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LINGUISTIC PECULIARITIES OF BRITISH AND RUSSIAN STANDUP PERFORMANCES: CROSS-CULTURAL CONTRASTIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Humour has a unique ability to unite people, it helps us to look at circumstances from a different angle, brings people together. However, it becomes a torture in cross-cultural communication, as it requires cultural and linguistic fluency in its comprehension. Our study compares humour in Russia and the UK, which is vividly represented in standup comedies that become more and more popular with the audience. By examining the process and ways comedians affect the audience using gesticulation and figurative language we have come to the conclusion that despite obvious cultural and linguistic differences, preferences in topics we can single out a certain degree of deviation in both cultures from "a control type" in cross-cultural comic space. Key characteristics of standup performances were identified under analysis: urgency of the topic, national color, special ways of achieving a comic effect, including the use of stylistic devices (hyperbole, repetition), colloquialisms, vulgarisms, bathos, non-verbal language (gestures, pauses), discourse markers. Our research was based on the rating assessment tool that allowed us to prove null hypothesis - the degree of deviation in Russian stand up is higher than in British stand up.

INTRODUCTION

Humor is one of the most basic types of human activity. Many definitions of this complex phenomenon present it as a kind laugh, a slight, kindly mockery, a good-natured ridicule of a person's weaknesses, the ability of the mind to react cheerfully to the phenomena of the environment, kindly show the shortcomings of human nature.

Though humor is "one of inseparable constituents of any language or culture" [1], there can be found little research in the character of this phenomenon, especially in the aspect of contrastive analysis of some linguistic features of humorous texts. Contrastive analysis allows to enhance "a proper understanding and comprehension of speech of the communicants" [2].

The present investigation attempts to identify specific linguistic features of standup performances of British and Russian comedians. The statistical analysis of the frequency of the occurrence of some linguistic verbal and non-verbal phenomena allows to define similarities and differences in the choice of ways of creating a humorous effect by comedians of the two countries.

The timeliness of the research can be justified by the lack of study of Russian standup performances, which can be explained partly by the fact that standup genre is relatively new in Russian society. The first performances of standup genre (a kind of a comic performance, in which, a performer acts on stage and speaks to a live audience, using a microphone) were shown in "Comedy Club" programme, TNT channel.

In contrast, in Great Britain standup originated in the XVIII-XIX centuries and became a mass phenomenon, one of the most popular genres of comic discourse in the XX century, since 1970s adopting the American style of standup.

Most scientific studies on the discourse of stand-up comedy are focused on a single language or culture (Polish [3]; English [4], [5]; Nigerian [6], [7]).

Standup performances are created to sound spontaneous, but in fact are prepared in advance (with the exception of some cases of improvisation), with the use of specially selected language units: the seemingly spontaneous stand-up performer "exchanges energy" with the audience by arousing some reaction from the audience [8].

The interpretation of the term "stand-up" by different researchers differs depending on the approach applied. Mintz interprets "stand-up comedy" as "... 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 costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle" [9], thus focusing on the comic behavior and speech of the presenter.

Chlopicki also accentuates the interaction of the performer and the audience, mentioning some practices used by comedians - "dividing the audience and addressing individuals, drawing them into a conversation, and possibly putting them down; challenging the audience's predictable views" [10].

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Adetunji (2013) focuses on the interactional context, which is based on the co-presence and co-operation of comedian and audience: "the local linguistic and extra-linguistic forms and background knowledge, relevant to the production and consumption of humour, and oriented to by both comedian and audience" [11].

Thus, the previous scientific background shows that the phenomenon of standup is complex, involving linguistic, social and cultural aspects.

Methods

The hypothesis is that Russian stand up represents humor as a complex linguistic and cultural phenomenon, and therefore there are certain differences between the cultural and linguistic aspects of the comic in both languages. In order to examine the hypothesis we used theoretical and empirical methods; some statistical techniques: mean and variance; ranking for determining the significance of difference between the mean scores of the two matched groups and nonparametric method. Methodologically the article is based on a sequence of three actions: At the beginning we selected the authentic data from the comedian's shows from YouTube's recordings using Real Player software. We focused on the performances of three comedians Ruslan Belyi, Stanislav Starovoytov, Nurlan Saburov (dating recently, 2014-2017). British comedians in the top decile were Ricky Gervas, Eddie Izzard and Jimmy Carr. They were chosen for the reason of their popularity and the unique style of their jokes. In the selected routines for this study the audience reactions showed that their stories were highly appreciated and accompanied with extensive laughter, yelling and clapping. The analyzed data shown in [Fig.1] represent the difference in frequency of gesticulation, repetition, colloquialisms.

The total duration of all the clips is 13 hours of which six hours are Russian stand up comedies and six and forty minutes are British comedies. The present study is aimed at discovering peculiarities of Russian and British stand up humour. The authentic data are generated into eight data sets.

We found the mean scores in both groups, which indicated their equivalents with regard to linguistic aspects of comedians. The analyzed data shown in [Table 1]. It represents the mean score of the verbal and non-verbal phenomena and the average in a number of standup performances in both cultures.

Ho - the variables do not have a rank-order relationship in the population presented by the sample.

To reject Ho is to say that there is a rank order relationship between the variables in the population.

Critical p (n =8, α = .05)

We ranked the score order separately for each variable with the highest score getting a value of 1. Thus, the number of occurrences takes on a ranked order (such as the greatest exponent receiving one to the lowest exponent receiving eight).

We used the ranking method to identify the most significant group in terms of the frequency of use of linguistic phenomenon.

We carried out a statistical analysis of the frequency of the occurrence of some linguistic verbal and non-verbal phenomena in the standup performances of Russian and British comedians [Table 1].

Table 1: Mean scores, variance and ranking of Russian and British standup humour

Verbal and non –verbal phenomena	Russian stand up jokes		British stand up jokes		
	Mean and Variance	Rank	Mean and Variance	Rank	p
1. Repetition	390 ± 103.6	2	275 ± 137.5	4	p>0.05
2. Hyperbole	89.3± 66.8	6	204 ± 57.5	5	p<0.05*
3. Discourse markers	286.6 ± 34.9	3	384 ±49.1	2	p>0.05
4. Pauses	29.6 ± 9.4	8	75.3 ±12.6	8	p<0.05*
5. Bathos	36.6 ± 7.7	7	114 ±26.6	7	p<0.05*
6. Gesticulation	3035.6 ±1366.7	1	2266 ±179.5	1	p<0.05*
7. Colloqualisms	272.3 ±69.8	4	120 ±27.0	6	p<0.05*
8.Vulgarisms	238.3 ±130.3	5	291 ±30.0	3	p>0.05

* received data are reliable

Ranking revealed a discrepancy in all the groups except gesticulation, which confirms our main hypothesis. In the second stage we calculated the difference between ranks and difference squared (see [Table 2])

Table 2: Difference between ranks and difference squared

Verbal and non –verbal phenomena	Russian stand up rank	British stand up rank	d	d²
1. Repetition	2	4	2	4
2. Hyperbole	6	5	1	1
3.Discourse markers	3	2	1	1
4. Pauses	8	8	0	0
5. Bathos	7	7	0	0
6. Gesticulation	1	1	0	0
7. Colloqualisms	4	6	2	4
8.Vulgarisms	5	3	2	4
Total				**14**

We computed Spearman's correlation (p) using the following formula.

The sample size (n) for the analysis was determined as n=8
$p = 1 - (6 \times \sum d_i^2)/(n(n^2-1))$
$p = 1 - (6 \times \sum d_i^2)/(n(n^2-1)) = 1 - (6 \times 14)/(8(8^2-1)) = 1 - 84/504 = 1 - 0.16 = 0.84$
$p = 0.84$ as n = 8

The critical value of p for (n = 8 , a = .05) the appropriate sample size p = .715

The correlation coefficient takes value 0.84, which indicates a perfect association of ranks. Correlation coefficient proves strong relationship between the data. We would like to reject the null hypothesis because the absolute value of the obtained p (.84) is larger than the critical p (715)

The next stage of our research was based on the rating assessment tool.

H0 - the degree of deviation in Russian stand up is higher than in British stand up.

To reject is to say that there is no deviation at all, or the deviation is rather low.

We divided the bulk of the verbal and non-verbal language phenomena into 4 groups. The first group is represented by Hyperbole and Repetitions. Both phenomena are used with the purpose of strong emphasis. Thus, they are the indicators of strong effect on the audience. Bathos and Discourse were grouped in the second. The third contains Pauses and Gesticulation. The last group is presented by Vulgarisms and Colloquialisms. Rating assessment scorecard is based on the idea of referents value assignment and standardization. We completed the table with the $a_{(j)}$ mean scores in lines and group numbers in columns (i) The Referent value in our case is the maximum of the compared values. All the values are shown in [Table 3].

Table 3: Reference value selection by indicators

(i= 1,2,3,…..n)	(j = 1,2,3,…,m). (1)	(j = 1,2,3,…,m). (2)	Referent value max
GROUP 1	390	275	390
	89.3	204	204
GROUP 2	286.6	384	384
	29.6	75.3	75.3
GROUP 3	36.6	114	114
	3035.6	2266	3035.6
GROUP 4	272.3	120	871
	238.3	291	291

We calculated the fractions with max. as denominator parameter. The received values are shown in the [Table 4]

(x_ij)=(a_ij)/(maxa_ij)

Table 4: Standardization of values

Group number	a/ max	b/max
GROUP 1	1	0.7
	0.43	1
GROUP 2	0.74	1
	0.4	1
GROUP 3	0.3	1
	1	0.7
GROUP 4	1	0.4
	0.8	1

The rating was determined by the formula and the result are shown in [Table 5]

$$P_j = \sqrt{\left(1\pm x_{1i}\right)^2 + \left(1\pm x_{2j}\right)^2 + \ldots + \left(1\pm x_{ni}\right)^2},$$

R1r=√(1-1) ²+(1-0,43)²= 0,57
R1b=√(1-0,7) ²+(1-1)² = 0,3
R2r=√(1-0,74) ²+(1-0,4)²= 0,65
R2b=√(1-1) ²+(1-1)² = 0
R3r=√(1-0,3) ²+(1-1)²= 0,7
R3b=√(1-1) ²+(1-0,4)²= 0,6
R4r=√(1-0,8) ²+(1-1)²= 0,2
R3b=√(1-0,01) ²+(1-0,466)²= 1,24

Table 5: Rating based on the received values

Group	R1	R2	R3	R4
Russian	0,57	0,65	0,7	0,6
British	0,3	0	0,3	0,2

S rus= 0,78
S br= 0,03

The performance of these indicators is shown in Spider diagram 1.

As we can see, the degree of deviation is higher in Russian stand up that rejects Ho.

RESULTS

The monitoring of the data revealed that despite the diversity and heterogeneity of stand up genre there can be traced some common features with regard to the means of expression. The analyzed data shown in [Fig. 1] represent the difference in frequency of gesticulation, repetition, colloquialisms.
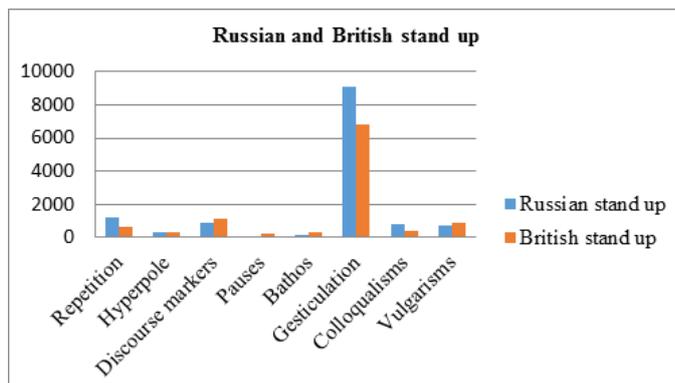

Fig. 1: The difference in frequency of verbal and nonverbal phenomena.
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Following the concept of "a control language" proposed by B.A. Uspensky [Uspensky 1967: 56] we calculated the deviation from the standard in Russian and British stand up. The idea of a control language is based on the concept of comparison. The control language stands out on a deductive basis. By defining a reference language and transforming the transition from a reference language to specific languages and vice versa (for different levels). The results show that British stand up is close to the control language in Group 1 that are Repetitions and Hyperbole indicators of effect onto the audience and Group 3 Pauses and Gesticulation. Russian stand up is characterized by a stronger deviation from the standard.

With regard to the means of expression in the speech of stand-up comedians, a hyperbole (i.e., a figure of speech consisting of exaggerating with the aim of emphasizing the individual characteristics of the object, event or person) is often used by the British comics [Fig. 2]. Most often, a hyperbole serves to exaggerate situations familiar to viewers, which leads to a comic effect.

The analysis of the comedian's verbal humor from a linguistic perspective allowed identifying one more characteristic of the stand-up comedian's discourse - the use of repetition. Though the comedians prepare their jokes beforehand, they are presented orally, thus repetition which is a common feature of any spoken discourse is frequently used by the comedians to create a humorous effect. Humor mainly arises from "the tension created by some kind of a series being established" [12]. Repetition can be used to strengthen the rhythmic pattern of a joke. These can be repetitions of syllables, often found in slips of the tongue, repetition of words and situations. The study revealed that stand-up comedians often use repetition of the same patterns in order to intensify the audience's reaction and to assure that the audience has understood the absurdity of the joke.
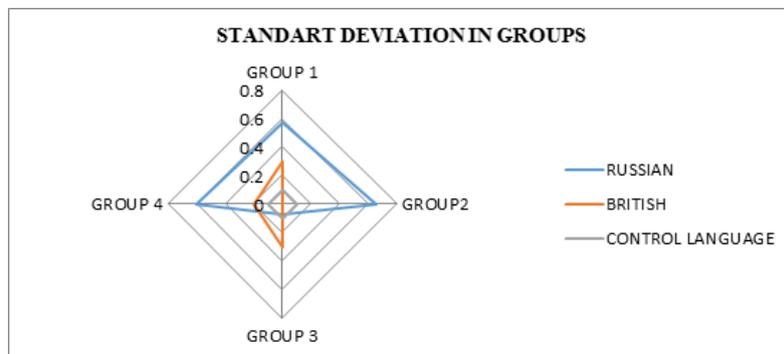

Fig. 2: Standard deviation of verbal and nonverbal phenomena in Russian and British stand up.

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DISCUSSION

Stand-up comedians usually begin to tell a fairly plausible story, then reducing it to an absurdity, describing obviously exaggerated situations and events, aiming at retaining and increasing the comic effect from the previous jokes.

The bulk of the analyzed stand-up performances reveals that British stand-up has a distinct stylistic feature - a wide usage of the irony, while the Russian comedians prefer straightforward ways of presenting jokes. Thus, the British stand-up comedians' jokes are often "masked" by irony, while the humour of their Russian colleagues lies on the surface - the text is devoid of ambiguity, allusions, etc. As for the topics of speeches both Russian and British stand-up comedians deal not only with everyday situations, but also some radical subjects such as politics, religion, sex, etc. Thus, any situation can be brought to the point of absurdity, and any absurdity can be made ridiculous.

Speaking about the differences between Russian and British stand-up one should distinguish the differences in the manner the comedians present their jokes, that is the differences of nonverbal nature. Russian stand-up is dynamic, with active gesticulation [Fig. 1] to achieve a comic effect. This phenomenon in humor in its extreme form is called slapstick comedy - an eccentric style of humor, featuring excessive physical activity often reduced to an absurdity. Thus, the usage of gestures not only supports what the comedian is talking about but also keeps the audience's interest and attention. Using pauses in speech is one of the strategies used by the comedians with the aim of keeping the audience's attention and exhilaration at a maximum.

CONCLUSION

The research revealed that the stand-comedy genre occupies its niche in the Russian humorous discourse. In general, standup combines two aspects: the text (the prepared material) and its presentation in front of the audience. The ability to convey a message, using the commonly accepted language, correct verbal and non-verbal means can significantly affect the outcome. A specific feature of the interaction between the comedian and the audience consists in the necessity of the presenter to keep the attention of the

audience for a long time; therefore, the speech of comedians is rich in speech signals, which pursue this goal.

The analysis of the standup performances allowed to identify the key characteristics of this type of discourse: urgency of the topic, national color, special ways of achieving a comic effect, including the use of stylistic devices (hyperbole, repetition), colloquialisms, vulgarisms, bathos, non-verbal language (gestures, pauses), discourse markers.

The study of British and Russian standup performances leads to the conclusion that there is less deviation from the control model in British standup compared to Russian standup, the control model (language) being a certain model which contains all the comic peculiar to all languages the aim of which is to arouse laughter of the audience.

The further study of standup could be into peculiarities, similarities and differences of this phenomenon in different languages, ways of translation of standup performances from one language to another, using standup performances with the educational aim in order to introduce "new strategies and educational technologies into the process of teaching" [11].

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
There is no conflict of interest.

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