Abstract

This thesis explores stand-up comedy as live performance focusing on the manner in which audience, performer, jokes and venue combine to make a unique interactive experience. It outlines the failure of previous literature in humour research to move beyond simple stimulus models of joking and laughter. It argues for a shift in the study of humour towards in situ observation which draws on both conversation analysis and audience research. Through the observation of stand-up interaction the thesis demonstrates that audience laughter is organised in a consistent fashion and that the transition between comedian's talk and audience laughter is socially organised. In turn the thesis examines the openings, middles and closings of standup routines. It demonstrates that despite a considerable variety of performance style, comedians' introductions, the commencement of the comedians' routines themselves and the closing of acts, are organised around a set of common features each with a preferred order. Further, it demonstrates the active role played by the audience as well as the performer in maintaining this ordering. It shows how a feeling of "liveness" is built up out of these sequences as they are constructed specifically for and respond to, individual audiences. Looking at the central section of stand-up routines this work demonstrates how jokes told by comedians incorporate a series of rhetorical and performance specific techniques which work towards announcing to an audience that a point of completion is approaching and that laughter is the preferred response. It is argued that this serves to minimise the audience's risk in laughing in a group situation and so is beneficial for both performer and audience. A new system for understanding stand-up is presented which pivots on notions of performance, interaction and liveness.
A stand-up comedy audience arrives with one thought in mind, a dare to the performers: Make me laugh. That means the audience is initially skeptical, sometimes so much it verges on being hostile. They believe the comedian has a job to do and it’s not their responsibility to help. Stand-up is almost exclusively defined by the entertainment of a crowd by a single individual. Stand-up comedy makes sense according to old understandings of power and creativity. Conventional thought would say that one man should be capable of leading a crowd and swaying them into laughter. I'm not trying to explain the thinking of stand-ups, but I'm trying to describe how stand-up does not distinguish itself from hierarchical society. Stand-up comedy is a comic style in which a comedian performs in front of a live audience, usually speaking directly to them. The performer is commonly known as a comic, stand-up comic, stand-up comedian or simply a stand-up. In stand-up comedy, the comedian usually recites a grouping of humorous stories, jokes and one-liners typically called a monologue, routine or act. Some stand-up comedians use props, music or magic tricks to "enhance" their acts. Stand-up comedy is often