

# Style as a bonding element between stand-up comedy and literature

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## Abstract

This paper discusses an approach between literature and stand-up comedy. The aim is to investigate the traces of defamiliarization of the speech contained in the stand-up comedy, of the style of his writings and of what constitutes the quality of author of its artists. Let's examine the text of the genre, identify its traces of this particular and singular style and investigate the role of it in the *mise-en-scène* of this Communication situation. The theoretical framework lies in Bakhtin (1997; 2012) and proposals about the style and the ethical act (philosophy of responsible act), complemented by Charaudeau (2008; 2010a; 2010b) Maingueneau (2008; 2012) and Proença Filho (2005). The research is descriptive and bibliographic with qualitative approach. The corpus is composed of excerpts from texts of American comedians Jerry Seinfeld and Mitch Hedberg. We found that the ability of exploring the abnormal in what seems ordinary by the lyrically reconfigured language, impression of the author's distinctive style, makes a bond strong enough to identify the stand-up comedy as a literary variant.

**Keywords:** Stand-up comedy. Literature. Style. Ethical act. *Mise-en-scène*.

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## Introduction

Many will say that ponder the meaning of the label shares with the *tour de force* of the noblest sterile searches the same principle. A direct and satisfactory definition of “literature” and what composes it seems far to be found, so we have limited ourselves, in this work, not to share the worthy efforts of those who tried. We prefer, as the reader will notice, to talk more about the effects that the literary discourse implies instead of the absolute characteristics that theoretically constitutes it. Addressing what literature do can lead us to make legitimate affiliations of its effects in the effects caused by other forms of art, from which we can draw out similarities and differences. A form of art that corresponds to this model is the stand-up comedy.

The stand-up comedy is a young art (dated from the 20<sup>th</sup> century) that has today its diffusion driven by multimodality, which is ideal to test the flexibility of the concepts we have in relation to literature. To restrict the literature to the weak frontiers of a platform seems simplistic, but it is not uncommon for many, especially those who do not inhabit any circle of discussion on the topic, to hastily connect literature to the idea of the printed book. There is an interesting conflict of perspectives surrounding this issue: literature appears in orality, the voice that is not attached to an object or a place, but it spreads, volatile, no cognizable basis which does not subject the listener to serve as a channel for others. It is only later that the “literary codex” becomes hopelessly attached to matter, the printed book. The internet, its multimodality and hypertextuality, will return literature to its status of mystical winged being.

Literature can overcome distances, entertains, decodes time and culture, defamiliarizes the ordinary. There seems to be a difference between literary discourse and ordinary discourse that goes beyond its physical format and configuration. Literature demands style, and style demands an author, identity, individuality, location in time and in the world, elements available (if not indispensable) for the stand-up comedian.

In this article, we propose the following question: stand-up comedy shares with literature the characteristics of style and aesthetic value that individualize its artists and turn them into authors. The overall objective is to examine the style that in both arts singularize their individuals and demarcate their speeches in the world. The specific objectives are to identify the traits of this singular style in texts of stand-up comedy and examine the role of style in the *mise-en-scène* operated by the comedian.

The theoretical framework lies in Bakhtin (1997; 2012) and its proposals concerning the style and ethical act (philosophy of responsible act), complemented by Charaudeau (2008; 2010a; 2010b), Maingueneau (2008; 2012) and Proença Filho (2005). The research is descriptive and bibliographic with a qualitative approach. The procedure is observational, and the method of approach is deductive. The research *corpus* is composed of excerpts from presentations of the American comedians Jerry Seinfeld and Mitch Hedberg, especially the first, chosen by the strong brand and style that they have and the minimalist feature of their texts. This work has two parts – *Style: a search for the extraordinary*, place of the theoretical background, and *The style on Jerry Seinfeld and Mitch Hedberg*, with analysis of the cases that comprise the corpus of research.

### Style: a search for the extraordinary

“I’m an ice sculptor. Last night I made a cube.”  
— Mitch Hedberg

If there is truth in the old cliché “there is no literature without sense of humor,” so teasingly described in that general tone, you may want to consider an inversion of that point of view when conceiving the possibility that humor not only subordinate itself to an art sublimated in conventions and history (as humor and literature would configure statutes able to oppose), but also, inalienable component of human life, it could imbue this nonspecific

quality (detectable only by traces and some evidences) which gives a speech the status of “literature.”<sup>1</sup>.

Eddie Tafoya, researcher and professor of American literature at New Mexico Highlands University, sponsors the notion of stand-up comedy as literature right from the title of his book *The Legacy of Wisecrack: Stand-up Comedy as the Great American Literary Form*. Although the book of Tafoya is basically a timeline of the history of stand-up surrounding an article that compares Dante Aligheri’s *Divine Comedy* with *Live on the Sunset Trip*, a stand-up show of the comedian Richard Pryor performed in 1983, there are interesting fragments and a valid logic that, if they are not enough to compose a solid argument for the author’s position, at least they make it possible for questions to be asked, and this is a significant contribution to any research.

Tafoya (2009) describes an attempt to define literature itself by theorists and writers (such as Terry Eagleton and Robert Pirsig) only to ratify that the issue is far from pacified. Antoine Compagnon (1999, p.44) drew attention to the very dense nature of the term: “the definition of a term like literature do not offer more than the set of circumstances in which users of a language accept to employ that term.”

Tafoya (2009, p.22) follows this line when he states that “Rather than looking at what literature is, perhaps it would be fruitful to examine what literature does.” The author thus rejects the claim of absolute definition, more suited to the jakobsian notion of literariness, which investigates what constitutes literature, although it borrows from it the question of “defamiliarization of the ordinary” to which we will devote attention to, next. Thus, Tafoya (2009, p.22-35) lists eight “effects” and “actions” that meets literature: (1) Literature codifies experience; (2) literature provides an emotional catharsis; (3) literature entertains us; (4) literature defamiliarizes ordinary; (5) Literature reveals the culture; (6) literature invites multiple levels of interpretation; (7) literature is language play; (8) literature engenders wonder. Tafoya (2009) demonstrates through examples that the presentation of

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<sup>1</sup> We will avoid, as will be detailed below, tangent to the question of literariness.

a stand-up comedian can fulfill all these requirements. The “defamiliarization of the ordinary”, a key element in our analysis, is a feature that the author identifies in the work of comedian Jerry Seinfeld, commenting that

A great deal of Jerry Seinfeld’s act revolves around the way he takes the most unremarkable objects and experiences, such as a trip to the supermarket, taking a shower or encountering a traffic sign that says “left turn okay”, and defamiliarizing the mundane so as to expose the dormant absurdities (TAFOYA, 2009, p.36).

This “defamiliarization” is taken as a feature of literariness from who explored this notion. According to Compagnon (1999, p.42), “the ‘literariness’ (the defamiliarization) does not result from the use of linguistic elements themselves, but in a different order (for instance, denser, more coherent, more complex) of those same everyday language materials.” This phenomenon of distinction, to extract from the triviality what is exceptional about it, relates also to the aesthetic valuation of Bakhtin (1997; 2012), a relevant element in the philosophy of responsible act. Compagnon (1999) rehears Bakhtin’s notion that the meaning is not in the language system, but builds itself when this system is taken by a subject and utterance, put to use. Similarly, Bakhtin (1997) speaks of “style” to address the different usage of the available elements in the linguistic system, as

The expressive intonation, which is understood distinctly on oral performance [...], is a resource to express the emotional-evaluative relationship of the speaker with the object of his speech. In the system of language [...] that intonation does not exist. [...] If a single word is uttered with an expressive intonation, it’s not a word, but a complete statement, carried by a single word (BAKHTIN, 1997, p.309).

The notions of style and literariness keep, of course, similarities. However, to say that, as in literature, stand-up comedy defamiliarizes the ordinary, Eddie Tafoya (2009) brings to his speech an inflection that is more to Bakhtin (1997; 2012) than to Jakobson (1971), preferring to examine the effects of this “different” instead

of defining an absolute quality. We share in this study the focus of Tafoya's work, since we give preference to style and "aesthetic valuation" that Bakhtin tells us to find parity between what the literature and stand-up comedy do, which can contribute to figure out or zoom in to find out what are they.

Tafoya (2009, p.39) concludes that an objective perception of literature will not be seen anytime soon, but that until then, it appears that even if the art form is not literature, it still has the power to do everything literature is supposed to".

Although it originated orally, shared around campfires or sung by bards in ancient Greece, which is currently taken by "literature", in its most rudimentary concept, seemed until very recently welded inalienably to the notion of writing, of paper record, something incompatible with the narrative fragmentation and pulverization of the media we see today. Maingueneau (2012, p.236) points out that "what we call 'text' is not content fixed on this or that support, but something that forms unit with its mode of material existence." The development of stand-up in Brazil - and the new breath it seems to gain around the world - does not obey the vicinity of a stationary platform, but the fiber optic network of hypertext. The video-sharing website YouTube, for example, is a hypertextual and multimodal information network that played a decisive role in popularizing the genre stand-up in Brazil.

The text of the stand-up comedy is literally written at first, but it received the comedian's voice (orality), so the literary genre is not tied to any platform or any physical limitation of format. According to Maingueneau (2012, p.214),

the literature does not necessarily involve graphic code [...]. On one hand, the statements that abound paraverbal indicators (in particular gesticulation), redundancies and ellipses, references to the situation of enunciation (linguistic clutch) [...]. In its dominant forms, literature today is associated with the independent statements of context.

The style is singling component of the speech, contributes to locate it in one place in the world and to individualise its author. This is the conclusion to which Bakhtin (2012, p.141)

comes to when he says that the “act-valuation [...] seeks his own justification, not within a system, but in a unique and concrete, unrepeatable reality.” When Maingueneau (2012) deals with the way that the text establishes itself as an integral part of its style, he reaffirms that the style printed on the text contains in itself a universe of time and space, the place where the text was written and the *zeitgeist*<sup>2</sup> of the time, in other words, the unique, concrete and unrepeatable reality of which speaks Bakhtin (2012).

In order to understand the style in Bakhtin, one must visit the concept of ethical act to which it is linked. Bakhtin (1997; 2012) describes the ethical act as occupying a unique place, from which he must answer – “responsible act”, as Sobral (2008) calls it – for this movement that individualizes it in the universal panorama of the subjects. According to Bakhtin (2012), there is no alibi in life. If, on the one hand, this means that we cannot refrain from responsibility for our actions, this inescapable bakhtinian precept points to the formation of the very identity of the subject, its position as an individual; in art and literature, the impossibility of escape also relates to the inviolable characteristic of the artist’s integrity, in other words, the author’s condition. From the moment in which the subject applies on the object of their art (writing, shared between literature and stand-up comedy) his “emotional-evaluative” tone (Bakhtin, 1997), his style, he marks it as his and demarcates himself on the world. “The writing [...] is the printed reflection in the material’s data for his artistic style [...]; the art style does not work with words, but with the components of the world [...]”(BAKHTIN, 1997, p.208).

We realize, then, that inhabit in the aesthetic valuation of the text the most important features that a comedian have in his hand to succeed in his show, in other words: make the audience laugh, complex task, especially in the case of stand-up comedy, which renounces the scenery, the costumes and the scenic nature of any element other than the artist’s own voice. According to Charaudeau (2010b), is the situation that determines the kind of discourse. This linguist notes three key elements to define the

<sup>2</sup> The general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era.

Communication situation: “[...] the ‘purpose’ of the speech act, the ‘identity’ of the partners and the place they occupy in the exchange, [and] the ‘material circumstances’ in which the exchange takes place” (CHARAUDEAU, 2010b). Regarding the subject of this study, we anticipate that “make people laugh” corresponds to “aim”, “comic” and “audience” are the “partners”, and “material circumstances” generally involves the comedian on stage without scene elements that addresses an audience occupant of a position of inferiority camouflaged by the characteristics of the genre.

Aiming to fulfill the purpose of “making people laugh”, the subject makes use of discursive strategies, mainly to the catchment strategy. The purpose of this discursive strategy is seduction or persuasion of the addressee subject, leading him to “enter the universe of thought that is the act of communication” so that he can “share intentionality, values and emotions of which this act is a carrier” (CHARAUDEAU; MAINGUENEAU, 2008b, p.93.). The resources available to the comedian to exercise catchment strategy are paraverbal and resources of style, literary, defamiliarization of speech. As we shall see, to successfully transmit an idea or to illustrate an analogy with precision, the comedian must make use of a different organization in his speech in order to “win” the public, transporting it to your “universe of thought.”

The stand-up comedy has the potential to (and often a need) to do basically the same as does the literature (coding experience, entertain, play with language, defamiliarize the ordinary). And the constitution of an author in both arts comes, above all, from style. Is to investigate this style as a link between the stand-up comedy and literature that will proceed following the analysis of excerpts from texts of comedians Jerry Seinfeld and Mitch Hedberg.

### The style in Jerry Seinfeld e Mitch Hedberg

According to Domício Proença Filho (2005, p.41), the “complexity” of literary discourse is a difference to the common discourse. The power not only to signify, but to reframe, to operate extraordinary connections between signs and referents, links



that cannot be provided in dictionaries, outside the range of the common lexicon. A text prepared for a show of stand-up is, at all levels, unlike a comic speech that integrates the role of everyday speakers, as anecdotes told among friends; back up again to the distinction between production and reproduction that Proença Filho (2005) highlights. In 2001, Jerry Seinfeld returned to stand-up after having co-created *Seinfeld*, the most successful sitcom of all time, which was aired from 1989 to 1998. He took two to three years of vacation. To play with the current phase of his career, Seinfeld presented in the traditional talk show host by David Letterman an unconventional text, defamiliarizing by resorting to a set of words that have the same suffix.

The question is this: what have I been doing? People say “you don’t do the show anymore, what do you do?”. I tell you what I do. Nothing. And I know what you’re thinking: “yeah, that sounds pretty good. In fact I would like to do nothing myself”. Well, let me tell you, doing nothing it’s not as easy as it looks. You have to be careful. Because the idea of doing **anything**, which can easily lead to doing **something**; that would cut in to your **nothing**, and that would force me to have to drop **everything** [our emphasis].

As highlighted by Carlos Reis (1997, p.124), “the language, when reconfigured lyrically, escapes from the standards of non-literary discourses”. It is this escape, this deviation, which separates the literary language of non-literary in its most primitive sense: the fact that this is the everyday language, the common language, similarly found widely in all their refuges. Words arranged in the text of *Seinfeld*, “anything”, “something”, “nothing” and “everything” are common words, screws inside the old toolbox of language. The style is the ability to make aesthetic valorization of what is common to transform it into something singular, in which surface is printed the digital of individuality, the author. What lies not only through language games, but by seeing reality through a unique perspective, by defamiliarizing ordinary events of life. Every artist distinguishes himself by his worldview, and is to come into contact with this singular vision we watch certain movies, visit art galleries and read literature.

The flight from the pattern is critical for the formation of the idea of author, for what corrupts an order, a symmetry (common speech), also composes identity, which means identifying the subject as an individual whose “exist is unique”.

[...] I am also participating in the existence in a unique and unrepeatable way, and I take the singular exists in a place that is unique, unrepeatable, irreplaceable and impenetrable from the position of the other. [...] The uniqueness of existence is irrevocably binding. [...] each existing is unique (BAKHTIN, 2012, p.96).

Endowed with style (unique, individual), the subject comes to occupy a unique place in the world, starts to spell out a specific and unique point in time and space, which is called by the Bakhtin Circle “evaluative intonation”, “the expression of the Circle to denote the fact that whenever you say something to someone from a given position”(SOBRAL, 2009, p.124). Under the shadow of evaluative intonation, is not allowed to the subject present his “alibi of existence.” The ethical act is laid, the subject exists, escapes from the condition of mere reproducer of language to occupy the position of the author of his speech.

The common language, in general context, has no author, no owner, no one who can claim their rights. It is only when it interferes with the prevailing pattern that the trace of extraordinary is obtained, the (literally) out of the series, printing in this common source their own brands. The American comedian Mitch Hedberg, who died in 2005, was characterized by a unique style of presentation that involved, among other factors, the massive use of one-liners. His choices of style and his peculiar vision of the world singularize him as an artist. Take as an example the following sentence by Hedberg: “My fake plants died because I did not pretend to water them”. Observe the use of nonsense in this line of text and it is evident (to whom the career of the comedian is familiar) as it becomes funny by the intersection with the absurdity that Hedberg flirted with throughout his work.

Jerry Seinfeld, as Mitch Hedberg, characterized himself throughout his career as a comedian of the “observational humor”,

who, in essence, strengthens the elementary argument dealt with here: the defamiliarization of what is trivial. Seinfeld's style is marked by observing the everyday by unprecedented points of view, generally pointing common facts in a way not imagined by most people, putting into practice both the issue of extraordinary use of language as the singularity, of what defines an author, as in the decomposition done, in this example, of the term "best man" to its primary sense: "I was the best man at the wedding. If I'm the best man, why is she marrying him?". Much of what fundamentally constitutes the stand-up comedy lies in putting the language in exceptional situations like this, where the basic goal is laughter, spontaneous manifestation before a particular breach of an existing state (the banality of the world, of society, of language itself).

Being an art of solitary creation (unlike other like cinema and theater) approaches the stand-up comedy to literature, where, in the end, matters the individuality of the artist, a certain look (unique) about the reality that surrounds him. When this look is meant to transform something, not only to use it, the language leaves its ordinary axis to occupy a new pantheon (extraordinary) - in which its way, and not only its primary function, shall matters. In this new universe also matters the author, the pace, the lexical choices; elements usually ignored or trampled when the speaker is interested in the language used in its basic meaning. It matters, above all, the style of the user. If employs style, he is no longer a "simple" user, he is an agent of language.

The language offers to each a repertoire of multiple possibilities. By assuming the speech, the individual seeks to choose the means of expression that best configure his ideas, thoughts and desires. This choice is what characterizes the style (PROENÇA FILHO, 2005, p.26).

The issue of choice, of lexical selection, is crucial in understanding the style. Of course it is not just the selection of each word individually, but in the relationship that is established between them to build something original. The style lies in the appropriation of the value of words and in the combining between them so that they have engrafted new values. Comedians usually

run the country with shows written and prepared beforehand. In this regard, careful preparation of the text becomes the core element of the comedian's art craft. Although eventually, for his particular style of presentation, the comedian gives the impression that he is just talking to the audience, giving his show an atmosphere of spontaneity, he has his text, in general, rigidly bounded to not intervene in the timing of the show and in the correct eloquence given to each phrase. A joke can be undone with the choice of a single word, or a longer break, an emphasis in the wrong place.

In an interview with *The New York Times* in December 2012, Jerry Seinfeld told the reporter Jonah Weiner about a joke he tried to get it right.

"I had a joke: 'Marriage is a bit of a chess game, except the board is made of flowing water and the pieces are made of smoke'", he said. "This is a good joke, I love it, I've spent years on it. There's a little hitch: 'The board is made of flowing water.' I'd always lose the audience there. Flowing water? What does he mean? And repeating 'made of' was hurting things. So how can I say 'the board is made of flowing water' without saying 'made of'? A very small problem, but I could hear the confusion. A laugh to me is not a laugh. I see it, like at Caltech when they look at the tectonic plates.

The repetition of "made of" is a style problem identified by Seinfeld, breaks the rhythm of the analogy that the comedian intend to do. The solution found by Seinfeld was to remove both "made of" and replace them by a paraverbal indicator.

"So," he continued, "I was obsessed with figuring that out. The way I figure it out is I try different things, night after night [...]. "The breakthrough was doing this"— Seinfeld traced a square in the air with his fingers, drawing the board. "Now I can just say, 'The board is flowing water,' and do this, and they get it. A board that was made of flowing water was too much data (WEINER, 2012).

This is a meticulous work of aesthetic valuation, how to decompose a good premise, a good idea, in its most perfect verbal, refined form, to function at its best before the public. As pointed by Maingueneau (2012, p.214), "the literature does not necessar-

ily involve graphical code”. In the same interview, for example, Seinfeld reveals that he is working on a joke for over two years. In stand-up comedy each word chosen (or suppressed) will have an aesthetic effect; will bring, as in literature, a load of specific references, and these references will be responsible for communicating to the public the message that the comedian wants to transmit (in the case above, the analogy between marriage and a game of chess). To prepare a text means tuning the language of humor to the idea that the comedian has, so you can also lead the public to assimilate this idea, share it, proceeding, between the discursive strategies marked by Charaudeau and Maingueneau (2008), to the catchment strategy.

The elements we have identified in a comic text as components of its style are fundamental in the constitution of the discursive *visages*, mainly the “to do-to do” (CHARAUDEAU, 2010a), in other words, to fulfill the discursive ‘purpose’, in this case, “make laugh.” This goal requires the use of discursive strategies, especially the catchment strategy, whose purpose is to make the listener “enter the universe of thought that is the act of communication” so that he can “share intentionality, values and emotions of which this act is a bearer” (CHARAUDEAU; MAINGUENEAU, 2008, p.93). The preparation of the text plays a vital role in the performance of a comedian to strengthen the “catchment power” of his speech. In the line “Sometimes the road less traveled is less traveled for a reason”, with which Jerry Seinfeld undoes the common aphorism that appeared after the famous poem by Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*, the minimalism employed in the text’s design, consisting of a single sentence, imitates the common way of sayings of popular wisdom at the same time that the repetition of “less traveled” gives it a rhythm, a comic timing.

As said by Domício Proença Filho (2005, p.40), “The code in which the literary discourse is grounded closely relates to the code of common speech, but has, in relation to this, singled differences.” The difference, in the latter case, between a popular aphorism and a great one-liner, guard with itself the finished concept of stand-up comedy as a literary form. The aphorism is

by definition a kind of text in cyclic and infinite reproduction, process that does not involve any inventive step (style, aesthetic valuation) by who puts it into action. Despite sharing the lexicon and the form, the “*singled out differences*” in the text created by Seinfeld are remarkable, as are between a newspaper and a Fernando Sabino’s chronicle.

The scenario is this: the comedian establishes with its audience an interdiscursive game in which the first tries to imply a certain behavior to the second. This behavior (*visage* of to make laugh, purpose to be fulfilled) is made dependent on the discursive catchment strategy and defamiliarization of common speech, which means, from a specific aesthetic value that distinguishes his speech; from his style, printed on an extraordinary use of language, his author’s condition is constituted, in other words, an individual determined on a unrepeatable place in the world.

### Final thoughts

We saw, in the developing of this work, the possibility to approach the stand-up comedy as a form of literature. To do so, based predominantly on Bakhtin (1997; 2012), Charaudeau (2008; 2010a; 2010b) and Maingueneau (2008; 2012), we analyze some cases that made the corpus of analysis of this study, excerpts from texts of American comedians Jerry Seinfeld and Mitch Hedberg.

It’s by Hedberg the well-known line that says: “One time, this guy handed me a picture of him, he said, “Here’s a picture of me when I was younger”. Every picture is of you when you were younger.” This ability to notice an implicit absurdity into banality (in this case, in a certain way, extremely common to say something) is what defamiliarizes everyday and what distinguishes the artist. The stand-up comedy, as an art form, requires from its artists the refined treatment of the text. Lives in the singularity of the artist’s worldview and his unique ability of aesthetic valuation of the text the constitution of what legitimizes him as an author.

Likewise, it is intrinsic to the stand-up comedy a need for *mise-en-scène* (CHARAUDEAU, 2010a), playing within a situa-

tion of Communication through discursive strategies and *visages*, a process also operated by writers of literature, which, to communicate beyond the primary purpose of language, must “catch” his audience (the reader) and bring it to his universe of discourse (CHARAUDEAU, 2008; 2010a; 2010b).

The literature fertilizes reality, demand from the impressions described there that perpetuate themselves beyond the time that were recorded. This is only possible because the writing itself, and not just about what is written, is attractive in itself, either by their strength, their beauty, their degree of novelty or how much it “defamiliarizes”, how it plays with ordinary to achieve a result that is extraordinary, case of Seinfeld and Hedberg’s work.

We do not know if someday the volatile and multimodal texts of stand-up comedy will be absorbed as “literature” by some unconscious collective called “culture” or another of their counterparts, but we do know that it is possible to apply the same critical and challenging look that good literature provokes, and this is a victory for the noble art forms.

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