

## Book review

**Logi, Lorenzo (2025). *Characters and Surprises in Stand-Up Comedy*. Bloomsbury.**

Lorenzo Logi's volume is a valuable contribution at the intersection of linguistics, performance studies, and humour research. This research arrives at a moment when stand-up comedy is experiencing unprecedented cultural significance, as evidenced by its growing influence on political discourse and social values. By 2018, major streaming platforms were releasing new comedy specials at a weekly cadence (Abramovitch, 2018). Comedians have become influential figures shaping political narratives and social values. Recent controversies, such as Tony Hinchcliffe's remarks at a political rally in October 2024, exemplify how comedic discourse can influence national conversations.

Despite this cultural prominence, Logi identifies a gap in the systematic linguistic study of stand-up comedy. He highlights the need to examine how comedians use multimodal resources – bodies, voices, facial expressions, and gestures – in addition to words, to generate humour. Traditional humour studies rely on classical models like Incongruity Theory, Relief Theory, and Superiority Theory, but these frameworks prove insufficient for analysing humour as a social semiotic practice. Logi puts forward a complex analytical framework grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) combined with Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). He draws on detailed analysis of performances by Ricky Gervais, Eddie Izzard, and Michelle Wolf to advance the “cartography” of two specific semiotic regions: *impersonation* and *expectation*. The book is organised around three central research questions that explore the intermodal realisation of impersonation, its role in creating humorous affiliation, and the semiotic realisation of expectation in stand-up comedy performances.

The theoretical foundation of Logi's work relies on Knight's (2010) SFL affiliation model, which reconceptualises humour as a resource for social bonding (Martin, 2004). In this framework, bonds represent units of community alignment, realised through “evaluative couplings” (Chapters 2 and 5) – the pairing of an attitudinal lexis (e.g., ‘fun’) with an ideational target (e.g., ‘party’) (p. 139). This model acknowledges that humour operates not through outright violation of social norms but through the introduction of “wrinkles” (p. 238) in shared values: tensions sufficiently provocative to generate laughter but not severe enough to rupture community bonds.

Logi explains that humour serves to ‘laugh off’ potential tensions, acting as a social lubricant that allows interactants to feel more closely bonded. This bonding occurs even when discussing controversial or “wrinkled” values, as laughter mitigates the potential for conflict by reinforcing shared understanding. This social semiotic perspective shifts analytical attention from the individual to the intersubjective space of performance, where meaning is co-constructed through multiple resources.

The book's methodological rigour is evident in its integration of analytical systems drawn from the metafunctions of language – ideational (meaning concerned with representing experience), interpersonal (meaning concerned with enacting social relations), and textual (meaning concerned with organising the message itself) – first systematically developed by

Halliday (1985/1994). Particularly innovative is Logi's extension of SFL to incorporate paralinguistic features, using the Paralanguage Model (Section 2.5) to distinguish between "somasis" (biological behaviour without semiotic significance) and "paralanguage" (behaviour carrying communicative weight). The author categorises "emblems" (e.g., thumbs-up, "V" sign) as part of language, not paralanguage (p. 72), because, as he claims, they have stable, coded meanings that stand alone without linguistic context. By developing a systematic framework for analysing paralinguistic resources such as contact (demand/ offer), social distance (intimate/ personal/ social), involvement (frontal/ oblique), and power (equality/ inequality), Logi demonstrates how impersonation operates as an intrinsically multimodal phenomenon.

The author defines intermodal impersonation as "the convergence of linguistic and paralinguistic resources to construe textual personae" (p. 75). Unlike written narrative, stand-up comedians use physical embodiment (gaze direction, body orientation, and gesture) to signal shifts between personae. The comedian's body becomes a semiotic canvas for multiple voices.

A particularly innovative aspect of Logi's framework is the concept of the *avatar*, which he conceptualises as "dialogic equivalents of emblematic meaning" (p. 138). Avatars function as cultural shorthand, allowing comedians to evoke complex cultural contexts and value positions with minimal cues. An avatar acts as a "bundle of cultural knowledge" (p. 138) that can be imported into a joke to allude to specific cultural contexts and their associated value positions. The avatar concept extends SFL theory by showing how cultural stereotypes and historical figures serve as semiotic resources that can be activated through minimal cues.

Logi illustrates intermodal impersonation in practice with a meticulous analysis of Eddie Izzard's performance in the "Dress to Kill" (1999) (throughout Chapter 4). In the excerpt, Izzard constructs a dialogue between two personae: a polite airline steward and a passenger. The comedian uses gaze vectors and shifts in voice affect to delimit these distinct voices. When embodying the steward, Izzard's voice becomes smoother, softer, and the body orients toward stage right. When responding as the passenger, Izzard steps to stage right and faces stage left, returning to a baseline voice quality. This physical "staging" creates *paralinguistic identification* (Sections 4.5 and 5.2.1.3), allowing the audience to track the dialogue without explicit narratorial markers.

Drawing on Lemke's (1998) principle of *semiotic multiplication*, Logi argues that the convergence of linguistic with paralinguistic choices creates emergent meanings that exceed what either channel could accomplish independently. The audience comprehends not just two characters speaking but the social relationship between them, the power dynamics at play, and the implicit commentary – all communicated through multimodal resources.

A central question in Logi's analysis is 'How does impersonation generate laughter?' To address this, he introduces the concept of the *dialogic coupling* (Section 5.1), an analytical unit that captures how a persona, an engagement resource, and a value position interact to create moments of humorous affiliation. Humour arises when dialogic couplings 'wrinkle against' audience bonds. A 'wrinkle' occurs when a comedian presents a value position that deviates from or contradicts the established social bond. Laughter acts as a 'referee', resolving the 'wrinkle' and allowing the audience to share a "deferred bond" (p. 170). This process is fundamentally affiliative, creating community through collaboration.

The framework allows for nested structures of considerable complexity. Logi provides an eight-layer example from his corpus: [comedian: acknowledge [deputy headmaster: acknowledge [lazy mouse: assert × *summer bounty will never end*]]] (p. 180). This notation, though intimidating to readers unfamiliar with SFL conventions, offers precise analysis of how comedians manage multiple voices and positions, creating polyphonic texts with dynamic evaluative stances.

Logi identifies three primary categories of impersonation interacting with humour creation. First, and most prevalent in his corpus, is authorial comment on impersonated personae, where comedians voice textual personae then comment on them. This category has five subcategories: authorial scepticism toward textual realism, authorial criticism of narrative predictability, authorial cynicism regarding story morals, authorial assumption of genre features, and the use of avatars (i.e., cultural stereotypes embodied in personae). The second category involves wrinkling bonds through impersonated interaction, where one impersonated persona reinterprets or deliberately misinterprets another's speech to create absurd interpretations. The third category, blending communicative levels, occurs when comedians temporarily transform the audience into textual personae within the impersonated scene. A particularly insightful observation concerns 'blended impersonation' (Section 4.7.3), where comedians simultaneously embody authorial and textual personae while maintaining direct contact with the audience, creating meta-commentary that laughs off both narrative content and rhetorical techniques.

Logi's analysis of Michelle Wolf's "White House Press Correspondents' Dinner" roast (2018) demonstrates how dialogic couplings create political humour through value wrinkles. His two-fold analysis reveals the semiotic work at play. First, the audience is prepared by the formulaic sequence "If a tree falls in the woods..." to anticipate the conventional completion "...does it make a sound?" This expectation is grounded in "phylogenetically realised shared understanding" (p. 227) – cultural knowledge so widely distributed that it operates almost automatically. Second, Wolf sets up counter-expectancy through both linguistic and paralinguistic channels. The shift in voice quality (slower, less loud) signals the transition to the punchline, while the lexicogrammatical content deviates radically from the expected script. The humour emerges from the 'wrinkle' against both the contemplative nature of the thought experiment and the norms of political civility. The laughter that follows resolves this tension, allowing the audience to affiliate around an aggressive political appraisal. Logi also observes that even when jokes deviate from expected conclusions, they often retain structural elements of the original pattern – such as interrogative mood and anaphoric reference – to maintain sufficient cohesion for the joke to remain intelligible rather than incoherent.

In his analysis of expectation (Chapter 6), Logi examines how comedians invest significant "semiotic labour" (p. 227) in establishing patterns specifically to disrupt them. The author demonstrates how expectation works across three strata: context, discourse semantics, and lexicogrammar. The 'phoric resources' (p. 242) are the referential chains – pronouns, demonstratives, definite articles – that create cohesion and predictability in discourse. When comedians like Ricky Gervais or Michelle Wolf establish strong phoric patterns, only to break them, they create surprise that is mainly textual rather than conceptual. These culturally bound linguistic patterns carry powerful expectations. The effectiveness of expectation-based humour depends entirely on a shared cultural background; without it, the comedian's semiotic labour fails, producing silence, not laughter. This observation emphasises the social nature of humour: it requires collective cultural competence, not just individual cognition.

In contemporary stand-up comedy, comedians do not simply violate expectations but violate expectations about expectation violation, creating meta-counter-expectancy. Logi's analytical framework makes visible the complex textual dynamics that might otherwise remain attributed to comic timing.

Logi's work represents a notable contribution to both humour studies and applied linguistics. The book's achievements are substantial and multifaceted: (i) it provides the first systematic multimodal analysis of impersonation in stand-up comedy, offering a rigorous framework that may be applied to other performative genres; (ii) it extends SFL's paralanguage model through theoretical innovations such as avatars as bundles of provenance and

paralinguistic identification as a mode of character tracking; (iii) it integrates expectation analysis with affiliation theory in productive ways; and (iv) it offers dialogic couplings as an elegant analytical solution to capturing polyphonic complexity in performance.

The book addresses primarily SFL specialists, and the analytical apparatus is technically demanding. Humour scholars without extensive SFL training will likely struggle to engage with the arguments. Comedy practitioners without linguistic training will find the work impenetrable. Terms such as “intermodal realisation”, “heteroglossic resources” and “evaluative couplings” create barriers. This raises questions about audience and the circulation of scholarly knowledge. While theoretical sophistication is valuable, one wonders whether the insights could be made more accessible without sacrificing analytical rigor.

The dataset comprises three comedians who perform in English-speaking Western contexts and who are engaged in political or social commentary. Logi’s detailed analysis of these performances is exemplary. Future research should examine applications of the model to stand-up shows from non-Western contexts where the bonds being negotiated may follow different cultural logics and the paralinguistic conventions may differ substantially. The book does not directly address these questions, inviting cross-cultural analyses.

Finally, one might question whether the analytical apparatus (e.g., eight-layer nested dialogic coupling notation), in its very granularity and complexity, may obscure the dynamics it seeks to clarify. Highly technical analysis faces an inherent challenge: the desire for comprehensive description versus the need for interpretive clarity.

Comedians use *impersonation* to import voices and *expectation* to build textual tension, all aimed at creating moments where shared ‘laughing off’ can occur. This captures an essential characteristic of stand-up as a communicative practice: it is artisanal work requiring extraordinary attention to coordinating multiple semiotic resources over extended periods.

Logi’s contribution works on multiple levels. Empirically, the book documents specific patterns in how contemporary Western stand-up comedians use impersonation and expectation, providing baseline data for future comparative research. Theoretically, it advances SFL in productive directions, particularly regarding paralanguage and polyphonic discourse. Methodologically, it demonstrates how systematic multimodal analysis can reveal the intricate workings of performative genres previously invisible.

The cultural significance of stand-up comedy has intensified in recent years. As Logi notes, in line with Koziski (1984) and Mintz (1985), comedians build community bonds through ritualised laughter. With stand-up comedy occupying an increasingly central position in public discourse, understanding the linguistic and semiotic mechanics becomes increasingly important. Logi’s work provides essential tools for this understanding.

The framework Logi develops – dialogic couplings, paralinguistic identification, avatars, expectation as implicated bonds, meta-counter-expectancy – offers strong analytical tools for future research. While developed specifically for stand-up comedy, these concepts have potential applicability to other domains: political rhetoric, storytelling, classroom discourse, therapeutic interaction, or any communicative context where speakers must coordinate multiple voices.

Future research might build productively on these foundations by expanding the dataset to include more diverse comedy traditions, testing the framework’s applicability across different humour styles and cultural contexts, exploring whether similar patterns obtain in non-comedic performative contexts, and investigating how the framework might be adapted or simplified to make its insights more accessible to practitioners and non-specialist scholars. Comparative work examining how impersonation and expectation function differently across cultures would test and refine the claims.

Overall, this volume sets a new standard for the linguistic study of stand-up comedy and performative humour more broadly. While the technical density may limit its immediate readership, its methodological innovations and theoretical insights may prove influential for scholars working at the intersections of linguistics, performance studies, rhetoric, and communication. For researchers committed to understanding how meaning is made in real-time performance through multiple semiotic resources, *Characters and Surprises in Stand-Up Comedy* offers the framework and a compelling demonstration of SFL's analytical power when extended to complex multimodal phenomena.

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