing effect within the joke. With the *setup* the comedian tells the story that creates certain expectations, whereas the *punchline* is the surprise that makes the audience laugh (Dean, 2000). Finally, Rutter (1997) identifies a last section referred to as closing, in which the comedian ends his/her monologue, thanks the audience for their attendance and eventually leaves the stage. For the audience, this is the moment to assess the performance through the applause and the cheering to the performer.

### 2.3. Contextualization of Taboo Topics

Taboo topics are conceptualized in a considerable amount of the themes of stand-up comedy. The concept of taboo relies on the cultural, social and communicative allusions of banning. In that sense, these prohibitions affect the speech acts and consequently, make the linguistics units that conceptualized them not able to be named or inappropriate (Cestero Mancera, 2015, p. 73). Thus, the only way in which taboos are transgressed and defied is making explicit reference to them (Linares Bernabéu, 2021, p. 86).

The origins of the word *taboo* can be traced back to the end of the 18th century to the languages of Polynesia simply meaning to forbid which is also applicable to any kind of prohibition. Taboos take form from our social constraints as individuals, where our behavior may cause harm, discomfort, or injury (Allan and Burridge, 2006, pp. 1-2).

The study of “taboo humour” relies on a whole spectrum of comedy themes and categories that are potentially topics many audiences struggle with due to their shocking nature (Bucaria and Barra, 2016, p. 3). The taboo thematic proposed by Bucaria and Barra (2016) is based on the previous considerations by Allan and Burridge (2006), and has been studied by Linaress Bernabeu (2019, 2021). They have distinguished the taboo humor categories as dark humor, sexual humor, racial, ethnic and minority humor, scatological humor, blasphemous humor, and finally, physical appearance humor. Figure 1 shows a more detailed characterization of the different categories.

Taboo Humor Thematic Categories	Characterization
Dark humor	Humor about death, sickness, and disability.
Sexual humor	Humor relying on explicit sexual references, situations, or practices.
Racial, ethnic and minority humor	Includes sexiest, homophobic, transphobic humor, as well as humor directed at the elderly.

Scatological humor	Humor relying on references to faeces, or other bodily fluids, and other traditional Western taboos such as incest and cannibalism. Also referred to as grossed out/sick humor.
Blasphemous humor	Humor targeting established religious beliefs and dogmas, and the ministers of those religions. Also referred to as sacrilegious humor.
Physical appearance humor	Humor which involves deformity and other, non-narrative traits, such as being overweight, short, or bald.

Fig. 1: Characterization of the taboo humor thematic categories

Humor is the ideal medium to express and confront taboos because it serves as a safety shield for the comedians to openly and freely deal with such sensitive topics. Necessarily, the discursive strategies to linguistically conceptualize taboos are the orthophemistic, euphemistic, and dysphemistic communications (Allan and Burrige, 2006; Casa Gómez, 2012).

In the case of the orthophemistic communication we refer to straight talking (Allan and Burrige, 2006, p. 1). Orthophemism refers to the neutral use of a linguistic element that makes reference to an indirect reality (Pizarro Pedraza, 2013; Cestero Mancera, 2015).

In euphemistic communication, euphemism is understood as sweet talking (Allan and Burrige, 2006, p. 1). This type of communication employs words or expressions that tend to avoid conflictive situations that attack the social image either of the speaker, the hearer, or a third party intervening in the communicative act (Allan and Burrige, 2006; Crespo Fernández, 2016). According to Burrige (2012, p. 81), this communication has other functions as to defy certain prejudices, to allow an individual to be part of a social group, and entertain and produce a comic effect.

Finally, dysphemistic communication is understood as speaking offensively (Allan and Burrige, 2006, p. 1). On the contrary to the euphemistic communication, dysphemism does not sugarcoat the taboo reality but intensifies and reinforces that reality (Casas Gómez, 2018). To be properly identified, dysphemistic communication reveals a direct and non-neutral form of communication which is vulgar and tasteless (Cestero Mancera, 2015, p. 80).

The conceptualization of taboo topics in stand-up comedy has been seen as a resource to transgress and challenge certain stigmas. However, this phenomenon happens not only in that particular sense, but it also causes a comic effect with the breaking of the different taboos (Mintz, 1985). In this sense, Allan and Burrige (2006, p. 6) agree that "...there is an assumption that both accidental breach and intentional defiance of the taboo will be followed by some kind of

trouble to the offender”, which is closely related to the constant challenging process of taboos by comedians. Ideally, we are able to avoid taboos and so are the comedians, however, comedy and taboos are linked to reach a humorous effect that makes us also reflect on topics like death, diseases, sex and sexuality, and even joke around that oldest institution through religion. In that sense, comedians defy, breach, challenge and transgress realities through taboos that are meant to make the audience laugh but also educate it.

#### **2.4. Features of stand-up comedy discourse: rhetoric-pragmatic strategies**

One of the premises guiding the study is that stand-up comedians use rhetoric-pragmatic strategies to mitigate or intensify the humorous discourse, considering their interaction and relation with the audience. In that sense, this study pretends to analyze some of the rhetoric-pragmatic strategies that are key for the comedian to deliver his humorous discourse effectively.

The first strategy is role play. By using this strategy the comedian is able to imitate and perform using different voices, accents, and languages. This is, in turn, the catalyst for the comedian to stand in and defend different ideological positions, and points of view from a voice change. This strategy has an explicit relation with direct speech and it is used as an underlying strategy in stand-up. As Ruiz Gurillo (2013b, 2019) states, direct speech is influenced by linguistic and prosodic elements that help unfold the comic effect.

The next strategy is mitigation which has been widely studied (Zadeh, 1965; Lakoff, 1973; Fraser, 1980; Holmes, 1984; Bravo, 1993; Briz Gómez, 1995, 2007; Albelda Marco, 2008, 2010; Albelda Marco and Cestero Mancera, 2011). Mitigation refers to the argumentative strategic activity which weakens the illocutionary force and the role of the participants in communication to successfully achieve a goal (Briz Gómez and Albelda Marco, 2013). It is a linguistic mechanism related to efficiency providing the speaker (comedian) with the listener’s (audience) acceptance of the comedian’s arguments (Briz Gómez, 2007). It has become crucial for comedians, since the use of taboo topics and stereotypes is a constant in their humorous discourse. In that sense, Albelda Marco (2010) affirms that messages with difficult and conflictive topics favor the application of mitigation strategies. This strategy benefits from three fundamental functions: self-protection, prevention, and repairing, which as their names indicate are employed to gain or avoid losing the speaker’s image, to protect the speaker's image, and to correct or emend what has been said and repair the image respectively (Bravo, 2002; Zimmermann, 2003; Fuentes



Rodriguez, 2016). Consequently, these last functions are implemented through the two main tactics of mitigation (1) depersonalization<sup>2</sup> and (2) attenuation<sup>3</sup>.

Following the mitigation strategies, intensification strategies are rhetoric tools to aid argumentation and persuasion. Briz Gómez (2017) affirms the speaker uses intensifiers to provide credibility, certainty, and truthfulness to their speech and, consequently, gain the attention and acceptance of the listener. Similar to mitigation, intensification possesses three general functions<sup>4</sup>. In addition, this strategy employs several linguistic elements to create a bond with the listener and encourage truthfulness. Some of these elements are hyperboles and superlatives (Albelda Marco and Briz Gómez, 2010, pp. 242-243). Applying intensifiers to the speech in stand-up allows the comedian to increase its illocutionary force, to render a more credible and truthful discourse, and to ensure the message is better accepted by the audience.

Lastly, intertextuality, which is not a rhetoric-pragmatic strategy but a critical term which is variously defined (Allen, 2020, p. 2). It is understood to mean the dependency of discourse's meaning on a text which was produced earlier. Intertextuality in humor has been broadly discussed (Norricks, 1989, 1993; Attardo, 1994, 2001; Kuipers, 2009; Tsakona, 2011, 2018). Its presence in humor happens, at times, without the speaker's realization of the phenomenon (Tsakona, 2018, p. 2). Within humor, the functions can be related to both incongruity and superiority/aggression theories (Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1994, 2001). The use of intertextuality provides humorous texts that are to be understood by the audience and that leave the comedian with a sense of self-gratification for being able to come up with the allusion (Sacks, 1974; Sherzer, 1985; Norricks, 1993; Hlynka and Knupfer, 1997; Mazurek-Przybylska, 2016; Tsakona, 2018). It is the listener's task to understand the allusion to get close to the comedian, otherwise this may result in the emergence of a distance between them (Tsakona, 2018, p. 4).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Methodological approach

This study has been based on a mixed methodology, considering the qualitative and quantitative approaches for its completion. Although verbal humor studies have been largely carried out from a qualitative perspective, the quantitative paradigm has taken a space in recent studies and consequently, suits

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<sup>2</sup> Depersonalization is effective by using generalizations, direct speech, grammatical impersonalization, and agent omission (Albelda Marco and Cestero Mancera, 2011; and Briz Gómez and Albelda Marco, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Attenuation is effective by using euphemisms, irony, metaphors, apologies, foreign words, etc. (Albelda Marco and Cestero Mancera, 2011; and Briz Gómez and Albelda Marco, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> The three functions proposed in the model (Briz Gómez, 2017) of intensification are: (1) *auto-reafirmación*, (2) *alo-reafirmación*, and (3) *contra-reafirmación*.

the present one. On the one hand, the quantitative paradigm, which is particular to corpus linguistics, serves to quantify the number of occurrences of taboo topics on the corpus. In addition, it helps to examine and determine the frequency of use of the linguistic units and discursive strategies to draw objective conclusions about the results. On the other hand, qualitative research helps in describing and analyzing in detail particular humorous sequences of the different taboo topics present in Noah's stand-ups. This qualitative paradigm benefits from the use of different research techniques such as observational and case studies directly applicable to the present study.

### **3.2. Trevor Noah, the comedian**

The figure of the comedian, especially in stand-ups is highly regarded and therefore, respected. Trevor Noah (<https://www.trevornoah.com>) is the son of a black Xhosa mother and a white Swiss-German father which led him to often refer to himself as "born a crime" (Donian and Holm, 2021, p. 32). He was raised during the horrific apartheid, therefore, his life and work as a comedian has been largely influenced by his upbringing and his racial and ethnic circumstances. This in turn, has defined his comedy as charged with a distinctive strain of racial-like issues which often features heavy accents, caricatures, and in-jokes that are typified by racial stereotypes and taboo topics that do not pass the edge of political correctness or offense. The racial theme of Trevor Noah's comedy is paramount and builds his show and stand-up comedy immensely (Hafisa and Hanidar, 2020; Källstig and Death, 2021; Donian, 2022; Nwankwo, 2022). Moreover, they agree with the idea that his upbringing, ability to speak and be fluent in several languages, and family history have influenced the thematic and direction of his humorous discourse, which not only focuses on race accountability but dwells on political, gender, and cultural issues interrelated to race.

### **3.3. Corpus TREVOR-UP: general characteristics**

The current study is a compound of 11 stand-up comedy shows, ranging from the year 2009 to 2022, and available on Netflix (<https://www.netflix.com/>) and Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/>) platforms. First, we converted all the video material into mp3 files to be used with transcription software. Every audio was automatically transcribed using the Descript transcription software (<https://www.descript.com/>). Once the written version was obtained, the researcher manually carried out a spell check and formatted the text. In particular, the transcription guidelines followed and used are under the Jefferson Transcription System developed by Gail Jefferson in 1963.

Consequently, the monologues were divided into sequences corresponding to each of the mp3 files. The sequences are understood as a series

of turns that talk about a particular topic and that have been interrupted or followed by the audience's laughs or applause (Ruiz Gurrillo, 2019; Linares Bernabéu, 2021, p. 125). In this particular case, they were interrupted by a sudden cut of the audio. The length of the sequences is an average of 7 minutes with 15 seconds. A total of 31 sequences were transcribed, which accounts for 487 minutes and 11 seconds -8 hours and 112 minutes- and 74953 words. Each sequence is labeled with the abbreviated name of the stand-up comedy show, followed by the number assigned within the corpus, for example, (Sequence CN1). This sequence in turn, responds to the youtube short video titled *Crazy Normal* (2011) - Attention all Passengers.

In addition, there were 4 particular shows for which the full transcript was available online (<https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/comedy/>), see figure 2 for more details. In the case of the full transcript, each is labeled with the abbreviated name of the stand-up comedy show followed by the number 1, for instance, (Sequence WW1), corresponding to *I Wish You Would* (2022). In the case of more than one example within the same sequence, this will be differentiated by common letters as in (Sequence AD1c) from *Afraid of the Dark* (2017).

### 3.3.1. Characteristics of the sample

Figure 2 shows the time duration, the number of words, and the number of sequences for each of the stand-up comedy shows that are collected in the corpus. The shows slightly differ in the duration of time since some of them were not available online on any other platforms as the ones suggested and used for the present study. For example, *That's Racist* (2012) only has a duration of 7 minutes and 49 seconds which accounts for a single sequence, while *African American* (2013) has a time length of 51 minutes and 9 seconds, corresponding to 6 sequences.

Stand-up comedy show (year)	Time Length (minutes. seconds)	Number of words	Number of Sequences
<i>The Daywalker</i> (2009)	13.18	1807	1
<i>Crazy Normal</i> (2011)	58.21	5471	5
<i>That's Racist</i> (2012)	7.49	1349	1
<i>African American</i> (2013)	51.09	8818	6
<i>It's my Culture</i> (2013)	43.57	7350	6
<i>Pay Back the Funny</i> (2015)	30.31	5144	4
<i>Lost in Translation</i> (2015)	62	9713	1 (Full transcript)

<i>There's a Gupta on my Stoep</i> (2017)	31.26	4680	4
<i>Afraid of the Dark</i> (2017)	67	9945	1 (Full transcript)
<i>Son of Patricia</i> (2018)	63	10839	1 (Full transcript)
<i>I Wish You Would</i> (2022)	60	9837	1 (Full transcript)
<b>Total</b>	487.11	74953	31

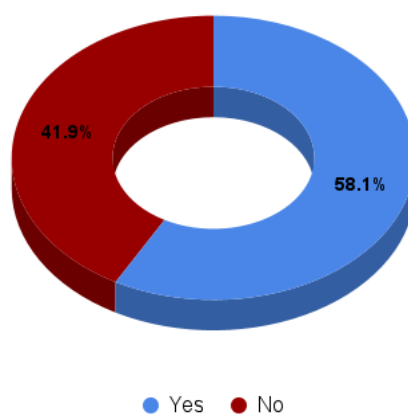
*Fig. 2: Data of the TREVOR-UP corpus*

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Analysis of the TREVOR-UP Corpus

The use of taboos and censored words is vital to the study of TREVOR-UP corpus. In this respect, the classification in figure 1 will aid in qualitatively and quantitatively analyzing the different taboo concepts that are part of the corpus TREVOR-UP. It would also help in examining the frequency of use and distinguishing the different taboo categories.

In figure 3 we observe that of the total of the 31 sequences of the corpus, it was found that 18 of them talked about a taboo theme, which represents 58.1% of the total of sequences. This is more than 50% of the thematic of the corpus in general, however it is not unexpected considering that one of the main themes is Race/Ethnicity.



*Fig. 3: Percentage of sequences containing taboos in TREVOR-UP corpus*

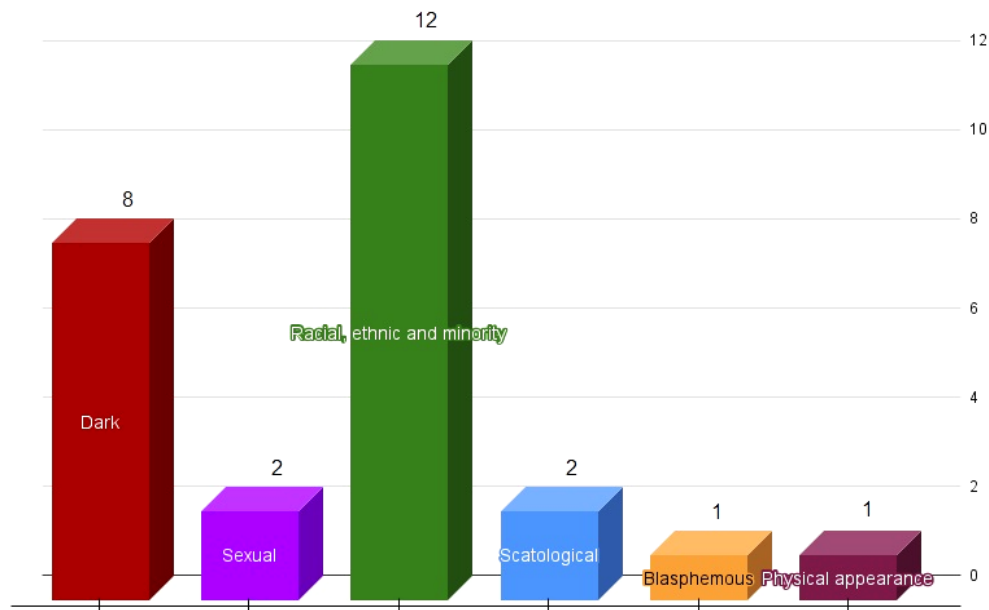


Fig. 4: Taboo categories developed in TREVOR-UP corpus

Furthermore, the classification presented by Bucaria and Barra (2016) was considered to quantify the frequency of each taboo category in the 31 sequences of the corpus. In that sense, figure 4 shows the taboo categories that are mentioned in the corpus and the frequency in which these were used.

The data evidences that racial, ethnic and minority humor is the most frequent taboo employed by the comedian (12 sequences). The latter is followed by dark humor used to talk about death, physical and psychological illnesses, and to a lesser extent disabilities (8 sequences). Moreover, references to scatological and sexual humor are poor (2 sequences each), and consequently, these results are aligned with the main themes of the corpus. New taboo categories were not found, especially because the comedian does not benefit from the use of other taboo categories to propose his humorous discourse. With that in mind, the taboos found in the corpus and their respective proportions established that Race/Ethnicity is one of the main themes in the corpus.

#### 4.2. The use of taboos in Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy

Trevor Noah, when using taboo topics, relies on a neutral communication which is purely informative; and makes use of an euphemistic communication to relieve the social tension to protect his image and that of the rest of the participants in the communicative activity (Linares Bernabéu, 2018). Finally, Noah uses dysphemistic communication to make emphasis on or intensify the expressions surrounding the taboo. In this sense, the following subsections will analyze the different types of taboo communications following Cestero Mancera's (2015) guidelines.

#### 4.2.1. Orthophemism or neutral communication

Dark humor is often used by Trevor Noah to break taboos and expose social constraints. The following example is a reflection of what is considered politically incorrect, in which a neutral communication is used to talk about AIDS and its stigma worldwide.

- (1) TREVOR NOAH: Cause she comes back (.) and I'll never forget this to TIL the day I die, I will not forget this conversation (.) she comes back (.) onto the beach and she stands next to me and she's taking off her wetsuit and she goes ((imitating a Californian woman's accent and voice)) so: like Africa::↑ (.) can I like ask you a question::↑ (.) ((normal voice)) yeah go ahead (.) go ahead (0.2) ((imitating a Californian woman's accent and voice)) if you're like from Africa: (.) have you like ever had AIDS::↑ (0.3) ((normal voice)) you know what's funny (0.2) is I wasn't offended by the fact that she said aids↓ (.) but I was offended by the fact that she said↑ if I had: aids (.) like aids is something you could had: like a passing flu (.) just you know (.) hey John no I didn't see you at work last week last week Thursday ( ) yeah bro I had a bit of aids there (.) I just uh (.) hit me hard aye (.) you took some corhinza<sup>5</sup> now I'm back. (Sequence TR1a).

In this sequence, the comedian does resort to some instances of euphemistic communication in which he talks about AIDS and about the stereotypical ideas formed around South Africa and this chronic disease. However, for the most part of the sequence, he uses a neutral language, which renders a orthophemism communication. Trevor Noah protects his image and that of his country by presenting a dialogue with a female surfer which is incongruent, considering the absurdity of the situation. The use of direct speech in this instance allows Noah to mitigate the situation by giving the exact words she used to shield himself. He situates the surfer as the facade of his thoughts to avoid responsibilities and safeguard his image as a South African. Noah's performative strategy is again the protagonist, as he enacts this Californian woman accent which is constantly in a rising intonation adding to the achievement of the humorous effect. This is associated with role playing as rhetoric-pragmatic strategy in constant aid to his humorous discourse.

Moreover, the comedian relies on the use of a conditional structure *if I had aids* to point out the severity of the disease. He later contrasts the seriousness of the disease by using the euphemistic expression *yeah bro I had a bit of aids there*, and compares it to *a passing flu* in a simile. By using these two expressions, he is

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<sup>5</sup> Corhinza is a drug, effective in relieving symptoms associated with common cold, influenza, fevers, catarrh, cold and flu endorsed by the Orange Group. [www.orangegroups.com](http://www.orangegroups.com)

taking away the gravity and importance of AIDS. The use of a comparison, apart from taking away the seriousness of the disease, helps dismantle the taboo and even stereotypes we hold surrounding the disease and its consequences.

#### 4.2.2. Euphemistic communication

The fact that there are all sorts of taboos, does not prevent us, as social beings, from expressing them; however it does imply choosing a way, at times the best way, to communicate them (Cestero Mancera, 2015, p. 74). Euphemistic communication is paramount for humor since not only does it protect the social image of the participants, but the lexical creativity of some of the euphemistic terms unfold a humorous effect (Casas Gómez, 2012; Linares Bernabéu, 2018, 2021). In example 3, Trevor Noah alludes to the final moments of a person with AIDS when dark humor continues to be at the center of Noah's humorous discourse.

- (2) TREVOR NOAH: it's just like chocolate↑ (.) you know (.) you just shouldn't have too much at one time (.) usually like aids aids aids aids aids aids oh ho ho ho too much aids too much aids (.) and then you stop for a bit and then afterwards you're like whoo-hoo more aids you know you just chill she's like ((imitating a Californian woman's accent and voice)) wow is it like chocolate↑ I said ((normal voice)) yeah yeah you should try it sometimes ((imitating a Californian woman's accent and voice)) NO that's disgusting: (.) to the end if it's like chocolate:: (.) then it's gonna get all melty it'll be covered in like chocolate and it'll be all sticky that'll be all dirty: I was like ((normal voice)) yeah (.) then you just take a shower ((big laughter from the public)) (Sequence TR1b).

In this instance, the main construct continues to be AIDS, however, the attention shifts to death or the final moments of a person suffering from AIDS. The humorous effect is achieved through a simile, by comparing what a body of a person goes through on the final stage of AIDS to chocolate melting. There is still that dose of ignorance behind the female surfer's point of view and the comedian uses it to deliver a message that is still difficult to assimilate. This is in relation with the *Superiority Theory*, in which the comedian feels he is in a better position of knowledge and he is able to target his culture and himself in the sequence. In addition, this comparison conveys two topics together -diseases and death- to entertain the audience from a place of knowledge and authenticity. In this sequence, mitigation as a pragmatic resource is vital, and euphemism as a mitigating resource is present throughout. The comedian lessens the impact of the message by talking about AIDS as if it is food (chocolate). Direct speech, as a mitigating element, is used to depersonalize the subjects and hide them.

Furthermore, direct speech is also used as an element of the rhetoric-pragmatic strategy of role playing. He is constantly imitating the female voice and accent to protect his image, and defend his point of view.

Moreover, by talking of this phenomenon as someone from a country that has experienced a great deal with the disease, the topic is better accepted by the participants of the communication. In the same way, in the following example the idea of death as a taboo is revisited. In this instance, the comedian talks about the death of Her Majesty the Queen Elizabeth II.

- (3) TREVOR NOAH: ((British accent)) the Royal Family has bad news (.) ((normal voice)) is it bad news↑ ((British accent)) yes it is (.) the Queen has died ((normal voice)) died of what↑ FINISHING LIFE ((Laughter)) (0.5) you kidding me↑ I'm not saying someone shouldn't grieve but she FINISHED LIFE (.) do you know how many human beings don't get to do that (.) she finished it she died as Queen (.) died of what OLD AGE that means you finished the game done credits are rolling↑ ((cheers and applause from the public)) buried with the jewels hashtag winning: (Sequence WW1).

The comedian's treatment of such a difficult taboo in this instance is full of humorous remarks. Death as a taboo is still a sensitive and conflicted topic to talk about. In this case, death is managed as if it is the end of a movie. The use of a simple metaphor such as *credits are rolling*, masquerades the impactful news of the Queen's death, and in turn, is a mitigation strategy of the comedian to build the humorous discourse. Therefore, the comic effect is achieved through the mitigating element in the discourse. It is of an euphemistic value to address the end of one's life with such a creative phrase.

To aid the metaphor and mitigate the speech, there are other expressions that build up the humorous discourse, for instance, *she died as Queen*, expressed in the most ironic manner. There is also *you finished the game*, making allusions to gamers and the satisfaction they must feel once they are able to finish a game; *buried with the jewels*, as an allusion to the power not only social and political but economic power of such an international figure as the Queen is. Finally, Noah uses *hashtag winning*, alluding to the social interactive platform that is twitter and the way in which news or events are spread within it and become trending topics. This latter is definitely a euphemistic way to acknowledge how trending and impactful the news of Queen Elizabeth II dying would quickly and universally spread. These mitigating elements are acknowledged by the comedian by expressing that the Queen's death could not be taken as bad news since she lived a full life and died *winning*. In addition, these latter represent instances of intertextuality that allow the comedian to propose this discourse he came up with



and feel self-gratification, and ideally allow the audience to have a mental portrayal of twitter, ultimately making sense of the joke.

#### 4.2.3. Dysphemistic communication

In this example Trevor Noah sympathizes with women and the instances in which women are undermined and downgraded because of their condition. He uses a phrase or statement that refers to a woman's reproductive organ and that is mostly paired along with weakness.

- (4) TREVOR NOAH: Don't be a pussy↑ (0.3) and that's where he lost me (0.2) that is where he lost me (.) I understand what he was trying to do↓ (.) guys do it all the time↓ (.) °hit° you with the phrase (.) don't be a pussy (.) yes (.) because it implies weakness (.) yeah (.) do not be↑ (.) like the vagina (0.2) the vagina that is weak (.) yes yes (.) don't be a pussy guys say that and then you do what they want don't be a pussy yeah don't be a pussy 'cause the pussy is weak and yet (0.2) in my personal experience↑ (0.3) I have found the pussy to be one of the STRONGEST things I have ever come across in my LIFE (0.3) don't be a pussy↑ (.) have you ever come across a pussy↑ (.) the vagina is one of the most powerful↑ YOU realize vaginas<sup>6</sup> can start revolutions and end wars↑ (0.2) YOU realize, even on a physical level the vagina is one of the strongest things that have ever existed (.) VIRTUALLY INDESTRUCTIBLE↑ many men in this room↓ many many men in this room have tales of how they once defeated the pussy(0.2) let me tell you now they have not↑ (0.3) the owner (.) of the pussy may have given you the impression that you defeated the pussy but it is alive and well my friends (0.4) whenever people say that (.) I go do you understand how impressive the vagina is (.) do you understand how strong it is there's a reason men have sought to oppress it for so long the vagina is frighten::ingly powerful (.) you realize human beings (.) come out of a vagina (.) human beings come out and STILL it continues to work (.) as intended do you understand how impressive that is↑ (.) I don't know if I'm the only one New York do you understand (.) a human being a human being (.) comes out of the VAGINA and still it continues to operate and it continues to work after a human has just come out you're saying it's weak↑ a human came out of the vagina you just sit on a penis wrong and it breaks you

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<sup>6</sup> The great Greek mythical warrior Bellerophon, who tamed Pegasus and the Amazons and slew the dragon-like Chimaera, called on Poseidon to inundate Xanthos; he was defeated by the women of Xanthos raising their skirts, driving back the waves, and frightening Pegasus. The display of the tabooed body part is a potent means of defeating evil (Allan and Burrige, 2006, p. 7).

just (1.0) ((laughter from the public)) don't be a penis (.) that should be the phrase (0.4) don't be a pussy (0.2) I wish I was a pussy (0.3) are you serious right now<sup>↑</sup> (0.7) don't be a penis that should be the saying. (Sequence AD1c).

This sequence in particular, shows how the dysphemistic expressions such as *don't be a pussy*, *don't be a penis*, and *the vagina* have several functions. On the one hand, these expressions are stylistically reflecting the informality and the colloquial side of the humorous discourse. On the other hand, they show Trevor Noah's point of view especially regarding the use of the derogative expression *don't be a pussy*.

From the pragmatic point of view, there are a few elements worth analyzing. *Virtually indestructible*, is used as a hyperbole to intensify the characteristics of the vagina and highlight its power. Furthermore, there is an instance of personification in the statement *you realize vaginas can start revolutions and end wars*. On this occasion, vaginas are portrayed as women, which is ironic since physically women are the ones to be born with vaginas. In that sense, Noah is siding up with women and giving them the respect and acknowledgement they deserve. It can even go beyond that, to an early feminist discourse from Noah's part. Additionally, there is another reference to women in the expression *the owner of the pussy* in which the comedian once again highlights women's power. The use of the uncertainty expression *I don't know* helps to mitigate Noah's commitment with what he knows for certain. Lastly, there is a marked repetition of the noun phrase of *human beings* that makes emphasis on how powerful is the vagina as human beings come out of it.

In addition, the humorous effect is accomplished on the power of the female reproductive organs and how its comparison with weakness irritates the comedian. Noah stated the facts on how the *pussy* is not near to being frail with expressions such as *you realize vaginas can start revolutions and end wars*, *virtually indestructible*, or *you realize human beings come out of a vagina*. In the first case, it alludes to the sexual power and nature of the vagina, while the other two refer to the physical resilience of the reproductive organ.

## 5. Conclusions

This study examined the use of taboo topics by Trevor Noah to deliver his humorous discourse. It has offered relevant data of the use of taboo topics by Trevor Noah in the search to deliver his humorous discourse. Through the different discursive strategies, namely orthophemistic, euphemistic and dysphemistic communications, the comedian navigated taboo topics like dark humor, sexual and racial, ethnic and minority humor as main conductors of his speech. Therefore, the use of the different discursive strategies served to the comedian's advantage and were directly related to the themes developed in his

comedy. Using taboo topics to deal with difficult communication instances is validated by the use of the racial, ethnic and minority topic intertwined with sexual and dark elements of taboo humor. Subsequently, he serves his comedy by using all the categories of taboo topics, with a particular emphasis on the racial, ethnic and minority taboo category.

The use of taboos in the corpus is noticeably representative of a speech full of discreet messages that are in turn mechanisms to avoid causing offense and cautiously protect the comedian's image at all times. Intentionally, Trevor Noah used different rhetoric-pragmatic strategies as mitigation, similes, direct speech and intertextuality to render a vision of his humorous discourse in terms of uncomfortable truths. These strategies, along with the taboo topics helped dismantle ideals and share hard truths openly. In the case of the orthophemistic communication, the neutrality was vivid by using just a few similes or an instance of conditionals. It was conveyed to serve an informative, and even referential purpose. In turn, when euphemistic communication was in place, the constant use of similes was evident to masquerade the speech, as well as mitigation strategies, and an ample use of intertextuality. Euphemism lessened the impact of the discourse whilst protecting the social image of the comedian and that of the participants in the communication process. What is very common in his discourse is the use of direct speech as an element of the rhetoric-pragmatic strategy of role playing. This was present in almost all communications, reinforcing his typical performative strategy. Finally, in the dysphemistic communication the comedian made use again of mitigation and similes. In this occasion hyperboles and personification were more common and reinforced the dysphemistic discourse. Dysphemism empowered the speaker, the comedian tended to be intimate and got close to the public by sharing his jokes openly which was palpable in his vocabulary and directness.

In sum, the data gave a clear understanding of the humorous discourse of the comedian that was nurtured by taboos to construct his speech. It revealed that the comedian tends to mitigate his speech and to use a fair amount of similes to convey his humorous discourse. Moreover, it also consolidated that his ability to speak and be fluent in several languages is used as a performative strategy aided by a constant use of direct speech in the role play strategy. It also solidified that his upbringing and family history influenced the thematic and direction of his humorous discourse, and that the idea that the racial theme of Trevor Noah's comedy is indispensable and builds his stand-up immensely.

This study is not completed as the comedian continues to work and perform in scenarios all over the world, and he is currently on a worldwide tour presenting a new stand-up comedy show. This, in turn, opens opportunities to develop new lines of research with different variables to be studied. In fact, his standup can be compared and examined from other colleagues' point of view

that construct their humorous discourse on Race/Ethnicity mainly. Moreover, a deep analysis of the relationship between the public/audience and the comedian could be explored in contributing to enhance his routines and humorous discourse.

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**Received: 12/04/2024**

**Accepted: 27/05/2024**