Illocutionary Acts of Dave Chappelle's Stand-up Comedy
The Closer

Sahat Parulian Prantinus Kaban[1], Akhyar Rido[2]
sahat.tugas@gmail.com[1], akhyar_rido@teknokrat.ac.id [2]

Universitas Teknokrat Indonesia

Abstract

This study examines the use of illocutionary acts in Dave Chappelle's stand-up comedy *The Closer*, focusing on its micro classes and literal meanings. Utilizing the framework established by Searle (1969) and employing a qualitative methodology, this study collects the data through library research. The findings reveal that Dave Chappelle's stand-up comedy uses four micro classes of illocutionary acts, consisting of assertive, directive, expressive, and commissive. Assertive acts become the most prevalent micro classes used by Dave Chappelle (604 data), indicating his authority delivery by asking questions, giving comments, or making requests. After that, directive acts are used to engage the audiences during the performance (74 data) by using personal anecdotes. Following that, expressive acts are utilized to show his emotional connection to the content (42 data) through conveying his psychological state. Finally, commissive acts are employed to indicate commitment on his personal concern (17 data) by making promises or expressing his intention. To conclude, this study provides better understanding of stand-up comedy as a performative speech blending humor with social commentary. Future study should explore audience reception to better understand comedic performances' societal impact.

Keywords: Illocutionary Acts, micro classes, stand-up comedy, Dave Chappelle.

Introduction

This study examines the use of micro classes of illocutionary acts in Dave Chappelle's stand-up comedy *The Closer*. Stand-up comedy, at its core, serves as a persuasive form of communication, aiming to entertain and sway the audience. As a part of public speaking, this art certainly requires skill and courage (Amelia et al., 2022). The success of stand-up comedy hinges on the comedian's ability to convince the audience to adopt their comedic perspective and see the world through their unique lens (Greenbaum, 1999). Considering that these comedians are able to empower their communication and language skills well. Moreover, the use of appropriate language for a specific purpose can improve the atmosphere (Pranoto & Suprayogi, 2020). Its popularity has surged worldwide, leading to the emergence of numerous comedians, commonly known as comics. These comics come from diverse backgrounds and racial identities, gaining international recognition and appealing to audiences in various ways.

However, several internationally renowned comics have sparked global discussions due to the controversies surrounding their performances. It should be noted that stand-up comedy has the potential to deeply engage audiences by employing satire and social commentary to address current events, politics, social issues, and cultural norms. While some individuals may find the narratives presented in stand-up comedy offensive and one such comic who has faced criticism from various groups is Dave Chappelle, particularly concerning his stand-up comedy specials *The Closer* (McCarthy, 2021), which forms a narrative that Dave Chappelle is degrading several groups and then made a massive cancellation of many affairs of him.

Many studies investigated stand-up comedy with different focus, such as the interactional context of humor in Nigerian stand-up comedy (Adetunji, 2022), conversational

maxims flouted to achieve verbal humor in stand-up comedy (Nancy et al., 2023), and discourse types in stand-up comedy (Filani, 2015). The study by Adetunji (2022) highlights the main pragmatic strategies used by Nigerian stand-up comedians to engage their audiences in creating humour. The analysis found that linguistic coding, stereotyping, formulas, call-and-response, self-deprecation, and shared experiences were key in involving both the comedian and the audience in humour production and consumption, minimizing the comedian's stage authority. It concludes that Nigerian stand-up comedy's unique interactional tenor is based on linguistic coding, especially the code-switching between Nigerian Pidgin and English.

Meanwhile Nancy et al. (2023) investigate conversational maxims flouted in the Churchill Show to create verbal humor by using descriptive qualitative and relying on the Gricean cooperative principle and Relevance theory. The findings reveal that the selected stand-up comedians flouted all four conversational maxims to generate humor. This research contributes to the field of pragmatics, particularly regarding Grice's conversational maxims and implicatures.

Moreover, Adetunji (2022) applies discourse-type theory to stand-up comedy by analysing two contexts in stand-up joking stories: the context of the joke and the context in the joke. The context of the joke is inflexible and embodies the collective beliefs of comedians and their audience. In contrast, the context in the joke is dynamic and includes the joke utterance, participants, and the activity/situation within the joke. These contexts interact during routines. The study reveal that comedians perform specific discourse types, such as greeting, reporting, and informing, which can further split into self-praising and self-denigrating acts.

Theory and Method

Searle (1969) expands the development of illocutionary act theory, which encompass assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative acts. These micro classes categorize how speakers assert, command, promise, express feelings, or create new states of affairs through their speech. Illocutionary acts analysis extends to various contexts, including artistic forms like stand-up comedy, where jokes can serve not only to entertain but also to convey social commentary or provoke reflection.

The current study utilizes a qualitative research approach which facilitates a systematic examination of different illocutionary act categories and their significance within the comedy specials. Qualitative data, comprising textual information, images, or physical items, focuses on descriptive details and subjective viewpoints Creswell (2014). Meanwhile, the primary data source of this study consists of text documents extracted from transcribed videos, specifically Dave Chappelle's stand-up comedy *The Closer*, selected for their relevance to the study's timeframe.

For data analysis, Creswell (2014) outlines a systematic approach for qualitative data analysis, starting from data collection and familiarization, through information compilation and the establishment of an initial coding system, to the creation of descriptive accounts identifying patterns or themes. The process continues with the development of a framework connecting codes, descriptions, and themes, culminating in data interpretation and comprehensive findings reporting, ensuring a robust qualitative research analysis. The analysis involves categorizing the process of each joke or comedic segment in the transcript of Dave Chapple's stand-up comedy *The Closer*. Finally, the micro classes of illocutionary acts and its literal meanings in each joke are presented and discussed.

Findings

This study focuses on two main objectives. First, it identifies the micro classes of illocutionary acts used by Dave Chappelle in his stand-up comedy *The Closer*. Second, it

elaborates the literal meanings of these illocutionary acts in Chappelle's statements. The general findings are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Micro Classes of Illocutionary Acts*

Micro Classes	Total
Assertive	604
Directive	74
Expressive	42
Commissive	17

Table 1. summarizes the number of illocutionary acts in five micro classes appeared in Dave Chappelle's entire performance. The total number of illocutionary acts found, analyzed, and discussed is 738, comprising 604 assertive acts, 74 directive acts, 42 expressive acts, and 17 commissive acts. Some extracts are presented below.

A. Assertive

Assertive illocutionary act is a type of micro class of speech act that commits the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition (Searle, 1969). The primary function of an assertive is to represent how things are. As a form of speech that aims to convey jokes, stand-up comedy generally contains more assertive illocutionary acts in practice. Dave Chappelle certainly displays a lot of information in his speech as well as descriptions, explanations, and other forms of assertive illocutionary act. There are 604 assertive illocutionary acts and some are presented below (Extracts 1-2).

Extract 1

Any of you, who have ever watched me know that I've never had a problem with transgender people. If you listen to what I'm saying, clearly my problem has always been with White people.

Based on extract 1 above, Dave took J.K Rowling as the example of powerful people that has been cancelled by trans community. He claimed J.K Rowling as someone more powerful than him and describe that claim with exaggeration. Dave claiming about his stand against transgender community and follows with another claim where he stated the real concern, he always brings up to all of his material. These two claims are the respond to those claims about him degrading the LGBTQ+ community related to his last three specials that always cover LGBTQ+ community issues. The statement followed by more explanations where he emphasized that he only has problem with one community which is white people. He mentioned some of the concerns about the community that he brought up in his specials and concluded that it everything he said was not specifically to one group yet everything about the community in general.

Extract 1 above is categorized as assertive illocutionary act. The utterances shows that Dave Chappelle asserts stronger declarations where he confidently claims something to be true. These assertive illocutionary acts are set up by several story that experienced by Dave Chappelle with transgender people and those who believe that he hates the LGBTQ+ community. Continuing these two expressions, Dave continued his discussion regarding his attitudes and opinions regarding similar issues.

Extract 2

They don't hate transgender women but they look at trans women the way we Blacks might look at Black face.

In Extract 2 above, Dave concluded his understanding about the definition of TERF that stands for Trans-exclusionary Radical Feminist. This term is attributed by the trans community to J.K Rowling. Dave mentioned this event as the beginning of his discussion about what trans community do to some people he knew. A brief explanation about the reason this event was also mentioned before.

Extract 2 above is considered as assertive illocutionary act as Dave Chappelle gives statements that put forward a belief or opinion that may be open to challenge or debate. He mentions a brief explanation about how great J.K Rowling in his view which obviously open to be challenged. Moreover, he makes a conclusion about his understanding about the term TERF, but the conclusion is something that never been officially stated as the definition of the term

B. Directive

A directive illocutionary act, as explained by John Searle (1969), is a type of micro class of speech act that attempts to get the hearer to do something. Unlike assertive, which is about stating how things are, directives are about trying to influence the behavior of the hearer. In some part of his speech, Dave Chappelle also does the directive illocutionary act in form of command, question, advice and other. There are 74 directive illocutionary acts found in this study and some are presented below (Extracts 3-4).

Extract 3
Do you see where I am going with this?

Extract 3 above is a part of discussion where Dave Chappelle brought up what happened to one of famous rapper known as DaBaby who had faced cancellation after making homophobic comments at a recent concert in the Miami area. Dave tried to establish the context about what impact DaBaby got after having problem with the LGBTQ+ community. He continued the discussion by mentioning another fact about the criminal history of DaBaby who killed a man and nothing happened to him. These two cases became the bases of his argument as he emphasized the contrast the impact of those cases.

Extract 3 is considered as directive illocutionary act where he asked a question and seek fo confirmation or understanding from the audiences. The primary intention was to gain information about whether the hearer was following the speaker's line of reasoning or thought process. While not a direct command or request, this question can carry a subtle directive component. The speaker might be implicitly urging the hearer to pay attention, follow the reasoning, or think in a certain direction.

Extract 4
No, no, go back, go back tonight after the show, watch every special I did on Netflix. Listen to everything I've ever said about that community.

Based on Extract 4 above, Dave told the audiences to watch all the shows he did on Netflix again. This refers to claims that he demeans some groups in all his Netflix specials before. Dave went on to make a more specific request by asking the audience to listen to his words about community. This command is one of the emphasizing of his argument that he never degraded any community except white people (Extract 1)

The Extract 4 was considered as directive illocutionary act since Dave instructed the audiences to take specific actions—namely to go back, watch every special, and listen to everything the speaker has said about a particular community. The phrasing indicates a

command. The speaker gives explicit instructions to be followed. The directive involves future actions by the hearer, specifying the time and the actions to be taken.

C. Expressive

Expressive illocutionary act is a type of micro class of speech act where the speaker expresses their psychological state or attitude about a particular situation or event. John Searle (1969) stated the primary function of expressive is to convey the speaker's feelings, attitudes, or emotional responses. They reflect the speaker's internal psychological state regarding some situation. Dave several times expressed what he felt about several issues and incidents that happened to him. Several expressions are used repeatedly, such as feeling annoyed and confused. There are 42 expressive illocutionary acts found in this study and some are presented below (Extracts 5-6).

Extract 5
I feel bad for him.

In Extract 5 above, Dave expressed his feelings about Mike Pence, who served as Vice President under Donald Trump, as a sad gay man. This claim is not a fact that can be verified and makes his statement, in the context of a joke, a form of satire. His satirical and comedic exaggeration of Mike Pence refers to the vice president being known for his conservative views, particularly his opposition to LGBTQ rights and same-sex marriage. By labeling him as gay, Chappelle plays on the irony and perceived hypocrisy of someone who is outspoken against LGBTQ rights for being part of the group he opposes.

Extract 5 is considered as expressive illocutionary act since the primary function of this phrase is to express the speaker's emotional response or attitude toward someone else's situation. In this case, the speaker is expressing sympathy or compassion. However, related to the context of satire, the phrase does not act exactly like it should. The phrase would then serve to criticize or mock the idea of sympathy rather than genuinely express it. Despite the literal meaning of feeling bad for someone, the context of satire suggests that Dave does not genuinely hold this sentiment. Instead, he uses the phrase to make a satirical point or commentary. But, in the composition of the speech, Dave Chappelle uses this phrase to act as expressive illocutionary act.

Extract 6
Beautiful tweet, beautiful friend, it took a lot of heart to defend me like that

Extract 6 above is one of the many expressive illocutionary acts in Daphne Dorman's discussion topic, where in this topic the most expressive illocutionary acts are found and the most positive expressions are found in this topic. Daphne Dorman herself is a good friend of Dave Chappelle who is a transgender. Dave told how he met Daphne and the good relationship the two of them had. In this topic, the fact is revealed that Daphne killed herself not long after defending Dave on accusations of demeaning transgender people. The statement above is Dave's reaction to Daphne's actions in willing to defend Dave from people who could be said to be Daphne's own people. Dave first conveyed what the tweet Daphne wrote at that time was like and became a relevant reason for the expressive illocutionary act that Dave conveyed the phrase above.

Extract 6 is considered as expressive illocutionary act since the primary function of this statement is to express appreciation and admiration for someone's supportive action. Dave acknowledged the positive impact of a friend's tweet and the effort involved in defending him. The Phrase is an expressive illocutionary act that combines compliment and gratitude,

conveying Dave's genuine appreciation and admiration for the supportive actions of their friend.

D. Commissive

A commissive illocutionary act, according to John Searle's (1969), is a type of micro class of speech act that commits the speaker to a future course of action. By making a commissive statement, the speaker undertakes a commitment that they will act in a certain way in the future. Dave Chappelle has several times made commitments, promises, or other statements that act as a commitment that they will act in a certain way in the future regardless of whether it happens on the show or at another time in the future. There are 17 commissive illocutionary acts found in this study and some are presented below (Extracts 7-8).

Extract 7

I'll be ready to have the conversation that I'm not ready to have today. But I'll tell that little girl, 'Young lady, I knew your father......and he was a wonderful woman.'

Extract 7 above is a commitment that Dave conveyed to the audience about what he would do to his friend's daughter, Daphne. He said this after he revealed the fact that Daphne killed herself and left behind a very young daughter. Dave said that he was waiting for the girl to be 21 years old so that she would be ready to convey what she couldn't convey at this time. Apart from that, Dave also revealed the fact that he had prepared expenses for Daphne's daughter which he would later provide.

Extract 7 is considered as commissive illocutionary act since it continues to imply a commitment or intention to communicate something to the little girl in the future. This aligns with a commissive illocutionary act where the speaker commits to delivering a message. Those phrases indicate personal growth or readiness over time and, in contrast, humorously or ironically shifts focus to a different scenario involving a humorous or unexpected remark about someone's father. Therefore, while the sentence *"But I'll say that little girl, 'Young lady, I knew your father... and he was a wonderful woman'"* contains elements of commissive (intending to tell the little girl something) and expressive (using humor or irony), it's also consisted the effect to provide humor or irony rather than straightforward communication of information or commitment.

Extract 8

I'm not telling another joke about you

Based on extract 8 above, Dave conveyed his decision to no longer discuss the LGBTQ+ community. This is the sentence he delivered towards the end of his performance and part of the conclusion to the entire discussion he conveyed in this performance. He stated that he wouldn't want to make jokes about the community if they could not laugh together. This refers to his previous statement that he did not aim to degrade any group and only had problems with white people.

Extract 8 is considered as commissive illocutionary act since the primary function of this statement is to make a commitment or declaration regarding future behavior. In this case, the speaker is committing to refrain from telling any more jokes about the person mentioned. Commissive speech acts like this plays a role in setting expectations, establishing boundaries, and managing relationships. By making such commitments, speakers can demonstrate respect, sensitivity, and consideration for others' feelings. However, in this context, this is also the expression illocutionary act by Dave Chappelle as he's done mentioning specific group since they do not take the joke as a joke.

Discussion

The findings reveal a complex interplay of the use of micro classes of illocutionary acts within Dave Chappelle's stand-up comedy *The Closer*. The predominant use of assertive acts highlights Chappelle's authoritative delivery; a characteristic that aligns with the performative nature of stand-up comedy where the comedian aims to present a coherent worldview to the audience. The high frequency of assertive acts underscores Chappelle's approach to comedy as a platform for stating opinions, narrating experiences, and delivering social commentary. This finding resonates with the work of Greenbaum (1999), who emphasized the comedian's role in convincing the audience to see the world through their lens. The presence of directive acts further illustrates Chappelle's engagement strategy, where he actively involves the audience by asking questions, giving commands, or making requests. This aligns with Searle's (1969) categorization of directive acts, which are intended to influence the behavior of the hearer. The utterance *Do you see where I am going with this?* (Extract 3) is an example that shows Dave's used of directive speech acts serves to engage the audience, prompting them to follow his line of reasoning and reflect on the issues he raises.

Expressive acts in Chappelle's performance reveal his emotional connection to the content, as he often shares his feelings about various topics, from personal anecdotes to broader social issues. This use of expressive acts aligns with the findings of Pranoto & Suprayogi (2020), who noted that appropriate language use can significantly enhance the atmosphere of a performance. Chappelle's expressive acts, such as *beautiful tweet, beautiful friend, it took a lot of heart to defend me like* (Extract 6) convey his psychological state and help humanize his commentary, fostering a deeper connection with the audience. The least frequent illocutionary acts in Chappelle's performance are commissive acts which involve the speaker committing to a future action. These acts highlight moments where Chappelle makes promises or expresses his intentions, such as in his commitment to no longer joke about certain communities. This aspect of his performance reflects Searle's (1969) notion of commissive acts as a means of establishing future commitments, further illustrating the multifaceted nature of Chappelle's comedic narrative.

Comparing these findings with previous studies on stand-up comedy reveals both commonalities and unique aspects of Chappelle's style. Adetunji (2022) examined pragmatic strategies in Nigerian stand-up comedy, highlighting techniques such as linguistic coding and self-deprecation to engage the audience. While Chappelle also employs engagement strategies, his use of assertive and directive acts is particularly prominent, reflecting his authoritative and confrontational style. Similarly, Nancy et al. (2023) found that comedians often flout conversational maxims to create humor, a technique Chappelle uses effectively to challenge societal norms and provoke thought. The study by Filani (2015) on discourse types in stand-up comedy provides additional context for understanding Chappelle's performance. Filani identified the interaction between the context of the joke and the context within the joke, which is evident in Chappelle's ability to shift between personal anecdotes and broader societal commentary. This dynamic interaction enhances the performative aspect of his comedy, allowing him to address sensitive topics with nuance and depth.

Conclusion

This study has thoroughly examines the use of illocutionary acts in Dave Chappelle's stand-up comedy *The Closer*, revealing a nuanced approach to comedic performance. The predominance of assertive acts indicates Chappelle's intention to assert his viewpoints and engage the audience through authoritative statements. His strategic use of directive, expressive, and commissive acts further demonstrates a multifaceted engagement with his audience, enhancing the overall impact of his comedy.

The findings align with existing literature on stand-up comedy, highlighting common techniques while also showcasing unique aspects of Chappelle's style. His ability to blend personal anecdotes with broader social commentary, while maintaining audience engagement, underscores his skill as a comedian and social commentator. This blend of humour and social critique not only entertains but also prompts audiences to reflect on pertinent societal issues.

Future research should explore the audience's reception of such performances to gauge their broader societal impact. Understanding how different demographics perceive and respond to Chappelle's comedy could provide deeper insights into the role of stand-up comedy in contemporary discourse. Overall, this study contributes to the field of pragmatics, especially comedic discourse, offering a detailed look at the illocutionary mechanisms that underpin effective stand-up comedy.

References

Adetunji, A. (2022). The interactional context of humor in Nigerian stand-up comedy. Pragmatics, 1-22.

Austin, J. L. (1975). How to Do Things with Words: Second Edition. J. O. Urmson, M. Sbisà, & M. Sbisà, Eds.; Vol. 1.

Astaman, & Rido. (2023). Direct commissive speech act in President Joe Biden's address to congress. Teknosastik: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra, 21(2), 78-92.

Amelia, Afrianto, Samanik, Suprayogi, Pranoto, & Gulö. (2022). improving publlic speaking ability through speech. Journal of Social Sciences and Technology for Community Service (JSSTCS), 3(2), 322-330.

Creswell, J. W. (2014b). Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, And Mixed Methods Approaches 4 edition. Retrieved from

https://library.umw.ac.id/index.php?p=show_detail&id=1755&keywords=

Fadilah, R., & Kuswoyo, H. (2021). Transitivity analysis of presidential debate between Trump and Biden in 2020. Linguistics and Literature Journal, 2(2), 98-107.

Filani, I. (2015). Discourse types in stand-up comedy performances: An example of Nigerian stand-up comedy. European Journal of Humour Research, 3(1), 41-60.

Greenbaum, A. (1999). Stand-up comedy as rhetorical argument: An investigation of comic culture. Humor: International Journal of Humor Research, 12(1).

McCarthy, T. (2021). Dave Chappelle's 5 most controversial jokes from "The Closer" Netflix special. Fox News. Retrieved from https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/5-of-dave-chappelles-most-controversial-jokes-from-the-closer-netflix-special

Nancy, C., Nganga, S., & Kandagor, M. (2023). Forms of humour created through maxim flouting in Churchill Show comedy performances. Scholars Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 11(03), 105-119.

Pranoto B.E., Suprayogi. (2020). Incorporating 9GAG memes to develop EFL learners' speaking ability and willingness to communicate. IJEE (Indonesian Journal of English Education), 7(2), 130-144.

Sari, P. I., & Pranoto, B. E. (2020). An analysis of illocutionary act and perlocutionary act towards the Queen Elizabeth's speech entitled we will succeed and better days will come. Linguistics and Literature Journal, 3(1), 24-33.

Searle, J. R. (1969). Speech Acts. Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from Https://Doi.Org/10.1017/CBO9781139173438.