

Code-Switching in Jordanian Stand-Up Comedy: A Humor Tool and a Means to Reflect Social Diversity

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Abstract

This article discusses the function of code-switching in Jordanian stand-up comedy. Drawing on Hoffman (1991) and Troike (1982), analysis of twenty performances presented by Jordanian stand-up comedians revealed that the alternation between colloquial Jordanian Arabic, the dialect these performances are mainly delivered in, Standard Arabic, and sometimes English does not only emphasize the humorous role of this genre, but also reflects the social diversity among Jordanians and helps in building rapport with them regardless of their different backgrounds.

Keywords: *Code switching, stand-up comedy, colloquial Jordanian, Standard Arabic, social diversity.*

1. Introduction

Code-switching is the alternation between two or more language varieties and according to Aranda (2014: 71), this phenomenon is ‘natural for many bilinguals especially in private settings.’ Many theories have dealt with code-switching and described it in a myriad of ways. Few studies have examined it vis-à-vis its utilization in humorous discourses; especially in the art of stand-up comedy. A case in point here is Jordanian stand-up comedy which includes switching reciprocally between different dialects and sometimes languages. For the purpose of the present study, analysis of the data is drawn upon Hoffamn (1991) and Troike (1982) to examine the functions of code-switching in the discourse of Jordanian stand-up comedy bearing in mind that Jordanian society is not considered to be bilingual yet diverse.

1.1.Theories of humor and stand-up comedy

Humor, the umbrella term for multiple nomenclatures as joke, sarcasm, wit, satire, ridicule, and mockery, has the power through interpreting the paradox of existence to mock life imperfections (Hassaine, 2014). It is seen as a main element in daily communications as all people share in humorous speech and behavior (Schwarz ,2010). Regarding the fact that it is associated with laughter and feelings of happiness (Filani, 2015), humor is said to have the power to bring people together (Katayama , 2009).

Being universal yet contemporaneously culture-specific (Aranda 2014), humor demands highly sensitive and cultural competence in order to be appropriately expressed and well appreciated. That is to say, what seems to be funny in one culture might be inappropriate in another (Katayama ,2009).

In view of the forgoing, the discourse of humor seems to be very pervasive and difficult to analyze; hence, it has been a focus for study to many scholars who have examined it from a philosophical, psychological, sociolinguistic, anthropological, and linguistic standpoints. Given the fact that language is embedded with meaning, and humor is mainly expressed through language, humor has been probed also by many linguists as it helps in describing, understanding, and stating principles which surround the process where humour is used in language (Filani, 2015).

Linguistic studies on humor have had the interest of examining the structure of the joking frame and the way the joker and the receiver participate in developing the interactional involvement (Rutter ,2000), and though communicators use humor for various rhetorical purposes, the receiver of that humor is the one who decides the way it is interpreted in and the actual function it serves (Meyer, 2000). Therefore, humor might get problematic sometimes; accordingly, it has traditionally been explored based on the three theories of humour: incongruity, superiority, and release theories.

Incongruity theories, referred to as inappropriateness, paradox, and dissimilarity (Raskin, 1985), entail making sense of the nonsense (Aranda, 2014). Incongruity can be traced back to Aristotle, yet Kant (1724- 1804) and Schopenhauer (1788- 1860) are said to be the first authors generally to deal with incongruity theories of humor as they see the element of suddenness, which results from the fact that your expectations have turned into nothing, is what causes laughter (Attardo, 1994). Accordingly, humor here results from the clash between what the recipient expects and what is actually delivered. That is to say, laughter is caused by the incongruity resulting from two conflicting meanings, and this in its turn leads to ambiguity, one of the most important features of humor (Schwarz, 2010).

On the other hand, contemporary researchers such as La Fave (1972), Lixfeld (1978), Grunner (1978), and Mio and Graesser (1991) are said to be proponents of superiority theories (Attardo, 1994). Superiority theories, referred to also as hostility theories, have to do more with the negative and aggressive side of humor (Schwarz, 2010) in which we experience superiority over people we do not like or, more yet, toward whom we feel hatred. This stresses the fact that hostility theories deal with humor on an emotional level (Aranda, 2014); hence the reason to be represented in many psychological researches, labeled as disparagement (Raskin, 1985).

Release theories are psychological in nature (Aranda, 2014) as they release tension, inhibition, and psychic energy in general (Attardo, 1994). Humor here liberates one from the conventions related to, for instance, talking about taboo topics (Schwarz, 2010) or the need to operate under certain constraints (Raskin, 1985). By and large, these theories do not contradict each other; they are compatible and supplement each other nicely, yet deal with humor from different angles (Raskin, 1985).

A case in point here is the art of standup comedy, one genre of humour. Standup comedy is ‘an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of custom, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle’ Mintz (1985: 71). In other words, it is a performance in which the comedian stands in front of a live audience with a microphone (Schwarz, 2010) and the content varies from political to everyday encounters (Jakoaho & Mrjamaki, 2012).

This form of entertainment has become a focus for study during the last few decades among many researchers who have explored it from different perspectives. Mintz (1985) opines that the standup comedian is a social mediator who has the power of effectively changing society through criticizing social issues. In line with this, the comedian is also seen as a social critic who analyzes, evaluates, and judges these issues and opens people’s eyes on some unspoken knowledge (Koziski, 1997) possibly by giving the floor to interpret life’s contradictions, incongruities, and absurdities differently (Smith, 2015).

In addition to that, pragmatic strategies utilized in such performances were one of interest. Adetunji (2013) put attention on some like stereotyping, coding, and formulaic expressions. Hassaine (2014) focused only on code-switching and how this phenomenon could be motivated by the change of setting, participants, and context. Filani (2015) viewed it as an activity type where the comedian and his audience work together in order to reach their interactional goals. On a more textual level, Rutter (1997) and Scrapetta & Spagnolli (2009) focused more on the layout of the performances: the way the comedian starts, ends, expands successful jokes, and refers to his audience.

1.2. Code switching in stand-up comedy

The phenomenon of code-switching is said to be found in the discourse of humor. Aranda (2014) studied code-switching in Iglesias’ stand-up comedy performances, a stand-up Mexican American comedian, who is said to use code-switching as a euphemism tool for taboo words together with using it to quote as well as to express identity. Aranda (2014) states that in all these three cases the comedian succeeded to elicit laughter. Wells (2011) analyzed George Lopez’ performances, a Spanish-English comedian, and found that he does not code-switch only to accommodate with his audience but also to generate humor. Mutheu (2015) explains the aforementioned function in lights of incongruity theories. He explains that code-mixing leads to incongruity by deviating from what the hearer expects to hear, hence creating humor.

1.3. Code switching: types and functions

Code-switching ‘involves the alternate use of two languages or linguistic varieties within the same utterance’ (Hoffman, 1991: 110). In other words, you are said to code-switch when you change languages in a certain speech event (Troike, 1982). Code-switching, according to Hoffman (1991) and Troike (1982), can be divided to multiple types depending on the scope of that language change. Intrasentential switches occur in the scope of single sentences, while on the other hand switches that occur between different speech acts are called inter-sentential. The latter, sometimes, is being referred to as code-mixing. Some avoid such a term that might lead to unnecessary confusion though it is a matter of personal preference to use one of which (Boztepe, 2003). According to Hoffman (1991), changing a word within a sentence or even changing pronunciation goes also under the umbrella of code-switching. Troike (1982) goes further to distinguish between situational, metaphorical, and discourse contextualization switching. While situational switching includes change of topics or participants, metaphorical switching happens within the scope of the same situation. In addition to that, changing codes to quote or to separate certain linguistic forms from other verbal contexts is called discourse contextualization switching.

Code-switching might have been studied from different perspectives in different discourses where speakers are said to be bilinguals, yet no study was found to shed light on code-switching in Jordanian stand-up comedy where the performers and the audience alike are considered to be monolingual. Hence, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. In which part of the performance do the comedians code-switch?
2. What are the types of code-switching utilized in these parts?
3. What are the possible functions behind code-switching in such a discourse?

2. Data and Procedures

Data collected were available on YouTube, so selected performances were downloaded then transcribed by the researcher. A corpus of 20 performances was chosen randomly to then being narrowed down to those delivered only by the comedians Rjai Qawwas and Rwsan Hallak for serving the aim of the present study the most.

Performances were analyzed according to their main components. I examined the occurrences of code switching with all its types in the introduction of the performance, the body, and the closing separately to better understand its functions as it will be illustrated in the following section.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Rawsan Hallak and Rajai Qawwas are Jordanian stand-up comedians who were first known through their performances in N2O, a show broadcasted by the YouTube channel Kharabeesh. Rajai started in 2006 through his modest performances in a coffeeshop in downtown Amman to then, years later, hit it big and began performing in many other countries all over the world. His colleague, Rawsan, a civil engineer, also found both her passion and herself in stand-up comedy and showed up lately in the Netflix series “Comedians of the World”. In response to criticism to sometimes crossing the lines in raising certain issues related to the Jordanian society, Rajai says that his material stems only from the society we live in, and if people happen not to like some words used then they got nothing but to change the reality these words are derived from.

Apropos of the foregoing, Jordan was and still is, throughout history, quite a home for many people from many different cultures and ethnicities. This can be noted from its different societal groups including Circassians, Kurds, Turkomans, Chechens, and Armenians. Not to mention, of course, Palestinian-origin Jordanians who had to come to Jordan during their 1948 and 1967 wars with Israel.

In the light of the aforementioned, different dialects, alongside Modern Standard Arabic which is the language of media, are said to be used among Jordanians. According to Abushihab (2015), the four major dialects spoken in Jordan are: Urban, Rural, Bedouin, and Palestinian.

This variety can highly be noted in the performances analyzed. Comedians mainly used Jordanian colloquial Arabic in their routines and were found to switch in certain places to English, other times to Standard Arabic, and sometimes switched between Urban, *Madani*, and Rural, *Fallaḥi*, dialects reciprocally.

First of all, intrasentential switching occurred where comedians moved from speaking in Jordanian colloquial Arabic to Standard Arabic. This happened frequently in different places throughout these performances.

According to Al-Quran (2017) and by examining the generic structure of Jordanian stand-up comedy, the component moves observed in these routines were the introduction of the performance, body and closing. Scrutiny of the data for the present study shows that switching to Modern Standard Arabic was noted to appear in all these three components, yet carrying different functions.

In the introduction of the performance, it was highly noticed that comedians tend to switch to Standard Arabic. This can be explained as to help them grab their audience attention from the very beginning of the performance. The following is a case in point:

(1) bida:jit miʃwa:r il kannih wil ħama:yih , bida:yih muʃriqah li ħaya:h wardyih la:kinnaha: muʔaqatih.

(The beginning of a mother-in-law-daughter-in-law relationship is one promising a very bright life, but it is all temporary).

The comedian switched to Standard Arabic in words like / *muʃriqah*/ and /*la:kinnaha:*/, as shown above. The reason to such switches can be referred to the fact that Standard Arabic is the variety which is considered to be the most formal. Starting off with a sense of formality might help in getting the audience hooked since it violates their expectation of delivering the performance in Jordanian colloquial. To grasp the audience attention, according to Filani (2015), is one of the comedian's goals in the activity type of stand-up comedy that can be seen as an attempt to get their blessings and approval. He also states that this is usually achieved through the use of paralanguage and shared knowledge.

Expressing shared knowledge with the audience is manifested in the introduction of the performances by contextualization switching through quoting. This process usually requires the transition from colloquial to Standard Arabic since it mainly includes referring to sayings, proverbs, or verses from poems.

(2) il ʔum ja zama:ʃah iʃi: kti:r kti:r kti:r muhim 'ʔal ʔumu madrasatun'.

(the mother plays a very very very important role in our lives. 'the mother is such a school').

/ʔal ʔumu madrasatun/ is where Standard Arabic is being used which is a verse from a very well-known poem for Ahmad Shawqi, one of the greatest Arabic poets nicknamed the prince of poets. Referring to events, people, places, or artistic work goes under the umbrella of the term allusion (Baldick, 1990) which can be achieved through direct quotations like in

the above example. Since allusion demands background knowledge, the comedian here assumes that he and the audience share one. This leads to build rapport with the audience, thus creating a sense of involvement. The strategy of involving the audience, according to Adetunji (2013), is one of great value, for it makes the comedian and the audience feel as if they were one community.

Contextualization switching from Jordanian colloquial to Modern Standard Arabic when direct-quoting was also noticed to occur in the closure as well. Switching to Standard Arabic at the end of the performance may have been utilized as to add a sense of seriousness indicating that the production of jokes has come to a halt, hence preparing the audience for the upcoming closure. According to Rutter (1997), all stand-up comedy shows share the same structure or moves in the closing part; one of which is paving the ground and preparing the audience for the closing through different devices. Sometimes, this can be achieved by simply announcing their willingness to finish.

Regarding the body of these performances, which is considered to be the backbone of Jordanian stand-up comedy shows where telling jokes and utilizing different techniques as to elicit laughter happens the most (Al-Quran, 2017), intrasentential code-switching functions in like manner in this part as to generate humor.

(3) kul waḥdih bta:xud za:wyih ʔu bitballif tibki:, bil ʕagil tʕabʕan, ʔu tundub ḥazha multa tʕimatal xad mandu:batal ḥa ʔʕ.

(Every girl sits in a corner crying on her misfortune.)

The above example is extracted from Rawsan's performance in which she ridicules Jordanian girls' behavior at weddings. The topic being introduced is one of no significant importance, so using Standard Arabic, the language of media, may trick the audience to perceive some sense of seriousness, to shortly after, that perception would be abruptly violated. Justified by incongruity theories of humor where the element of suddenness creates laughter, the sudden clash between what the audience expected to be of weighty issue and apace turned out to be not is thought to have the power to evoke laughter.

Likewise, this kind of switching took place in the body of the performances through switching from Arabic to English as in Rawsan's performances in which she triggers Jordanian girls.

(4) *Hi ḥabi:bti....tʕa:lʕa date.*

(hi darling...I'm going out on a date).

(5) *ħabi:bi ki:f ħa:lak ?? kte:r nifsi bi ha:d il dress.*

(how are you baby? I so badly want this dress).

(6) *il ze:t wil maj tabaġu:n is-saja:ra... wasax everywhere zba:lih everywhere.*

(the car's oil and water ... it's all dirty and there's trash everywhere).

The above examples are extracted from Rawsan's performance in which she mocks Jordanian girls. Such switches may have taken place in order to ridicule girls as they always want to sound classier and more prestigious, hence the use of some English words within their speech even though Jordanians are not bilinguals. This goes in parallel with Akeel (2016), who explains that Arab women use some English in their speech as a sign to reflect their high social class.

Bearing in mind that the comedian is a female who happens to ridicule girls, one can say that the comedian here uses intrasentential code-switching as a means not only to mock the butt of the performance but also to make fun of oneself. Self-ridicule or self-deprecating is said to be used in standup comedy in order to create some sort of connection with the audience (Aranda, 2014). In addition, intrasentential code-switching was also used throughout these performances as to release inhibition as in the example below:

(7) *ʔu he:k shaklak ġabaġd'ak ʔalat' it's not personal ma tifhamni ʔalat'.*

(I don't feel you're a good worker, it's not personal. Don't get me wrong).

In this performance, Rajai chose to switch to English while shadowing his boss at work, thus humour here takes a more psychological level (Attardo, 1994) as to release the tension you hold towards a superior entity; in this case, your boss at work towards whom you have to behave under certain constraints. Be it as it may, inhibition here is being released through ridiculing bosses who use English to sound more intellectual, intelligent, and well-educated while their employees cannot confront them with the fact that, in some cases, they are not.

Furthermore, intrasentential switching occurred when changing between urban and rural dialects which happened sometimes unconsciously in the places where the comedian tells jokes using his/her own voice and other times consciously while impersonalizing others.

On one hand, switching unconsciously between these two dialects reflects the comedians' multicultural identities which stems from the fact that Jordanian society is a blend of different ethnicities and nationalities regarding that it has always welcomed refugees from different places throughout history, especially Palestinians with whom we are bound religiously, linguistically, and socio-culturally (Al-Ali, 2005). According to Hassaini (2014), this kind of switches helps in expressing solidarity and meeting with the audience by simply taking into account all the dialectal differences among them.

The performances analyzed are replete with urban */madani/* and rural */falla:hi/* switches where the comedians diversify the dialects utilized through unconsciously replacing the sounds /z/, /t/ and /ʔ/ with /ð/, /θ/ and /g/ representing */madani/* and */falla:hi/* respectively:

(8) hassa min aħla il ʃayla:t fil bana:t wa xus^su:s^san ʔiza ka:nat ħilwih ʔu kuntu: ga:ʃdi:n fi shillih ... zayha zay kol ʔilli ʔa:ʃdi:n ...

(One of the most beautiful things in girls, especially if that girl is pretty, and you were all setting together, they act similar to their friends sitting with them...).

(9) biru:ħu biʒi:bu wa:ħad θa:liθ biʃtiyil ʃanhum ittine:n

(They go bring someone else to work for them both).

(10) ʔinta ʔilmafru:d^s tʃu:f ʔinʒa:za:t ʔiða ʔinta biddak tʃu:fni baʃtaʃil taʃa:l yaxi ʔu ʃu:f ʔiza ʔil mawd^su:ʃ mawd^su:ʃ ʃo:f

(You should focus on the achievements not on the work itself. If you want to see me work then come and see me work ...).

As illustrated in the above examples, the comedian shifted between urban and rural dialects within the same speech event. In example (8), the word */za:lisu:n/*, meaning we are sitting in Standard Arabic, was used in its colloquial form; one time in the */falla:hi/* dialect: */ga:ʃdi:n/* and another in the */madani/* dialect: */ʔa:ʃdi:n/* by using the voiced velar plosive sound /g/ in the first and replacing it with the glottal stop /ʔ/ in the second. The same applies to */θa:liθ/* and */ittine:n/* using the voiceless interdental fricative sound /θ/, commonly used in */falla:hi/*, then replacing it with the voiceless denti-alveolar plosive sound /t/ in */ittine:n/* the way /θ/ is articulated in */madani/*, and to */ʔiða/* and */ʔiza/* where the voiced interdental fricative sound /ð/ is used in */falla:hi/* and the voiced alveolar fricative /z/ is used in */madani/*, in examples 9 and 10, respectively.

On the other hand, to consciously switch between */madani/* and */fallaḥ/* was noticed to occur hand in hand with the alternation of the setting, participants, and context. This is highly manifested in the parts where the comedians impersonalize different characters from the Jordanian society like in the one where the comedian Rajai Qawas mimics fathers in one of his performances as illustrated in the example below:

(11) Father: ya:ba ʔinta ma btiʕraf ya:ba ha:ð^ʕ fi hazzamana:t

(son, you don't know that, once upon a time, this person...).

The comedian chose to use the voiced velarized alveolar fricative */ð^ʕ/*, mainly used in */fallaḥi/*, in the word */ha:ð^ʕ/* meaning 'this' when imitating Jordanian fathers. While in fact, the comedian himself was noticed to use the voiced denti-alveolar plosive */d/*, the one used in */madani/*, hence using the word */ha:d/* instead of */ha:ð^ʕ/*. Referring to Abushihab (2015), this can be explained by the fact that young Jordanians tend to use the urban dialect a lot more than the old generation due to its prestigious status while the elderly, on the other hand, sticks to their ethnic dialects. Imitating the way in which the elderly speaks does not only reflect the dialectal diversity among Jordanians but also helps in addressing the different age groups among the audience so all can feel involved, and this would certainly build solidarity among the comedian and his/ her audience regardless of their differences.

4. Conclusion

Being governed by components of speech events, code switching is said to have a myriad of functions. This study focused on code-switching appearing in humorous discourses; specifically, in Jordanian stand-up comedy. Scrutiny of the data showed that Jordanian stand-up comedy performances are mainly delivered in Jordanian colloquial Arabic. Comedians were noted to "intrasentential" switch to English, Standard Arabic, and mostly altering between urban and rural dialects reciprocally. Whether it was to mock the butt, to self-ridicule, to release tension, or to add the element of suddenness, the implementation of code switching in such a genre definitely aimed at generating humor. In addition to that, discourse contextualization where Standard Arabic is used in order to quote helped in building rapport and creating a sense of involvement with the audience through expressing shared knowledge. It is said to also be used as to grab the audience attention from the very beginning of the show and to indicate the stoppage of jokes' production at the end by adding some sense of seriousness.

Creating solidarity and always trying to involve the audience were not solely achieved through expressing shared knowledge with them but also by frequently switching between rural and urban dialects throughout these performances. This happened consciously with the change of setting, participants, and context when impersonalizing characters from the Jordanian society and unconsciously within the same speech event; such switches are said to help in reflecting the social variety among Jordanians and, simultaneously, the comedians' unflinching attempts to address this diversified audience.

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التناوب اللغوي في الكوميديا الارتجالية الأردنية؛ أداة لخلق الفكاهة وعكس

الاختلافات المجتمعية

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ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة الهدف من استخدام التناوب اللغوي في الكوميديا الارتجالية الأردنية. لتحقيق هذا الهدف، وتم اختيار عشرين عرضاً كوميدياً، وتحليلها استناداً إلى هوفمان (1991)، وترويك (1982). وأظهرت النتائج أنّ التناوب اللغوي بين اللهجة الأردنية المحكية - والتي استخدمت بشكل رئيسي في تقديم هذه العروض - واللغة العربية الفصحى، وأحياناً اللغة الإنجليزية، لم يكن الغرض منه كوميدياً فقط، وإنما الوصول للجمهور الأردني بالرغم من الاختلافات الثقافية المجتمعية بينهم.

الكلمات الدالة: التناوب اللغوي، الكوميديا الارتجالية، اللهجة الأردنية، اللغة العربية الفصحى، اختلافات مجتمعية.