How do French humorists manage their persona across situations? A corpus study on their prosodic variation

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Objective: This empirical corpus study presents an analysis of stylistic variation on the temporal, pitch and stress level of eight French humorists' speech in four different speaking contexts (conversation, radio interview, radio show and live comedy show). It reveals which prosodic features comedians use to adapt their speech to a specific audience and communicative situation. With this, it enquires whether specific prosodic cues allow distinguishing between variations in *phonogenres* (shared representation of an oral practice) and *phonostyles* (acoustic style characteristic of an individual, social group or situation task) (Simon et al. 2010:72).

Data & Method: The two-hour corpus consists of 24 samples from eight French comedians in four speaking contexts. The data was treated with Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2012) and processed with several tools. Segmentation and phonetic alignment were done with EasyAlign (Goldman 2008) while prosodic profiles of the samples were extracted using Prosogram (Mertens 2004). Syllable stress and categorization were done using Prosoprom (Goldman 2009) and additional Perl scripts. Inspired by previous research on communicative behavior and their variation through situational and contextual determiners (Koch & Osterreicher 2001:586), the corpus structure allows to correlate the humorists' performance over three different axes: professional vs. non-professional speaking style, everyday private vs. public broadcasted situation and spontaneous vs. prepared speech.

Hypothesis: The study is drawing upon H&H theory according to which a speaker adapts his discourse production depending on the communicative and situational requirements (Lindblom 1990). The first hypothesis claims that public and prepared situations (radio and comedy shows) will incline speakers to produce discourse with (1) higher articulation ratio and speech rate (temporal features), (2) melodic excitation marked by a wide speech range (due to expressivity) but (3) fewer hesitations marks (filled pauses and lengthening). Secondly, we hypothesized that less experienced comedians will show more variety/adaptability in their performances than experts, as there is a conflation between show-persona and life-persona for the latter (Astésano 1999:293-294; Fónagy & Fónagy 1976). The hypotheses of the study are twofold: between situation tasks and between speakers.

Results & Discussion: Corpus data confirm a decreasing continuum of hyper-articulation from prepared and radio situations to spontaneous and face-to-face ones. During shows and on the radio, this hyper-articulation serves as a strategy of proximity between the actor/presenter arising from a necessary effort to counterbalance the lack of shared contextual knowledge between the speakers: if the comedian fails at communicating the pun, the legitimacy of his practice could be questioned; if the radio host doesn't manage to formulate a clear message, the radio audience won't have (at least directly) the chance to ask for additional information. Prosodic variation of humorist speech has a pragmatic and epistemological value as it carries an "identifying function" for the speaker (identity control in regard to a given genre) and the listeners (information and perception of the speaker's singular identity) (Attardo et al. 2011:196; Goldman et al. 2009:221).

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