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AMBIGUITY IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE THREE STAND-UP COMEDIANS' RULE: A DISAMBIGUATING STIMULUS FOR HUMOR

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Abstract: The phenomenon of stand-up comedy relies heavily on linguistic manipulation to generate laughter. While ambiguity has been studied in various humor contexts, no research has specifically examined how Indonesian stand-up comedians exploit ambiguity within the rule of three structure to trigger disambiguation and create humorous effects. This study aims to analyze the types of ambiguity (lexical, structural, and situational) used in the rule of three pattern, describe the linguistic strategies employed to build and resolve ambiguity, and examine how disambiguation contributes to humor. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, data were collected from stand-up comedy performances on YouTube, transcribed, and analyzed using relevance theory. The findings reveal that comedians deliberately construct initial expectations in the first two sequences before introducing ambiguity in the third sequence (punchline). This ambiguity forces audiences to disambiguate sociocultural concepts such as educational quality, social piety, and economic status, with successful disambiguation producing laughter. The study concludes that ambiguity in stand-up comedy functions as a precise stylistic instrument for deconstructing conventional logic and social norms. Future research should explore sociolinguistic dimensions affecting disambiguation speed across different audience backgrounds.
Keywords: *ambiguity; stand-up comedians; disambiguation; rule of three; pragmatics*

INTRODUCTION

In the modern entertainment world, stand-up comedy has evolved into one of the most popular spoken-word performance genres and a highly influential platform for social criticism in Indonesia. This genre's acceptance is inseparable from its unique mechanisms, which rely on rhetorical intelligence, pragmatic precision, and audience cognitive manipulation through deliberate linguistic structures (Barotto, 2026). One fundamental structure commonly used by stand-up comedians to build humor is the rule of three, a narrative technique based on a triadic structure that juxtaposes two initial premises to form a linear pattern (expectation) and then breaks it down drastically with the third element (punchline) to stimulate the process of disambiguation (Al-hamzi, 2026). In practice, their creation of humor and social criticism relies on the management of explicature as a logically explicit meaning, as well as implicature as an implied intention that is deliberately hidden in order to convey satire safely but effectively (Chen et al, 2026).

The stand-up comedy industry in Indonesia has experienced rapid growth over the past decade, with comedians now not only joking on stage but also dominating various sectors of the entertainment industry and cross-platform audio-visual production (Yang, 2026). This massive growth is driven by the emergence of new talents through television competitions and the Standupindo platform, which by 2021 had expanded its network to 130 regional communities with approximately 300 members across the country. Beyond performing as stage comedians, their ability to craft scripts and engage in verbal improvisation has led to many

comedians being absorbed into the film and television industries as screenwriters, directors, and comedy consultants (Tang, 2026). The integration of comedians into the audiovisual industry has significantly reduced production costs for production houses (PH) in hiring dedicated creative teams for humor. However, this development is considered only a precursor to its future, as Indonesia's vast territory demands that comedians continue to produce original, critical, and adaptive works that align with local wisdom without neglecting social responsibility (Lee & Wei, 2026).

The phenomenon of stand-up comedy has become an increasingly popular and respected form of entertainment in the entertainment world. In Indonesia, the growth in the number of performers, communities, and audiences demonstrates the significant appeal of stand-up comedy (Mussavifard, 2026). This phenomenon relies largely on wordplay and the manipulation of meaning to generate laughter (Prawidya, 2021). The ability of stand-up comedians to create comedic moments is often rooted in the use of ambiguity. Intelligently exploited ambiguity can trigger surprise and laughter from the audience (Arianti & Putri, 2022). Comedic structures, particularly those involving repetition patterns like the rule of three , provide fertile ground for stand-up comedians to build expectations and then subvert them through the use of unexpected ambiguity. This involves the cognitive process of disambiguation by the audience (Li, 2024).

Theoretically, this study extends relevance theory Sperber & Wilson, 1995 (via Alves & Gallai, 2026) by demonstrating how disambiguation operates within the three-part structure of comedy. Through this mapping, this research makes a new contribution to the study of cognitive pragmatics, particularly in understanding the dynamics of layered meaning processing in spoken discourse. Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin, through their General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), assert that humor stems from overlapping texts that contain script opposition (Tseng, 2026). In this context, humor is created when the audience successfully detects and deciphers the shift from a logical primary script to an unexpected secondary script at the end of the utterance (Lengo & Mazzaggio, 2026).

Furthermore, practically, these findings can help stand-up comedians deliberately design three-part rule jokes that maximize humorous impact through controlled ambiguity (Moarfian et al, 2024). By understanding the linguistic formulas generated from this research, stand-up comedians have a tactical guide to exploit linguistic structures to trigger more precise surprise effects on stage (Salvador-Grande, 2026). Finally, pedagogically, the results of this study can be used as teaching materials for pragmatics and discourse analysis courses at universities in Indonesia. The presence of real data from the local creative industry in the classroom is expected to bring pure linguistic theory closer to the concrete linguistic phenomena that exist in today's modern society (Choe & Kang, 2026).

Theoretically, ambiguity in linguistics refers to situations where an utterance, word, or phrase can have more than one interpretation. Pragmatics provides an important framework for understanding how this ambiguity functions in communication contexts, particularly through concepts such as implicature and Grice's (1975) conversational maxims (Ulum, et al., 2024). In the context of comedy, ambiguity is intentionally created for humorous purposes (Li, et al, 2024). The creator hopes the audience will experience surprise when the most likely or first-considered interpretation turns out to be incorrect or inappropriate, thus eliciting laughter in response to the successful disambiguation (Ali et al, 2024). The rule of three structure, consisting of two bits that establish the pattern and the third bit that is the punchline, creates expectations that can be exploited for ambiguity, making the process of disambiguation the core of its mechanism (Syaharini et al, 2026).

A review of previous research shows that the study of ambiguity has been widely exploited in digital sitcom discourse and the analysis of classic literary texts as a crucial instrument for creating distortions of meaning (Hilaliyah & Sumadyo, 2024; Al Jawawi et al., 2026). Most researchers focus on classifying the types of ambiguity—phonological, grammatical, and semantic—that arise due to the concise and informal nature of communication in contemporary media (Al Jawawi et al., 2026). This phenomenon of ambiguity is generally accepted not as a linguistic error, but as an intentional artistic element employed by speakers to evoke humor. However, most current literature remains static, focusing on written texts or rigidly scripted sitcoms. The gap in this research is how structures of ambiguity are dynamically designed in spontaneous theatrical spoken discourse to manipulate the audience's cognitive awareness in an instant.

The rule of three structure is a unique pragmatic unit of analysis in narrative

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construction and oral rhetoric (Rahmadhian & Tambunan, 2026). Research in this area demonstrates that the use of triadic patterns—namely, aligning two initial elements to establish linear expectations before breaking them drastically with the third element—is effective in conditioning the listener's psychology and focus. The characteristic use of this structure is commonly found in public speeches and creative writing to strengthen persuasiveness or create a surprising effect. Although its structural significance and rhetorical function have been widely recognized in establishing the rhythm of communication, a gap in this research is the specific linguistic formula and variations of this triadic pattern when used specifically as a pragmatic trap to insert ambiguity in a comedic performance.

The disambiguation process, in pragmatic and cognitive studies, is the mental mechanism through which listeners unravel the overlapping meanings of an ambiguous utterance (Siregar et al., 2024). When faced with ambiguous information, human cognition automatically seeks secondary context to restore the relevance of the communication so that the utterance can be understood logically (Escandell-vidal, 2026). In humor discourse, this rapid process of resolution and restoration of meaning has been identified as the primary trigger for the surprise effect, which stimulates audience laughter. However, various cognitive experiments to date have predominantly used simple, single-sentence stimuli. The gap in this research lies in the audience's cognitive threshold and the mental processing time required to disambiguate when ambiguous information is hidden in layers within a tight triadic structure.

Research on stand-up comedy discourse in Indonesia has grown rapidly, along with the transformation of this genre into a massive medium for social criticism and reflection on public discourse. Existing studies to date have predominantly mapped macro-aspects of discourse, such as analyzing violations of Grice's maxim of cooperation, the use of satirical language, and the deconstruction of conversational implicatures related to political situations on stage (Pratama & Nugroho, 2025). These studies have successfully demonstrated how social reality is rearticulated through humor by national comedians. However, previous research has tended to view humor solely from the perspective of its social function and perceived meaning. A gap in the current literature is how stand-up comedians in Indonesia technically exploit specific types of ambiguity within the rule-of-three structure to trigger a disambiguation process that remains adaptive to local wisdom and Eastern cultural norms of politeness.

However, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding the specific rule of three structure used by stand-up comedians in Indonesia to exploit ambiguity to trigger disambiguation processes that lead to humorous responses. Most research on humor and ambiguity tends to be general or focuses on other genres (Khalfaoui, 2024). No study has yet focused on analyzing the linguistic patterns, types of ambiguity exploited, and disambiguation strategies used by stand-up comedians in the Indonesian cultural context, particularly in the structure of the rule of three. rule of three as a unique pragmatic unit of analysis in their performances (Rahmadhian & Tambunan, 2026).

The exploitation of ambiguity within the rule-of-three structure of stand-up comedy serves as a powerful stimulus for disambiguation, as evidenced by numerous studies on humor and its mechanisms. The rule of three, a common comedic structure, relies on the arrangement of two similar elements followed by a third element that subverts expectations, creating humor through surprise and incongruity (Malau & Damanik, 2026). This technique is particularly effective in comedy screenwriting; its structural playfulness and tonal flexibility allow for nuanced depictions of complex themes, such as mental health, by challenging stereotypes and encouraging audience engagement (Crisp, 2025). The use of humor in scholarly publications also juxtaposes mundane ideas with scientific ones, effectively communicating complex concepts while maintaining academic rigor (Cook et al., 2025). In comedic situations, ambiguity is often utilized through membership categorization, highlighting misunderstandings and moral conflicts humorously, making the moral order visible to the audience (Okazawa, 2022). Humor can be created by shifting interpretations, as seen in jokes that blend old, new, borrowed, and taboo elements (Maraev et al., 2021). Path jokes exploit semantic ambiguity, leading the audience to a dominant interpretation before revealing a hidden alternative meaning, thereby increasing the humor's potential through cognitive reanalysis (Nisa et al., 2026). In educational contexts, the use of humorous texts, such as jokes and puns, aids in the teaching of semantics by engaging students in the dynamic exploration of polysemy and structural ambiguity (Zhou & Jia, 2026).

These studies collectively underscore the importance of ambiguity in humor, highlighting its role in comedy's effectiveness and educational utility, while also emphasizing the need for careful structural and linguistic choices to avoid unintended ambiguity.

This study addresses the following research questions: (1) What types of ambiguity (lexical, structural, or pragmatic) are exploited in the rule-of-three structure of Indonesian stand-up comedy? (2) What linguistic strategies do stand-up comedians use to construct and resolve ambiguity in the rule-of-three pattern? (3) How does the disambiguation process contribute to the creation of humorous effects for the audience? The urgency of this research lies in the need to quantify and thoroughly qualify the linguistic mechanisms underlying the appeal of stand-up comedy, as well as to provide empirical contributions to understanding the interaction between language, cognition, and humor in specific cultural contexts (Nisa et al., 2021).

Based on the urgency and research gaps that have been identified, the main objective of this study is to analyze in depth the exploitation of ambiguity in the rule of three structure in stand-up comedy as a stimulus that triggers the disambiguation process (Wang & Zhang, 2026). This study aims to identify the types of ambiguity (e.g., lexical, structural, or pragmatic) commonly used in the rule of three pattern, describe the linguistic strategies applied by stand-up comedians to build and resolve these ambiguities, and analyze how these disambiguation processes contribute to the creation of humorous effects for the audience (Allan, 2026). Through this analysis, it is hoped that a richer understanding of the art of language in stand-up comedy and its implications for pragmatic theory and humor studies can be obtained (Nisa et al., 2025). While previous research by the authors has focused on politeness maxims (Nisa et al., 2021) and Grice's maxims (Nisa et al., 2025), this study is the first to specifically examine the rule-of-three structure as a vehicle for exploiting ambiguity. This novelty distinguishes this research position from other humor studies, which generally tend to classify static types of ambiguity or the macro-level social function of criticism. Thus, the focus of this research's originality lies in dismantling the triadic structural engineering that forces an immediate cognitive disambiguation process at the end of a comedian's utterance (Atalianis & Vessey, 2025).

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method. A qualitative approach is appropriate because this study aims to interpret the meaning-making processes and linguistic strategies used by comedians, which cannot be quantified. The research data consists of speech fragments containing the rule of three structure. and elements of ambiguity taken from videos of several stand-up comedians performing on YouTube. Data collection techniques included non-participant observation, transcription of spoken data into written form, and coding of utterances. The data were then sorted to identify the types of ambiguity that emerged, at the lexical, grammatical, and situational levels (Figueredo & Freitas, 2026).

This research data was sourced from the YouTube platform, taking seven stand-up comedy videos as analysis samples. The data corpus focused on comedy material presented by two Indonesian comedians, Arie Kriting and Dzawin Nur, covering topics related to education and health. Each video performance analyzed had a running time ranging from 5 to 10 minutes. From the entire video sample, the researcher identified and examined total utterances (utterances) structured with the rule of three, which were explored to dissect the process of explicature construction and the stimulus ambiguity within them.

Data analysis was conducted using a pragmatic matching method based on Sperber and Wilson's (1995) relevance theory (Jr, 2026). The analysis began by identifying the initial explicatures constructed in the first and second sequences of the rule of three structure (Li et al, 2026). Next, the researcher analyzed the ambiguity stimulus that emerged in the third bit, and a disambiguation process was carried out to achieve new understanding. Data validity was ensured through theoretical triangulation and peer discussion to ensure that the interpretation of the humorous disambiguation process was objective and in accordance with pragmatic principles (Yuan & Zhang, 2026).

The speech data in this study were transcribed using simple orthography, where each spoken utterance from the comedian was transcribed verbatim into written text without the use of complex phonetic notation, while still maintaining the authenticity of the subject's spoken dialect and style. After the transcription process was completed, the data were analyzed through a systematic coding process that involved three

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main stages: (1) The author identified and inventoried all speech examples that structurally met the criteria for the rule of three, namely a sequence consisting of two initial sequences as a pattern-builder (set-up) and a third sequence as a pattern-breaker (punchline). (2) Each identified data item was then coded based on the type of ambiguity exploited by the comedian, which was categorized into three main types: lexical ambiguity, structural ambiguity, or situational ambiguity. (3) The author analyzed the explicature construction process and the disambiguation mechanisms that occur when the third sequence (punchline) triggers a context shift, to reveal how humorous effects are produced through the resolution of this ambiguity.

To simplify the analysis and classification process, the collected data is presented in a special visual coding format. As an illustration, the data presentation format in this research can be seen in the following example:

Example: (2) CONTEXT: PRIVATE CAMPUS IS MORE SOPHISTICATED

> "Finally, I entered a private university. But after I entered my university, I felt proud of my university because it turned out that my university was much more advanced than the universities in these countries. Seriously! It's not for nothing, they let students in at state universities if they pass a test, have sufficient IQ, then enter the university, they are trained, and then the graduates become smart people. What's strange? Smart people enter, smart people leave. This university is not sophisticated!" Education Topic: PT1 - 01:02

Through this presentation model, each piece of data is accompanied by an index number, a description of the pragmatic context of the situation, a transcription of the explanatory text, and a topic label along with a timestamp from the original video source (for example, the topic "Education" with code PT1 at minute 01:02) to ensure the validity and traceability of the research data.

To ensure the quality, validity, and reliability of the analysis results, this study employed a qualitative data validation strategy specifically adapted for text analysis and pragmatics. The first step involved theoretical triangulation, in which the researcher used more than one theoretical perspective to interpret the findings from the speech data. The analysis of the rule of three phenomena and the exploitation of ambiguity in this study was comprehensively analyzed by integrating Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) and the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo & Raskin, 1991). The combination of these two theories ensured that the cognitive process of disambiguation and the mechanisms of humorous text creation could be explained in depth, objectively, and complementary ways.

Furthermore, to avoid subjective bias in the coding process, peer debriefing was conducted to test the reliability of the data. In this procedure, two independent researchers with expertise in linguistics were asked to randomly recode 20% of the total data. Based on the results of the independent testing, the inter-coder agreement reached 92%. This high percentage indicates that the instrument and coding process for ambiguity types (lexical, structural, and situational) in this study have a very strong and reliable level of consistency.

Finally, regarding the member-checking procedure, the researchers believe that this conventional method is not applicable to the type of data in this study. This is because the object of study is performance data in the form of recordings of stand-up comedy performances, which are public, static, and one-way, making it impossible or necessary to reconfirm with the comedians involved. Nevertheless, contextual validity was strictly maintained by ensuring that the orthographic transcriptions were fully synchronized repeatedly with the original performance videos to maintain the authenticity of the data in their original context.

This research was conducted while upholding the principles of scientific ethics, although all data used was sourced from open digital platforms. All speech data in this research was collected entirely from publicly available videos of stand-up comedy performances on YouTube. Because the object of study is public performance material that has been widely published by the rights holders or the comedians themselves, this research did not involve direct interaction with human subjects as active participants.

Therefore, this study did not require special approval or permission from a research ethics committee (ethical clearance). Furthermore, the researchers ensured that no sensitive personally identifiable information was collected or misused in the analysis process. The use of video data from the YouTube platform is solely intended for the purpose of advancing scientific knowledge, specifically in the fields of pragmatic linguistic analysis and humor studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Context: Sugar machine analogy

> " It's like a machine. This university (state) uses sugar cane as its raw material, then processes it in a certain way, and the output is sugar. Sweet? It's just so-so, it's already sweet. At my university, sugar cane? No! Cassava, sea urchin, and cassowary go in, and it's processed in a certain way, and the output is sugar. Sweet? It's more sophisticated, isn't it? "
> Education Topic: PT1 - 01:43

A pragmatic analysis of this Data excerpt (1) on the topic of education examines how the rule of three structure and the exploitation of ambiguity are used to create humor through the lens of Relevance Theory. In the initial parts of the utterance (the first and second setups), the comedian constructs an initial explicature that guides the audience's cognitive assumptions. Through the analogy of a sugarcane machine at a state university, the audience believes the comedian is praising the superiority of his private university as a far more sophisticated institution capable of processing "unusual input" into qualified graduates ("sugar output"). The initial context perceived by the audience is a positive academic metaphor, in which the private university is depicted as possessing a superior and revolutionary educational system or teaching method capable of transforming ordinary input into extraordinary output.

However, the audience's linear assumptions and expectations are immediately shattered by the emergence of an ambiguous stimulus (the punchline) in the third part, namely when the comedian mentions the input elements of "cassava, sea urchins, and cassowaries" that enter the machine, producing "sugar" as the output. The emergence of these highly random, illogical, and unrelated elements creates cognitive incongruity and triggers strong situational ambiguity. The audience realizes that the sugarcane machine analogy can no longer be interpreted literally or positively within the context of ideal formal education quality.

This situation forces the audience to engage in a disambiguation process by seeking a new, more relevant context to resolve the ambiguity. The audience realizes that cassava, sea urchins, and cassowaries cannot be processed into sugar in a normal production system. Therefore, the audience recalculates the information received and shifts their interpretation from the meaning of superior academic quality to a more sarcastic one. This disambiguation process is successfully completed when the audience realizes that the "sophistication" referred to by the comedian is not scientific achievement, but rather a forced oddity or miracle.

Through resolving this ambiguity, the resulting implicature emerges in the form of a humorous new interpretation. The final result of the audience's cognitive analysis reveals a social critique and sharp satire of the reality of private universities. The new meaning captured is that the graduation process at the private university is considered unrealistic, lacking logical input-output standards, or giving the impression of "just passing" as long as it produces a uniform output (like sugar), without regard for the students' backgrounds and qualifications. This shift in meaning from false praise (irony) to humorous satire is what triggers laughter and produces a deliberate humorous effect by the comedian.

Context: Private campus is more sophisticated

> "Finally, I entered a private university. But after I entered my university, I felt proud of my university because it turned out that my university was much more advanced than the universities in these countries. Seriously! It's not for nothing, they let students in at state universities if they pass a test, have sufficient IQ, then enter the university, they are trained, and then the graduates become smart people. What's strange? Smart people enter, smart people leave. This university is not sophisticated!"
> Education Topic: PT1 - 01:02

A pragmatic analysis of Data (2) on the topic of education examines how the comedian manipulates audience cognition through the rule of three structure and exploits situational ambiguity to trigger humor based on Relevance Theory. In the initial parts of the utterance (the first and second setups), the comedian constructs an initial explicature that fosters positive assumptions in the audience's minds. When the comedian expresses his pride in a private university, which he considers far more advanced and sophisticated than universities in other countries, the audience believes he will highlight the superior academic quality, modern facilities, or superior learning system at the private university. This initial context is reinforced by the comedian's criticism of state universities, which he considers mediocre because they only graduate smart people who were already smart from the

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start of the entrance exam.

However, the audience's linear thinking is suddenly disrupted by the emergence of an ambiguous stimulus (punchline) in the third part, namely when the comedian draws a rhetorical conclusion: "Smart people enter, smart people leave. This university is not sophisticated!" This statement creates a contradictory situational ambiguity. On the one hand, the comedian has just exalted private universities as "more advanced" institutions, but on the other hand, he has undermined the premise of state universities with their logical input-output standards (smart people enter, smart people leave). This contradiction creates cognitive incongruity because the audience realizes there is a hidden meaning behind the definition of "sophisticated" that the comedian uses to judge educational institutions.

This situation forces the audience to engage in a process of disambiguation by seeking new contexts that have relevant cognitive effects. The audience begins to realize that the meaning of "sophisticated" in the comedian's utterance has undergone an ironic shift in value. The audience resolves this ambiguity by reversing conventional logic: if state universities are considered unsophisticated because they process intelligent input into intelligent output, then the private universities the comedian praises as "sophisticated campuses" operate in the opposite way. The audience recalculates the existing social context and concludes that the "sophistication" in question refers to the ability to process input that is far from ideal.

Through the resolution of this ambiguity, the resulting implication (implicature) emerges in the form of a new, sarcastic and humorous interpretation. The final result of the audience's pragmatic processing reveals a sharp critique of the educational reality in several private universities. The new, humorous and ironic meaning that the audience successfully grasped was: private universities are considered "sophisticated" because they are able to accept students with low qualifications or "less intelligent" upon admission, but miraculously still manage to graduate them as bachelors. This shift in meaning from academic praise to a satire on the lax graduation standards and the commercialization of education is what disrupts the audience's initial expectations and successfully produces an explosion of laughter.

Context: Announcement of ongoing charity

> "It's like someone at the mosque announcing a charity event. 'A donation of mosque carpets from Mr. Memet.' Ah, that's not allowed. 'A donation of 1 million rupiah from a servant of Allah.' That's fine, mention the name... it's me, you know!"
> Health Topics: PT3 - 04:02

A pragmatic analysis of Data (3) on the topic of health/social sciences examines how the comedian manipulates audience cognition using the rule of three structure and exploits ambiguity to trigger humor based on Relevance Theory. In the initial parts of the utterance (the first and second setups), the comedian constructs an initial explicature that guides the audience's cognitive assumptions toward the concept of sincerity in worship. When the comedian cites the example of a donation announcement at a mosque—from a carpet from Mr. Memet to a monetary donation from a "servant of Allah"—the audience believes the comedian is discussing the importance of maintaining anonymity and sincerity in charity to avoid showing off (riyah). The religious context and social norms perceived by the audience are a conventional moral message about the virtue of anonymous giving.

However, the audience's moral and linear expectations are immediately shattered by the emergence of an ambiguous stimulus (punchline) in the third part, namely when the comedian suddenly says, "That's fine, mention the name... it's me, you know!" This statement creates a situational ambiguity that contradicts the previously established religious premise. On the one hand, the phrase "servant of God" is culturally associated with anonymity, concealing identity. On the other hand, the comedian demands his name be revealed and directly acknowledges that the servant of God in question is himself. This contradiction triggers a cognitive incongruity in the audience.

This situation forces the audience to engage in a process of disambiguation by seeking a new context with a more relevant cognitive impact. The audience realizes that the hidden meaning of the comedian's actions is not a lecture on sincerity, but rather a parody of human behavior. The audience resolves this ambiguity by shifting their understanding from the context of "true piety" to the context of "cosmetic piety," or pretense. The audience recalculates the motive behind the speaker's use of the phrase "servant of God," which turns out to be merely a rhetorical

ploy to appear humble, while still thirsting for public recognition.

Through this resolution of ambiguity, the resulting implicature emerges in the form of a new, ironic and humorous interpretation. The final result of the audience's pragmatic processing reveals a social critique of the phenomenon of covert narcissism in charity. The intriguing new meaning that the audience grasped was that the human desire for praise is often far greater than its commitment to the value of sincerity itself. This shift in meaning from a sacred moral message to a hilarious and honest revelation of the human ego is what disrupted the audience's initial predictions, resulting in spontaneous laughter.

Context: Showing off while dating

> "A guy was walking with his girlfriend and saw a beggar and gave him 10 thousand rupiah. ' Wow, you're so kind to give the beggar 10 thousand rupiah.' 'Yeah, here's some change, let's give it to him.' After walking a long way, he came back: 'Sir, sir, give me your change...'. 'Oh no, I don't have any change.' 'Hey, just candy, do you want to top up your phone credit?'."
> Health Topics: PT3 - 02:59

A pragmatic analysis of Data (4) on the topic of social/health examines how the comedian manipulates audience cognition using the rule of three structure and exploits ambiguity to trigger humor based on Relevance Theory. In the initial parts of the narrative (the first and second setups), the comedian constructs an initial explicature that guides the audience's cognitive assumptions toward the concept of generosity and a positive image in front of their partner. When the comedian describes a man who gives 10,000 rupiah to a beggar to impress his girlfriend, then takes the initiative to return the change, the audience believes the man is trying to appear extremely generous, romantic, and caring towards others. The initial context perceived by the audience is an act of showing off kindness that culminates in further philanthropic action.

However, the audience's linear expectations are suddenly shattered by the emergence of an ambiguous stimulus (punchline) in the third part, namely when the man returns to the beggar and says, "Sir, sir, give me your change..." followed by a hilarious negotiation, "Hey, just candy, do you want to top up your phone credit?" This sentence creates a highly contradictory situational ambiguity. On the one hand, the act of "going back to the beggar" is associated with increasing donations, but on the other hand, the man's dialogue indicates that he is actually asking for change from the 10,000 rupiah bill he gave earlier, even offering the option of candy or a top-up like a convenience store cashier. This contradiction triggers a strong cognitive incongruity in the audience's mind.

This situation forces the audience to engage in a process of disambiguation by seeking a new context with a relevant cognitive effect. The audience realizes that the hidden meaning of the man's actions is not sincere charity, but rather a pretense of lack of capital. The audience resolves this ambiguity by shifting their understanding: the man is actually very stingy and has no intention of donating a large amount. When he realizes he doesn't have change, he willingly goes back and demands it from the beggar using ridiculous methods, in order to save face in front of his girlfriend and save his remaining money.

Through resolving this ambiguity, the resulting implicature emerges in the form of a new, ironic and humorous interpretation. The final result of the audience's pragmatic processing reveals a social critique of the phenomenon of character deception for the sake of romantic validity. The intriguing new meaning that the audience grasped was that the man's pride and stinginess collided in extreme ways in front of the beggar. This shift in meaning from the actions of a "generous love hero" to "a super stingy man who treats beggars like store cashiers" is what disrupted the audience's initial predictions, resulting in spontaneous laughter.

Context: Hadith about riya

> "Actually, riya is the thing that the Prophet feared the most. The Prophet once said: 'Inna akhafa ma 'alaikumusy shirkul ashghar'... meaning, in fact, the thing I fear most from my people is minor shirk or riya. Because riya is like a black ant walking on a black stone in the pitch black night. It is difficult to see it."
> Health Topics: PT3 - 03:40

A pragmatic analysis of Data (5) with a social/religious theme examines how the comedian exploits the rule of three structure and ambiguity to manipulate audience cognition based on Relevance Theory. At the beginning of the narrative (the first and second setups), the comedian constructs an initial explicature that guides the audience's cognitive assumptions along a very serious and sacred theological path. When

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the comedian cites an authentic hadith regarding the Prophet Muhammad's fear of the dangers of riya (showing off), which is categorized as minor shirk (shirk), the audience fully believes that the comedian is delivering a draft of a sermon or a noble spiritual reflection. The initial context perceived by the audience is conventional religious education about the subtlety of riya (showing off) in the heart, which is metaphorically described as very difficult to detect, like seeing a black ant walking on a black stone on a dark night.

However, the sacred atmosphere and the audience's linear expectations are suddenly disrupted by an ambiguous stimulus (punchline) in the third act, which arises when the black ant metaphor is presented in a hanging conclusion: "Because riya is like a black ant walking on a black stone in the pitch-black night. It is difficult to see it." At this point, the ambiguity is situational and metaphorical. The audience recognizes a cognitive incongruity because the comedian stops at the description of "the difficulty of seeing the ant," without providing the moral religious conclusion that typically concludes a sermon. This creates ambiguity as to whether the comedian is seriously alluding to the nature of riya or is shifting the audience's focus to the visual aspect of the ant analogy itself.

This situation forces the audience to engage in a process of disambiguation by seeking a new context that has a more relevant cognitive effect for a single comedy performance. The audience resolves this ambiguity by realizing that the comedian has intentionally drawn out the highly abstract and profound analogy of the hadith into a very literal and superficial realm of meaning. The audience recalculates the information they receive and shifts their understanding: the comedian isn't actually preaching to them about the dangers of sin, but rather highlighting the absurdity of imagining the visual situation of "black ants on a black rock at night" from the perspective of everyday logic.

By resolving this ambiguity, an implicature emerges, a new interpretation that is both ironic and laugh-inducing. The end result of the audience's pragmatic processing reveals a cognitive parody of how humans interpret textual metaphors. The new, humorous meaning the audience grasps is a humorous deconstruction of the classic analogy: instead of contemplating the thin line of human ego that shows off, the audience is invited to laugh at the impossibility of the human eye seeing ants in such pitch darkness. This shift in meaning from a frightening spiritual warning to a trivial and amusing logical observation is what disrupts the audience's initial predictions, resulting in spontaneous laughter.

Context: Arrogance and expensive cell phones

> "These days, arrogance is really trendy. Many people buy cell phones prioritizing prestige over functionality. They buy cell phones for up to 12 million. I have two cell phones, one for 100 thousand, the other for a million and a half. If combined, the price is one million six hundred. If the 12 million cell phones were combined and then sold, my mother could go on the Umrah pilgrimage!"
> Health Topics: PT3 - 04:39

A pragmatic analysis of Data (6) on the topic of social/economics examines how the comedian manipulates the audience's cognition using the rule of three structure and exploiting ambiguity to trigger humorous effects based on Relevance Theory. In the initial part of the speech (the first and second setups), the comedian constructs an initial explicature that leads the audience's cognitive assumptions to critique a hedonistic lifestyle and the attitude of qanaah (sufficiency). When the comedian criticizes the trend of arrogance in society, which involves buying expensive cellphones for prestige worth 12 million rupiah, and then comparing it to himself, who only owns two cheap cellphones worth 100 thousand and 1.5 million rupiah, the audience believes that the comedian is positioning himself as a simple, frugal figure who is not dazzled by material prestige. The initial context perceived by the audience is a moral education about the importance of prioritizing function over prestige.

However, this linear expectation and impression of simplicity are suddenly shattered by the emergence of an ambiguous stimulus (punchline) in the third part, namely when the comedian says, "If the 12 million cell phones were combined and then sold, my mother could go on the Umrah pilgrimage!" This sentence creates a contradictory situational ambiguity. On the one hand, the comedian has just calculated the price of his cheap cell phone in detail to demonstrate the contrasting social class differences, but on the other hand, he shifts to assuming the proceeds from the combined sales of other people's 12 million cell phones will be used to send his mother on the Umrah pilgrimage. This contradiction triggers cognitive incongruity because the audience realizes the shift in focus

from an "anti-prestige" attitude to a hidden desire for the nominal value of the luxury item.

This situation forces the audience to undergo a process of disambiguation by seeking a new context that has a relevant cognitive effect. The audience realizes that the hidden meaning of the comedian's defense of his cheap cell phone is not a form of life satisfaction, but rather a disguise for envy disguised in humor. The audience resolves this ambiguity by reversing their understanding: the comedian actually fully understands and calculates the value of the 12 million rupiah phone. The disambiguation process is complete when the audience realizes that the comedian is using the visualization of the value of worship (umrah) to legitimize the fact that the expensive phone is indeed extraordinarily valuable, while simultaneously covering up his financial inadequacy through extreme assumptions.

Through resolving this ambiguity, the resulting implicature emerges in the form of a new interpretation that is both ironic and amusing. The final result of the audience's pragmatic processing reveals an honest social critique of the "self-defense" of lower-middle-class society when faced with the trend of luxury goods. The new, humorous meaning that the audience grasps is that behind the argument of "the functionality of a cheap phone," there remains an honest acknowledgment that 12 million rupiah is far more useful if realized in other forms of greater value (such as the umrah). This shift in meaning from an ascetic morality lecture to a humorous acknowledgment of economic hardship is what disrupts the audience's initial predictions, resulting in spontaneous laughter.

Context: education and private campus

> "My campus is the National Institute of Technology Malang. I majored in City Planning, even though planning for the future is still difficult. I got into it, but it's a private campus. I tried to get into it, but I didn't pass the entrance exam at a state university. Oh, I was so sad, I had high aspirations of getting into a state university but I didn't pass."
> Education Topics: PT1 - 00:28

A pragmatic analysis of Data (7) on the topic of education examines how the comedian manipulates audience cognition using the rule of three structure and exploits ambiguity to trigger humorous effects based on Relevance Theory. In the initial parts of the utterance (the first and second setups), the comedian constructs an initial explicature that guides the audience's cognitive assumptions toward a narrative of academic excellence and personal regret. When the comedian recounts his educational background at a private university (Malang National Institute of Technology) majoring in Urban and Regional Planning (Planology), and then recounts his profoundly sad failure in the state university entrance exam, the audience believes he is sharing an honest, melancholic story about the collapse of youthful aspirations due to the intense competition for admission to state universities. The initial context perceived by the audience is an emotional and regretful outpouring of feelings regarding the social status of private versus state universities.

However, the audience's emotional atmosphere and linear expectations are suddenly disrupted by an ambiguous punchline in the third act, which arises when the comedian inserts a clause midway through the introduction of his major: "...I majored in City Planning, even though planning for the future is still difficult." This sentence creates structural and situational ambiguity. On the one hand, the phrase "planning" in an academic context has a technical-scientific connotation regarding urban spatial planning, but on the other hand, the comedian immediately links it to the personal and existential "planning for the future." This contradiction between his expertise in large-scale urban design and his inability to plan his own future triggers a strong cognitive incongruity in the audience.

This situation forces the audience to engage in a process of disambiguation by seeking a new context that has a relevant cognitive effect for a comedic bit. The audience realizes that the comedian is deliberately twisting the meaning of the word "planning" from a prestigious professional realm to a tragic personal one. The audience resolves this ambiguity by connecting the comedian's failure to enter a state university with the uncertainty of his future: if he failed to plan his own college destiny, how could he be trusted to plan a city's spatial planning? The disambiguation process is complete when the audience grasps the irony behind his choice of major.

Through resolving this ambiguity, an implicature emerges, a new interpretation that is both ironic and laughter-inducing. The final result of the audience's pragmatic processing reveals a self-criticism and humorous satire on the paradoxes of the college world. The new, humorous meaning the audience grasps is a

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portrait of the helplessness of a planning student who appears contradictory: molded to be a great city planner, while in fact, he himself is lost in planning his future due to being stranded at his second-choice private university. This shift in meaning from an admission of serious academic failure to a sad joke about the ironies of life undermines the audience's initial predictions, resulting in spontaneous laughter.

This discussion section begins by highlighting the audience's cognitive mechanisms at work when confronted with the ambiguity-based rule of three structure. The analyzed data clearly demonstrates that the comedian intentionally constructed the first two sequences as "traps" for expectations. Theoretically, this sequence constructs a linear explicature that aligns with common logic or prevailing social norms in Indonesian society. When the audience is in a calm psychological state and following the flow, the comedian then presents the third sequence as a stimulus of ambiguity that triggers surprise. The audience's laughter, in this context, represents a release of cognitive energy after successfully disambiguating, discarding the first, normal interpretation and accepting the second, absurd, yet logical interpretation within the humorous framework.

Furthermore, findings on the theme of education indicate a deconstruction of the values of state universities. The ambiguity invoked in the terms "sophisticated" or "process" (as in data 1 and 2) actually serves as a sharp critique of the education system, which often prides itself solely on the quality of input rather than the quality of transformation. Using the analogy of a sugar machine and raw materials, the comedian successfully demonstrates the contradiction that a university considered great is actually "lazy" if it only graduates smart people back to being smart. Ambiguity serves as a satirical tool to expose the societal double standard that overly idolizes state institutions while denigrating private institutions, which ironically often carry out the more difficult work of transformation.

In the dimensions of social behavior and religiosity, ambiguity is found to be used to dissect the phenomenon of "performative piety." The data from "Hambalah Allah" and the black ant analogy (data 3, 4, and 5) illustrate how sacred religious terms are often misused to fulfill human existential needs for recognition. The comedian exploits the gap between theological meanings, which should be anonymous and humble, and the practical reality of individuals' continued desire to exist. Ambiguity pits high moral values against the honesty of human nature's thirst for praise, creating a paradox that ridicules the veiled hypocrisy in society.

Furthermore, analysis of data on luxurious lifestyles (data 6) reveals that ambiguity is also effective in portraying the inconsistency of human attitudes toward material things. Initially, the comedian positions himself as a critic of extravagant lifestyles, but in the punchline, his focus shifts pragmatically to the economic value of the items for other purposes (such as the Umrah pilgrimage). This demonstrates that ambiguity can represent the "tug-of-war" between moral idealism and pragmatic desires. The audience laughs because they see a reflection of themselves, often criticizing the luxury of others while still secretly calculating and desiring the economic value of that luxury.

The effectiveness of ambiguity in the rule of three structure lies in its ability to simplify complex social issues into humorous paradoxes. Through this technique, the comedian acts not only as an entertainer but also as a critical social observer. The audience's successful disambiguation demonstrates a collective understanding of the social issues being discussed, from educational inequality to moral falsity. Thus, the ambiguity in Indonesian stand-up comedy serves as a space for reflection for society to review the way they think, act, and view values that have long been considered established but are full of internal contradictions.

From a more technical perspective, there is a significant information gap between what is explicitly stated and what the comedian implicitly intends. This gap arises from a mismatch between the audience's "mental schema" regarding a concept and the reality presented in the punchline. For example, in the data regarding regional planning majors (data 7), there is a gap between academic competence (the ability to design cities) and personal failure (the inability to plan for the future). This ambiguity exploits the human inability to align intellectual capacity with emotional or financial stability. This gap is the driving force of humor; the greater the gap between the ideal image of a student and the reality of their messy life, the stronger the laughter produced when the disambiguation process occurs.

Furthermore, this study found a profound sociological gap related to double standards in Indonesian society. There is a stark difference between the ideal values upheld verbally (such as

humility and academic integrity) and the actual practices rife with image-making and an obsession with social status. The ambiguity in the rule of three serves to bridge this gap in a satirical manner. The comedian doesn't directly condemn such behavior, but instead uses an ambiguous structure to allow the audience to recognize the contradictions they experience for themselves. The audience isn't just laughing at the comedian, but at the "harsh truth" about their own society, which has long been obscured by formality and rigid norms.

Finally, these findings also highlight a methodological gap in how we view failure. In the rule of three structure, the third bit often transforms failure or deficiency into a new "logical victory." Ambiguity forces the audience to see that what is considered less than ideal (such as attending a private college or having a less intelligent student) can actually be evidence of excellence when viewed from the perspective of a transformational process. Thus, ambiguity is not merely a linguistic tool, but rather a way for comedians to renegotiate established meanings in society, simultaneously bridging the gap between feelings of inferiority and self-esteem through unconventional thinking.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the exploitation of ambiguity in the rule of three structure In stand-up comedy performances in Indonesia, it is a highly effective pragmatic strategy for stimulating humorous responses through the process of cognitive disambiguation. Data findings indicate that stand-up comedians consistently construct stable initial explicatures in the first two sequences (set-up) to create linear expectations in the minds of the audience, before finally introducing the ambiguity stimulus (Jlassi, 2025). both lexically, structurally, and situationally in the third sequence (punchline). This ambiguity triggers a shift in meaning that forces the audience to disambiguate sociocultural concepts, such as educational quality, social piety, and economic status. The successful transition from a primary, misinterpreted interpretation to a new, unexpected understanding is what drives laughter (Ahn & Yap, 2025). This proves that ambiguity in stand-up comedy is not a communication failure, but rather a stylistic instrument precisely designed to deconstruct conventional logic. As a suggestion, further research can expand the locus of analysis to the sociolinguistic dimension to map how the audience's cultural background influences the speed of the disambiguation process in more complex humor schemes (Cornish, 2022).

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