

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

Laughter is a vital part of everyone's life and humor is viewed as the ability to make other laugh or to be able to laugh at funny things. In general, humor as a tool in creating laughable plays or situations has been viewed through three perspectives: incongruity theories, theories of superiority, and theories of relief. According to the theories of incongruity, a humorous text which includes situations, events, pictures, or acts is funny when the idea runs against the expectation, such as clowns wearing outrageously large shoes, people having an especially big nose, or politicians telling the truth. On the other hand, the superiority theories view humor as a result of jokes which basically play on one's mistakes or weaknesses, typically on political, ethnic or gender grounds. As for the theories of relief, humor can be seen as the explosion of repressive feelings that are depressed by social phenomenon. For example, the most dirty or taboo jokes are basically seen as the reflection of social aspect which is repressed and released by making fun of it (Krikkmann 33-35).

The theories of humor are traditionally divided into three genres: incongruity, superiority, and relief, all of which have been used as an effective methodology to investigate various topics of interest on humor. The Theory of Incongruity is the idea that a surprise creates the laugh. This means that the humor is built because it runs against things expected. This idea leads to the understanding that jokes are basically

generated when there is conflict between what is expected to occur and what actually occurs. The Theory of Superiority states that humor arises from jokes involving one's mistakes. This concept says that people always laugh at things or people "being lower" than the others. Humor, then, arises from the jokes which basically play on one's mistakes or weaknesses, typically on political, ethnic or gender grounds. Finally, the Theory of relief is that humor occurs when tension is released. Here the laughter is a kind of energy released from the pressure in a human's life, especially when it is discharged by one's social taboos such as gender, dirty things and religion.

Yi He studied factors which create humorous effect in discourse of the film *Crazy Stone*. According to film critics in mainland China, the film is a reflection of "ridiculous reality" because the film scenes and plot not only reflect but also satirize some current social and cultural problems of China. It was found that linguistic devices used for creating humorous effect in verbal interactions include phonetic, lexical and discourse devices. As for societal perspective, two essential factors in constructing humor were found to be the use of irony to satirize the current social and economical situations and the use of dialect for different purposes which could make the audience "laugh every five to ten minutes during the movie" (1990). Regarding the interactions in the socio-political context, it was concluded that the background of dialectal region and culture of the audience is significant to the perception of humor, that is, the knowledge about the dialect and the imagination of the regional people will influence the humorous effect aroused by the dialect.

Two Thai studies supported the humor concept as an interactional activity. Kanjana's humor study examined how humor conveys social beliefs, ideologies and power relations through the frame of linguistic strategies which are used to create the

sense of humor in Thai jokes. It was found that two linguistic strategies, punning and discourse, are used to create a sense of humor. It was also found that certain groups of people – politicians, women and ethnic minorities – are made fun of in various ways. Kanjana's study suggested that language is relevant to the society when it reflects the aspect of individuals and groups in the jokes.

Another interesting humor study, by Chalermchai Parasuk, demonstrated outstanding characteristics of Lan Na jokes based on Raskin's Script-based Semantic theories, Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humor, Grice's Theory of Conversational Implicature, and Pun Theories. The study findings indicated the reflection of power relations in Lan Na society. It was concluded that humor serves not only as a part of entertainment but also as a reflection of the socio-political structures of the society.

According to Jason Rutter, previous humor research views standup comedy as "just a collection of jokes, funny stories and witticisms and relegate any move towards understanding its environment as irrelevant" (69). He argues that although the prime purpose of standup is the telling of jokes by a performer for the entertainment of a gathered audience, the social processes that guide the actions of both performer and audience are too important to be ignored.

The study by McIlvenny et.al "I Really Wanna Make You Laugh: Standup Comedy and Audience Response" challenged the assumption that audiences act spontaneously and have little to do with what performers do on stage. By analyzing fragments of natural performance comedy of professional standup comedians, the study illustrated that the organization of comedian talks and audience responses in

stand-up comedy is a multi-faceted phenomenon consisting of a rich interaction between both sides. For example, a comedian may use a membership category to involve the audience in identifying, affiliating, or disaffiliating with such a category before building humor on the knowledge available through the member category, making either “favorable or unfavorable references” (239).

Jonathan Lane’s article “Standup Against Racism” pointed out that humor found in the standup comedy significantly plays an important role in perpetuating the racist, ethnic and gender bias in the society. He asserted that racist and ethnic jokes are part of the performance which the comedians use to elicit the laughter from their audiences, making the performance more popular and prevalent. One explanation given is that despite the rise in political correctness which determines the extent to which racist and ethnic jokes can be told at modern standup comedy, the audience enjoys hearing these types of jokes because they feel that this is the one place where they can hear them in public. He emphasized that if hearing these jokes that give new ways to look down on people gives the audience a greater sense of superiority, then the audience will subconsciously desire to hear more.

Live standup comedy began in the form of jesters, clowns, fools and wits entertaining kings and queens in the medieval times in Europe. In the US, the performance of standup comedy developed from the fairground, the circus arena, the American Burlesque and the vaudeville stage. In the last 10 years, standup comedy has been very popular in the UK and the US, with famous English speaking performers like Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, and Whoopie Goldberg. Nowadays, standup performance in the US is popular not only on stage but also on television and video. As discussed above, skillful standup comedians are not merely telling jokes.

They need to improvise, memorize and edit a live show on the stage in order to gain laughter from their audiences. In fact, they are a “critic and observer of human life” and are allowed to “escape the censor” in their “use and abuse” of the convention (McIlvenny 226-227).

In Thailand, Udom Taepanich (Note) started his standup comedy in 1994. Since then, his performances have been increasingly popular among an audience of different age groups. His videos on the website www.youtube.com have been visited by more than 100,000 viewers. His performances have reached the 9th episode. Note basically deals with situations that everybody is familiar with. A lot of his jokes build up humor from the characteristics of marginal people as being uneducated or old-fashioned. It would be interesting and worthwhile to investigate whether the success of Note’s performances in eliciting humor responses among the Thai audience can be explained through the classic incongruity, superiority, and relief humor theories.

1.2 Purpose of study

- To examine the sense of humor within the Thai socio-political context in Note’s 4th episode standup comedy based on the three foundation theories of humor
- To investigate the use of figurative language as linguistic device to create the sense of humor

1.3 Educational Advantage

It is hoped that the findings of the proposed study can provide not only better understanding in the humor theories but also insights into the role of standup humor as a reflection of the Thai socio-political context.

1.4 Scope of study

The study is a qualitative research obtaining the data from one episode, the 4th episode of Note's standup comedy.