



Some performative techniques of stand-up comedy: An exercise in the textuality of temporalization

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Abstract

In the spirit of Bakhtin's work on voicing in narrative chronotopes, this article explores the verbal art of stand-up comedy. One focus is on documenting a particular kind of multiply voiced chronotope in which British comedian, Eddie Izzard, transposes historical processes into a dialogic form that creates an imaginary historical real-time 'peopled' by fictionalized national entities in conversation with each other. The chronotope and the poetic parallelisms in which it participates are explored for the role they play in the principles of textuality generally and linguistic humor specifically.

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1. Introduction

Mikhail Bakhtin's work has been quite influential of late and rightly so. One of Bakhtin's central points was a simple, yet profound one. His concept of 'voice' taught us that the semiotics of 'sounding like yourself' exists, as it were, only relatively. Indeed, we know today that 'how we sound'—or better perhaps, 'who we are through speech'—emerges at the interpretive intersection of the many social framings of 'speaker types' and 'language in use' in interaction with cultural ideologies and other aspects of the ongoing context of interpretation. Bakhtin's work in this area explored narrative spatio-temporal frames, or

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‘chronotopes’, as they emerged from the genred ways in which juxtaposed social voices constituted particular characters and plots in novels (Bakhtin, 1986; Parmentier, 1994; Silverstein, 2005). In this article, I want to refigure his work by extending it to a spoken genre of speech. I want to consider the performance genre of the ‘stand-up comedy routine’ with two interrelated goals in mind.

First, I want to make a modest contribution to our understanding of the semiotic processes by which language functions humorously. I want to offer a logical reconstruction of the semiotic processes involved in ‘getting a joke’, or better perhaps, being susceptible to it from an analytical perspective. A three-step process will be proposed that tracks interacting linguistic and non-linguistic signs through the real-time process of comic performance. Central to this task will be a focus on certain organizing principles of textuality. The analyses will shed light on the important role of repetition, and more specifically poetic parallelism, as central textual mechanisms for the coherent, and thus meaningful, organization of co-occurring linguistic and non-linguistic signs across the real-time process of performance.

Second, alongside the above attempt to model humor in language, I want to document, with Bakhtin’s work in mind, an interesting kind of chronotope. It is one that is found in the work of Eddie Izzard, a stand-up comedian from England. In a study of his political humor on the history of colonialism, I want to make explicit the creative ways in which this particular kind of chronotope relies on knowledge of regular social ‘voices’, typical events of language use, and cultural ideologies. In particular, as we will see below, Izzard creates this chronotopic ‘reality’ by transposing historical processes into performed, imaginary dialogues between personified entities. Of particular relevance to the humor communicated in the narrative world of this particular kind of chronotope will be the multiple overlapping voices through which Izzard ‘speaks’ and the ways in which they come into existence and develop across a series of unfolding poetic parallelisms (cf. Hill, 1997).

2. Language and comedy: The semiotics of a three-step process

For the purposes of the present study, how does comedic language ‘work’? Though of course it exhibits many traits, we will work with the idea that it can be represented as an interpretive process with three interrelated steps (cf. Beeman, 1999).¹ These three steps can be found in both the construction and the interpretation of humor and, as such, they are being proposed here as being at least logically implicit in the process.²

The first step emerges from a very general principle. In all actions that are considered humorous, one finds something unexpected or surprising. Be such actions linguistic or otherwise—and whatever the interactional framing against which they are interpreted—they violate expectations from some perspective. For our purposes here, following the Prague School (Vachek, 1966, 1964), we will label such acts ‘foregroundings’.

¹ There is a wide variety of work on humor in language (Cohen, 1999; Critchey, 2002; Freud, 1963; Sherzer, 1978, 2002).

² I wish to make explicit the meaning of calling the exercise here a logical reconstruction. The argument is that the propositional material analyzed is implicitly present in a logical reconstruction of the working of the humor. This is not to make the argument that this kind of analysis makes explicit what happens in the real-time consciousness of the writer, performer, or audience member. Indeed, consistent with the conclusions here, these are all potentially overlapping but theoretically distinct semiotic questions.

The second step emerges when we are forced to interpret a foregrounded action. At this second stage of the process—in the form of the logical analytical reconstruction aimed at here, recall—we seek to find a proposition or a series of related propositions that will make the foregrounded act recognizable as a socially coherent act of some kind. Though that tricky concept of ‘context’ has a way of motivating very complicated kinds of propositions in actual contexts of social interaction, first candidates nevertheless typically emerge out of the oppositions created by juxtaposing presuppositions informing the expected action as they contrast with the action performed. One simple example will have to suffice. In the world of physical humor, a fall can be arguably funny based on its opposition to ‘normal’ instances of physical self-control and, if done particularly well, to the norms of comic falls themselves. Thus relevant oppositions, such as ‘physical self-control’—though likely to be perhaps only visualized in this case—would be logically reconstructed in propositional form in the kind of analytical exercise being proposed here.

Consider finally the third and last step. Reconstructed logically here in the form of explicit propositions, how does one make use of the new contextual knowledge that emerged in the second step of the process? Here that knowledge is used to ‘ground’ the foregrounded action(s) such that they become not only socially coherent and thus recognizable, but also—for our purposes here—arguably humorous in some sense (cf. Silverstein, 1992).³

One way to try and ensure a successfully humorous grounding is for the comedian to ‘set up’ the relevant background knowledge for the audience within the performance itself and further teach them, or at least guide them, in how to use it. The method to be focused on here is thus one that sets up real-time ‘poetic parallelisms’ within a performance. The component parts of these repeating structures of linguistic and non-linguistic signs across the real-time flow of the performance set up or model, as we will see below, the relevant oppositions for grounding the foregrounded behaviors as humorous and entertaining (cf. Agha, 2005). Though this method, in one form or another, is one that has been commonly cited in the semiotic literature on humorous language, it has rarely been demonstrated in the kind of detail demonstrated below (cf. Beeman, 1999; Norrick, 1987; Sherzer, 1993; Sherzer, 2002).⁴

3. The verbal art of stand-up comedy: The case of Eddie Izzard

Stand-up comedy routines are at first glance quite simple performative events. Typically, a lone comedian stands on a stage with a microphone and talks to an audience that has paid to be present. The official purpose of the performance is for the comedian to make the audience laugh and thereby entertain them. What, however, must the audience

³ The interpretive process being outlined here has been explored in the terms of other analytical traditions (e.g., Gestalt theory and Prague School work) and extended to other kinds of linguistic functions.

⁴ It has been commonly argued in the literature that poetic parallelism as well as the general principle of repetition on which it is based are widely relevant to the discovery of not only humor but also of many different kinds of functional meanings in language and social interaction (see Bauman and Briggs, 1990; Fox, 1977; James J. Fox, 1988; Hanks, 1987; Jakobson, 1960; Johnstone, 1987; Keane, 2002; Robbins, 2001; Sherzer, 1982; Silverstein, 1984; Tannen, 1987, 1990).

members know in order to find the performance funny? Given the essentially empty and thus ‘imaginary’ stage, it is primarily language that is used to bring into shared existence the kinds of knowledges that are key to an understanding of the performance’s humor.

In this article, then, I first want to make explicit the way in which Izzard’s performance of multiply overlapping voices participates in the constitution of a very particular kind of chronotope. This will then allow us to consider the ways in which the chronotope itself—at both local and more global levels within the performance—participates within a series of overlapping poetic patterns to create the opposing presuppositions for ‘getting the jokes’—or, in the terms being used here—for grounding Izzard’s foregrounded acts. In order to do so, we will work our way through two clips from a recent performance by Izzard (1998).

4. Clip 1: ‘Flags’⁵

In order to properly frame a consideration of the focal chronotope and the textual parallels on which it depends, we must first consider the immediately preceding material from Izzard’s performance.

- 1a Izzard: So we built up empires.
 1b We stole countries.
 1c That’s how you build up empires.

When expanding on prior discussion about British colonial history, Izzard speaks as ‘himself’ in Clip 1 (Lines 1a–1f). In other words, given the performative context, Izzard already speaks with two overlapping voices. At the very least, he speaks both as an individual, who is a citizen of Britain, and as a professional comedian in the midst of a performance. When utterances can be stereotypically linked to standard ‘comedian’ routines—such as, ‘Hey how’s everybody feeling tonight?!’—the line between what the individual as individual ‘really’ means in terms of truth-functional propositions and what the performer is saying in order to be funny can be a very difficult semiotic inference to draw.

In (1:1b)—that is, Clip 1, Line 1b, and hereafter this will be the abbreviated convention for referring to the transcripts—we find the first instance of a foregrounded act. There Izzard describes the process of empire building as one in which countries were ‘stolen’. As countries are, semantically speaking, not material possessions that can be stolen as

⁵ As mentioned earlier, given the goals here, the transcripts will include only relevant gestures. The linguistic detail is thus not being reported in the kind of detail needed to achieve the goals of work done by certain kinds of discourse analysts. The basic analytical goal is to focus on the humor, and as such many signs that supported the analyses here were not made explicit so as to not distract from those that played a more central role in the arguments being made here. That said, the following conventions were used: Each speaker’s turn-at-talk is broken down into lines based on a combined consideration of syntax and coherent interactional move. Immediately below that line appear any significant gestural or intonational signs enclosed in parentheses. The starting point of these signs is roughly ordered so as to show where they began, but not necessarily where they ended, in relationship to the words spoken on the line above them. The symbol ‘-’ was used to mark a relatively short pause and ‘...’ was used to mark a relatively longer pause. A period at the end of an utterance marked falling intonation, whereas a question mark signaled rising intonation.

ing voices as individual and performer. He discursively creates two ‘participants’ in this ‘conversation’. One is clearly ‘Britain’, the colonizer, and the other, as we will see, is ‘India’, the colonized.

Consider the fact that up until this point in his discussion of the history of British colonialism, ‘we’ referentially included the British Izzard in opposition to the American audience. Given the participant framework of the performance that has been in play to this point, the switch from the first person plural to the first person singular in (1:2a) is foregrounded. Consider, then, some of the other foregrounded signs that both overlap with and follow that ‘I’ as they provide the contextual cues for grounding the pronominal deictic shift as a coherent verbal act spoken by a fictionalized ‘Britain’.

First, of course, Izzard explicitly named ‘Britain’ in (1:2a). Second, he has also already described the ‘cunning use of flags’ that he is now beginning to dialogically inhabit. In addition, Izzard turns to his left immediately before he speaks as if directly addressing an interlocutor. Given the semantics and the timeless present-tense marker of the performative verb used (i.e., ‘I *claim*’), the utterance also sounds formal and ritualistically appropriate as an example of the speech of a state. Given audience knowledge and historical facts, however, ‘Britain’ as a whole cannot be reliably represented by the ‘voice’ of any particular individual in the imaginary historical dialogue that Izzard is performing. Note, then, how he adds yet another voicing here by giving Britain an upper-class English accent. Finally, in what amounts to the most surprising of foregroundings layered within all those documented above, Izzard also gives ‘voice’ to ‘Britain’ through a series of verbal and non-verbal signs that index, for lack of a better stereotype, what we can call a ‘spoiled child’. Admittedly this grounding and the foregroundings upon which it is based are still only weakly present to this point. It is here primarily based on the ongoing childish act of trying to use a flag to claim a country. As we will see, however, this particular voicing will become increasingly clear in and central to the humor.

Once one has accepted the above series of overlapping foregrounded acts being performed in this now multiply voiced chronotope by Izzard, its elements find at least a partially coherent grounding in the conventionally genred knowledge that comedians often do this sort of thing and that, despite its transposed imaginary time frame, it is in a way faithful to history. Britain did formally ‘claim’ India—albeit at the end of a long historical process and not as the result of a single conversation. As most of these foregroundings then slip into the presupposed background, it is the most surprising one—Britain as a spoiled child—that attracts analytical attention. How is this implicit representation of Britain to be made coherent?

In (1:2a), Izzard has already begun to suggest the proposition needed to ground this multiply foregrounded act. The political leanings to this point in the performance—including the critical act implicit in Izzard’s earlier material—guide the audience to reconstruct a widely known, contemporary ideological view: Britain’s behavior was wrong in a selfish way. This ideologically supported belief allows them to ground a foregrounded analogical projection of the behavior of a rich and spoiled child on to that of colonial Britain in a humorous way. The power and wrongdoing of a once mighty colonial power are thus humorously reduced to the behavior of a young, spoiled child.

- 3a Izzard: They’re going—
 4a ‘India’: You can’t claim us!
 4b We live here . . . five hundred million of us.

In (1:3a) above, Izzard transforms himself briefly into a narrator of the ongoing imaginary discourse that he is performing in order to introduce India's conversational response. Doing so—in the present progressive no less!—provides further interactional evidence for the 'social reality' of the conversation. How do we know though that it is India whose speech he is introducing in (1:4a–b)?

In addition to the obvious signs—India is named in Britain's first line and Izzard has just been talking about this particular chapter of colonial history—consider the kind of voice with which India 'speaks'. The content itself—at least in the fictional discursive frame constructed to this point—is not that surprising. Given the claim that Britain has made, India has seemingly decided to argue and to do so in an understandably angry but rational tone. Moreover, the arguments themselves index contemporary ideologies. That is, Britain cannot claim India because, as we all believe today, individuals are equal in their right to democratic freedom and, as such, they are organized into nations with the inalienable right to self-rule. Thus, while part of the humor here is the idea that India is arguing with Britain in this kind of imaginary discourse, it is in the spirit of Bakhtin's work, though, that we further ask 'who' India sounds like.

When India replies in the imaginary argument that Izzard has verbally created, the 'voice' used here of course does not speak in Hindi. It is a coherently angry voice that speaks not even with an Indian-accented English, but rather with a working-class English accent. That is, this fictionalized 'India' from past history speaks in the voice of a contemporary English-speaking group that is in a comparable political position to a ruling English elite. Such a move is arguably humorous not only because of the opposing types that are in a way equated—Indians and the lower-class working English—but because it is politically coherent in contemporary terms and, as such, the voicing lends even more credence to their anger and thus to ongoing absurdity of the chronotopic dialogic framing.

Note too how India's response largely ignored Britain's behavior as a rich, spoiled child. India—having been made the 'straight' man in this comedy routine—simply reacts angrily to the political absurdity of Britain's claim on their country. That is—recalling the tension presented above—Izzard has India making a rational discursive response to the political aspect of what Britain has said here (and thus done historically). They have indeed noticed what has happened and they argue angrily and sincerely with Britain by presenting contemporary ideological arguments for the political offensiveness of the colonial act. They thus respond discursively to colonialism as contemporary ideology wishes they had in both what they say and how they say it. What is humorous, then, is how contemporary views about the colonized 'Indian' and the power relations encoded in the varieties of the English language join together to ground the foregrounded acts here in line with a contemporary political ideology that sees India as a rationally angry victim of colonialism.

It is important to note too that the first instance of a local parallelism has just been completed here. Within the imaginary time frame of the ongoing discursive chronotope, the first set of repeating signs is framed by Britain making a claim on India and India arguing against it. Layered into and partially constituting this framing—but ignoring for now the ongoing but analytically less important voicings here that relate to Izzard himself as an individual and a performer—there are numerous overlapping voicings. Britain speaks as a colonizer with an upper-class English accent and India speaks as

the colonized with a working class English accent. Moreover, as we have seen, England is further characterized as a rich, spoiled child and in response, India is angry, but rational. As we will see below, this basic framing of linguistic and non-linguistic signs will repeat several more times. As such, it will serve as the relevant background against which to interpret new foregroundings and thus as the grounds for a humorous interpretation of his material.

5a ‘Britain’: Do you have a flag?
(upper-class accent) (sticks out tongue and leaves it there)

In (1:5a) above, Izzard moves to a more humorously absurd part of this created dialogue. Discursively inhabiting the already humorous theory proposed earlier, ‘Britain’ asks ‘India’ if they have a flag. The question is itself a foregrounded act. It is important to note that outside of the fictional context created here, such a question has no clear implication. Here it implies that to have a flag is to have a legitimate country. In the strange inferential magic that emerges from the parallelism framing the performance of this discursive chronotope, understanding ‘Britain’ here requires one to rely on what Izzard, the performer, taught the audience only moments earlier. However absurd it may be, ‘Britain’ is in effect presenting an ‘argument’ in support of the claim already made on India in (1:1a) and rejected by India in (1:4a–b). The result of course is that Izzard is now discursively enacting precisely the ‘cunning use of flags’ that he spoke of earlier. That cunning use, however, is being enacted now by a ‘Britain’ that is increasingly being voiced through verbal and non-verbal signs of a rich, spoiled child. Thus, for the audience member, Britain can be propositionally grounded in a humorous way as a spoiled child who believes himself to be cunningly controlling a key moment in human history through the childishly absurd use of a flag. That is, by holding all of the other repeating signs constant and merely foregrounding even further the voice of the spoiled child, Izzard has helped the audience ground this aspect of the performance as increasingly humorous. Needless to say, at the same time of course, it can be seen as inherently ambiguous because it can also be grounded as an increasingly sincere criticism about the British. We will return to this kind of ambiguity below.

6a ‘India’: ... We don’t need a bloody flag!
(looks around in shock)
6b It’s our country, you bastard.

Consider above how the second instance of this first parallelism concludes. In (1:6a–b) above, ‘India’ responds in a way quite similar to its earlier response to Britain in (1:4a–b). It continues to argue with Britain rationally by stating the obvious as defined in contemporary ideological terms. What has changed, then, between this response and their first? Britain has returned to its absurd political claim on India and based it, from India’s perspective, on even more absurd grounds. Indeed, the central fact that was implicitly argued in India’s first response is now stated explicitly: India is their country. They are thus understandably angrier. Consider their use of ‘bloody’ and the fact that they actually call Britain ‘a bastard’. This at once indexes their (now) increasingly agitated emotional state, while at the same time making their lower-class voicing even clearer. If we recall the highly foregrounded and humorous chronotopic framing that has these two fictionalized entities arguing with each other and keep in mind India’s role as the ‘straight man’ in this routine,

this is all very coherent. India remains rational but angrier in this closing part of the second local parallelism because ‘Britain’ did not respond to their argument the first time around.

- 7a ‘Britain’: No flag, no country.
 7b You can’t have one.
 7c That’s the rules that . . . I’ve just made up!

Consider Britain’s final turn in (1:7a–c) above as the third and final repetition of the parallelism in play here in Clip 1. Britain as a rich, spoiled child is now too conventionally obvious to ignore. In (1:7a–b), one finds the stereotypical tantrum of a spoiled child. Similarly, on one hand, Britain’s final utterance in (1:7c) merely continues the spoiled child’s tantrum by displaying faulty adult reasoning. On the other, brilliantly, it overlappingly indexes by implicit analogy yet another widespread, contemporary ideology that critically evaluates Britain’s colonial actions. What Britain did historically is thus easily mapped on to the behavior of a child, who also creates irrational justifications for his own selfish motives. India needless to say is silenced by Britain’s final turn. Britain as a spoiled child is now too obvious. Rational argument and thus India’s final parallel turn-at-talk have thus been rendered interactionally irrelevant.

In closing our consideration of this first clip, note the centrality of the multiple voiced chronotope that Izzard creates in the local poetic pattern that structures the humor here. The turns-at-talk, in terms of their voicings and their content, repeat three times. In the first exchange between England and India (1:2a and 1:4a–b), Izzard establishes the fictional interactional framing central to this particular kind of chronotope. England makes a claim on India and India argues back angrily but rationally, based on contemporary ideological criticisms of colonialism. This element remains constant across the other two instances of the two pair-part discursive turns-at-talk. Slight variations then emerge as local foregroundings against this repeating background. In these real-time poetic patterns, it is that very opposition between what stays the same and what changes that serves to set up the foregroundings and, crucially at the same time, provide some of the background needed for grounding them as humorous.

In (1:5a) and then again in (1:7a–7c), Britain thus becomes increasingly irrational in the form of an ever more clearly rich, spoiled child. Correspondingly, in (1:6a–b) and then, by silent opposition at the end of this clip, India becomes increasingly angry in a rationally understandable manner. In sum, the multiply foregrounded, dialogic characterization of these two fictionalized entities is arguably humorous because it is in line with contemporary critical ideologies of colonialism which Izzard both guides the audience to through humor and which he had reason to assume they already knew and were amenable to politically. Once again, the material is both arguably humorous and political.

5. Clip 2: ‘Pilgrims’

The second clip to be discussed occurs in Izzard’s performance shortly after the one analyzed above. What links the two clips is that, though the topic is now the American colonial treatment of the Native American, we find another example of Izzard’s multiply voiced chronotope in it. Moreover, as we will see, with the shared topic of colonialism in mind as a start, the parallelism that structured three repeating segments in the first clip acts as

a more globally relevant model for a series of parallelisms in the second clip. Indeed, when reviewing the operation of the local parallelisms present in this second clip, we should keep in mind how the parallelisms with the first clip add additional strength to the groundings of the second. Izzard has already taught his audience how to interpret them.

This time the embedded dialogue takes place between the ‘American Pilgrim’ (as the voice of the colonizer) and the ‘Native American’ (as the voice of the colonized).

- 1a ‘Pilgrim’: Ah ... this is where our god has brought us to ...
 1b We can practice our religion.
 1c We can raise a family
 (looking around and admiring environment in all three lines above).

The opening lines in (2:1a–c) above belong to the voice of the ‘colonizing pilgrim’. Here, however, even more clearly than in the first clip, the colonizer’s voice cannot be based on a stereotypically known individual from the historical process being dialogically transposed here or on an instance of some generalized type of ‘pilgrim speech’. Clearly neither exists. As a result, we are left wondering how one can know that it is a pilgrim’s voice that is speaking here.

In addition to the performative material framing these lines, the pilgrim’s identity is indexed by the fact that these claims are from the official ideological story for why they came to America. That is, we know them because of the story of Thanksgiving. The foregrounding here, then, is simply that these ideologically based lines are stated aloud as if they literally occurred historically in a particular monologue. Again, as in the first case, an historical process has been transposed into a fictionalized dialogue.

- 1d ‘Pilgrim’: ... There’s nobody here.
 (looking around and admiring environment)

Consider (2:1d). This claim is not an officially explicit part of the ideological narrative about Thanksgiving. Locally then this line is foregrounded in a sense against the previous ‘ideological’ ones. And yet, brilliantly on Izzard’s part, the pilgrim’s false statement still finds an implicit grounding in widespread contemporary ideologies about what was immoral about the American colonial treatment of the Native American.

- 2a ‘Pilgrim’: Excuse me.
 (turning around quickly) (gesturally and intonationally polite)

Consider in (2:2a) the pilgrim’s quickly turning around and politely saying ‘Excuse me’. Through those foregrounded acts, Izzard creates the illusion that the pilgrim has just bumped into somebody while talking. Part of the humor is created by the local foregrounding of running into somebody after having just proclaimed that ‘there’s nobody here’. The emergent proposition—again, already obviously known to the audience but humorous because of the multiple ways in which the voicings deliver the message—is that the pilgrims were quite naïve about the Native Americans. As above, this too indexes contemporary critical ideologies about colonialism. The creatively humorous move here is how Izzard has linguistically managed to have the Native American literally walk in on the figurative ideologies of colonialism.

At this point, we have seen one full instance of the first local poetic parallelism being performed here. As such, of course, it should not yet be recognizable to the audience as a local regularity in the real-time performance. Given the prior parallelism

developed in Clip 1, however, Izzard has repeated enough elements across these two clips for the audience to recognize that, in many ways, the ‘same thing’ is happening again.

Topically we are again dealing with colonialism. Discursively we are again listening to a very similar kind of chronotope in which a colonizer and a colonized are interacting with each other in a fictive historical ‘real-time’. Note too how the same tension that Izzard created in the dialogue between Britain and India is here as well. Just as India was potentially acting in a naïve and primitive way by ‘letting’ their country be taken over by the ‘cunning use of a flag’, the Native American’s silence here comes surprisingly close to a negative stereotype of them as silent and thus primitive beings. Just as in the case of the first clip, this view appeared historically in colonial ideology and played a role in justifying colonization. In this case, however, as we will see below, through the dialogic silence of the Native American, Izzard ‘linguistically’ inhabits the silencing of the Native American while at the same time mocking the colonizer in humorous ways. He also, it should be noted, avoids the politically dangerous act of trying to sort out a non-demeaning but comprehensible linguistic ‘voice’ for the multitudes of peoples that are today grouped under a category, Native American, that is itself a remnant of colonialism. Instead he gives ‘voice’ to the Native American through non-verbal behaviors or, as we will see, through silent but implicit verbal ones.

In (2:3a–b) below the pilgrim simply returns to his (ideological) train of thought after having been literally—and historically, if one accepts the analogy—interrupted. In (2:4a) below, however, the pilgrim is interrupted again in what marks the completion of the second instance of the first local parallelism in play in this clip.

- 3a ... There’s nobody here.
 3b Yes ... a land empty of human existence.
 4a ‘Pilgrim’: Who the hell are these guys?!
 (turning around quickly)
 (angrily)

Interactionally here, the pilgrim seemingly just registers his annoyance over having now been interrupted again. Note the foregroundings here, however. In particular, note how their grounding is guided by being opposed to the repeating regularities at both the local and global levels of the parallelisms in play.

First, there is a decided register switch away from a formal style in which ideological pronouncements were essentially delivered to us, Izzard’s audience, from an imagined historical past to an informal everyday style in which anger is expressed among those who know each other well.⁶ Second, the pilgrim has his ideological pronouncements disturbed

⁶ This is as good a point as any to note the number of local and global repetitions and parallelisms that—often in conjunction with very complex contextually based inferences—have to go unspecified in analyses of particularly artful comedy. Consider but one example of many here. Izzard has the pilgrim move from ‘Excuse me’, delivered with a polite formality in (1:2a), to ‘Who the hell are these guys!?’ in (1:4a). A focus on only this local opposition emerging from the poetic parallelism in play shows how culturally subtle and rich they can be. In opposition to speech aimed at ‘history’, by speaking to other pilgrims around him, we project on to the pilgrim the everyday informal traits that such speech presupposes. Given the time frame and the lack of knowledge about what ‘informal’ must have sounded like then, this move analogically equates them with humorous equivalents today. Needless to say, this kind of textual richness is found throughout Izzard’s performance, but the scope of the present article constrains my ability to describe many of them.

again by the presence of the Native American. This time, however, the pilgrim is angrier and it is a plural Native American presence that is bothering him. In ways analogous to the play of the local parallelism in the first clip and as further grounded by the similar foregroundings in the first local parallelism in play here in Clip 2, consider, then, how this fictionalized pilgrim's failure to literally notice the Native American, as well as his discursive displays regarding their growing number and his increasing anger and frustration with both, map directly on to the historical facts of the colonialization process. Though of course these events never took place in a real historical dialogue, they are easy to ground given the actual colonial history here. What makes it humorous, again as in Clip 1 above, is that the foregroundings slowly index the beginnings of a humorous transformation of the pilgrim across the instances of the repeating parallel segments. Just as the British colonizer was made to look increasingly childish, selfish, and immoral, the pilgrim will be made to look increasingly foolish, selfish, arrogant and immoral. To this point, of course, the transformation has only just begun and the pilgrim after this first local parallelism has been made to look naïve. Across both cases, however, the propositions needed to ground these increasingly exaggerated and thus foregrounded characterizations as humorous are again to be found in widespread, contemporary ideologies about colonialism, the respective colonizers and colonized in the two historical cases here and, of course, in the parallel structure of the performance itself.

- 5a 'Pilgrim': What's all this please?
(hands placed on hair) (mocking smile)
- 5b No! We don't want any of your food.
(intonation and expressions of mocking disdain)
- 5c Thank you very much!
(sarcastic intonation and expression)
- 5d Just put some clothes on
(looking at 'them') (intonation and expressions of mocking disdain)

In (2:5a–d) Izzard begins a second local parallelism when he has the pilgrim directly address the Native Americans in a way that is both mocking and disdainful.⁷ The pilgrim offers up a series of linguistic and non-linguistic displays that mock Native American hairstyles, disregard their hospitality and display shocked amusement at their presumably uncivilized lack of clothing. In light of the presupposition that the audience knows the history here, these acts are foregrounded because they egregiously enact the naïve, foolish, and arrogant traits found in contemporary views of the early American colonialist, who is being symbolically represented here by the pilgrim. Thus it is again that while political criticism is implicitly present as logical presupposition, the humor is to be found in the dialogic enactment—that is, through the multiply voiced chronotope that Izzard has created.

⁷ Interestingly—given historical and real-time performative parallels—the Pilgrim's voice sounds increasingly British through this part of the transcript. Though in all likelihood a performative slip of sorts—as Izzard's strength is not in accents and he tends to use the same few for many different voicings—it is one that is coherent with all that has been argued to this point. At the same time, it arguably demonstrates the unconscious role that poetic patterning can have on performers and audience members alike.

- 6a ‘Narrator’: Meanwhile ... later that winter ...
 7a ‘Pilgrim’: Excuse me? Do you have any food?
 7b I love all this—lovely idea.
 (hands placed on hair)
 (emotionally gushing)
 (nervous laughter)
 8a I’m sorry we were a bit brusque when we first arrived.

As he did in Clip 1, Izzard takes on the role of narrator in (2:6a). What follows in (2:7a–b) locally parallels the dialogue before it. Now in dire need of the Native American for food—as all audience members know from the official story here—the pilgrim appears pathetically apologetic in (2:7a–b). Izzard has the pilgrim speak in a way that at least at first seems to take back the insulting nature of his previous behaviors. In (2:8a) the pilgrim even offers an explicit and seemingly sincere apology.

Throughout, note, the behaviors of the Native American have to be implicitly reconstructed based on the actions of the Pilgrim and, in every case to this point, they are in fact ‘mere facts’. In the first local parallelism in this clip, the Native American simply lived in North America and did so in great numbers, whereas in the second local parallelism, they simply displayed their cultural ways and knew how to cultivate and find food during the winter. It is important to see how even without explicit language, Izzard has given ‘voice’ to the Native American. What though is happening to the character of the pilgrim?

The local opposition that emerges because of the two parallel dialogues here—before the winter in (2:5a–d) and during the winter in (2:7a–8a)—is that between a mocking and arrogant colonizer who disrespected the legitimate rights and cultural ways of a native people and a humbled and naive colonizer. Through the local poetic patterns here, the audience is able to watch how their ideologically supported grounding of the (historical) pilgrim as naïve, foolish and arrogant is discursively enacted as Izzard literally comes to perform these traits.

The second instance of the second local parallelism now complete, Izzard—always one to add additional layers to his humor—continues on. In the final discursive turn, the pilgrim’s talk extends in a way the kind of talk found in Britain’s final turn (1:7c). In both, Izzard frames the colonizer’s talk so as to have them announcing or at least displaying contemporary ideological critiques of their historical behavior. In the case of Britain, it was a spoiled childishness that was shown to be ultimately self-serving, irrational, capricious, and immoral. In the case here, the damning implications are uttered even more explicitly:

- 9a ‘Pilgrim’: We didn’t realize you owned the whole country.
 10a But you have no system of ownership?
 10b Hmm—interesting.
 10c Maybe that’ll come in useful later on.
 11a Food! Thank you very much!
 12a Yes. There’s more of us coming.
 12b But don’t worry.
 12c We’ll keep our promises.

In (2:9a) above, while still seemingly involved in an apology for his earlier behavior, the pilgrim offers an excuse for the earlier mistreatment of the Native Americans. The reason

named—not knowing that the Native Americans actually owned the country—is of course at the heart of what contemporary views see as one of the main forms of the American mistreatment of Native Americans. Indeed, what follows in (2:10a–c) and then again in (2:12a–c) even more clearly violates—from even a fictionalized discursive perspective!—what might have been said. In the first case, minimally framed as a sort of thinking aloud to oneself, the pilgrim first comments on the Native American’s lack of a system of land ownership. That is, it shows the pilgrim, who is allegedly in the act of apologizing, innocently discovering one of the facts that the audience knows will later be used to rob the Native American of their lands. This comment is thus locally foregrounded because it undermines the—now supposedly—sincere apology. Similarly, the same kind of foregrounded act is created when—in response to their implicitly asked question—the pilgrim promises the Native Americans explicitly that though more pilgrims will be coming, they will keep all the promises that were made to them.

In both cases above, the pilgrim discursively enacts what can be grounded as almost unmediated contemporary criticisms of their historical behavior and, in so doing, creates the final move in Izzard’s construction of their identity. In conjunction with the local poetic parallelisms in play here, Izzard uses this final segment to add to their naivety, foolishness, and arrogance, the traits of both manipulateness and dishonesty. As a whole, this progression transforms the official Thanksgiving story from one of miraculous unity, survival, and ultimately national celebration to one of a false humility used to cover up arrogance and developing unjust deceit. Needless to say, the grounding for these traits in addition to the work of the parallelisms in play is to be found in contemporary critical ideologies about colonialism.

6. Conclusion

The clips discussed above display an indexically complicated and coherently developing fictional dialogue between the ‘voices’ of the colonizer and the colonized. Although both of these clips were performed on an empty stage and consisted of fictional dialogues that never could have taken place, Izzard’s dialogic chronotope worked in part because he coherently weaved together signs of an ongoing, real-time conversation. That is, to name but a few, the ‘speakers’ sound different and take turns. They literally ‘turn’ to each other when speaking and they are engaged in recognizable speech events. In the end, oppositions coming from our knowledge of coherent types of language use and ideological constructions informing our political world today, all arranged in subtle poetically repeating patterns, made ‘getting the jokes’ possible in both cases.

The two clips analyzed above were selected specifically because they were ideal for documenting the multiply voiced chronotope created by Izzard and demonstrating the central role that repetition in general, and poetic parallelisms in particular, play in humorous language use. Though local poetic parallelisms were found and documented above within each clip, consider in closing how the first one in Clip 1 set up a parallelism for interpreting those found in Clip 2. In both cases, it was the multiply voiced chronotope itself that was at the center of this larger global parallelism. Through it, Izzard slowly created in both cases increasingly humorous, arguably critical, identities for the colonizing powers. In both as well a colonizing power was discursively opposed to a colonized victim and the violation of inalienable rights to self-rule was ultimately the most commonly relied upon proposition used to ground foregroundings as humorous and/or political. Finally, it is interesting to note

that by ordering them as he did, he likely made it easier—or, coming the other way, unconsciously unavoidable—for the American audience to accept the overarching analogical argument, which is perhaps more commonly found only in academic circles: What America did to Native America was just as much a form of colonialism as what Britain did to India.

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