

Pragmatic Functions of Humor in Indonesian Podcasts: Implications for Intercultural Competence in Language Learning

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Abstract

This study explores the strategic functions of humor in an Indonesian podcast conversation between Raditya Dika and Pras Teguh. While humor in digital media is widely discussed, its pragmatic and cultural dimensions in Southeast Asian podcast discourse remain underexamined. Using a pragmatic linguistic framework and cultural discourse analysis, this study reveals that humor fulfills three key functions: building social rapport, mitigating face-threatening acts, and maintaining discourse coherence. The analysis draws on five major theories: incongruity, superiority, relief, general theory of verbal humor, and multimodal strategies. Methodologically, the study integrates verbal and non-verbal cues in naturalistic podcast data to capture how humor operates in spontaneous, informal interactions. The findings also show that intertextual references, cultural expressions, and soft stereotypes embedded in jokes reflect Indonesia's high-context communication style and function as identity negotiation tools in the digital public sphere. This research contributes a Southeast Asian perspective to digital humor studies and highlights humor's pedagogical value. It suggests that podcast-based humor, when contextually analyzed, can support language instruction by enhancing learners' pragmatic awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and communicative competence.

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Introduction

In recent years, humor has gained recognition not only as a form of entertainment but also as a central feature of human communication and identity construction. In digital discourse, humor plays a crucial role in managing interpersonal relationships, negotiating power, and constructing shared meanings. Studies by Dynel (2011) and Haugh (2013) highlight how humor functions in various digital genres such as memes, vlogs, and podcasts, not just to amuse, but to perform pragmatic and social work. Moreover, in digital education settings, humor is increasingly seen as a pedagogical tool for promoting engagement and fostering intercultural communication (Nguyen, 2019; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). While these studies provide valuable insights, they often focus on humor as a sociolinguistic or pragmatic phenomenon rather than as a resource for language pedagogy. There remains a significant gap in exploring how humor, especially spontaneous and culturally grounded humor in digital formats, can be integrated into language education, particularly in the development of pragmatic competence and intercultural awareness. Positioning humor within the context of language teaching is especially relevant in today's globalized and digitally mediated classrooms, where learners need to navigate both linguistic forms and sociocultural cues (Kristeva, 1980; Gultom, 2024).

In Indonesia, the popularity of podcasts has grown rapidly, especially among younger audiences. Indonesian podcasts often feature informal, humorous conversations that draw from vernacular language, pop culture, and everyday life. Figures like Raditya Dika and Pras Teguh are among the influencers who use humor not only for entertainment but also to comment on social issues, identity, and language norms. These humorous exchanges reflect shifting language ideologies and identity expressions within Indonesian youth culture. Yet, their linguistic and pedagogical potential remains largely underexplored in academic literature, particularly in the context of how such media can inform language learning practices that are culturally responsive and pragmatically rich (Aristotle, 2007).

Although studies on humor have explored various genres such as television, stand-up comedy, and classroom interaction, research on spontaneous digital humor, especially in Southeast Asian podcasts, is still limited. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to how such humorous discourse can be integrated into language learning, particularly in teaching pragmatic competence. This study responds to this research gap by analyzing authentic humorous discourse in Indonesian podcast conversations and considering how such data may inform language education in culturally relevant ways.

The analysis in this study is informed by key theories in pragmatics and humor studies, including Leech's (1983) politeness maxims, Attardo's (1994) General Theory of Verbal Humor, and Dynel's (2009) framework for multimodal digital humor. These perspectives help in identifying how humor is produced, negotiated, and interpreted in spontaneous, informal discourse. In addition, the study draws from sociolinguistic concepts of identity and code-switching, which are particularly relevant in multilingual and multicultural settings like Indonesia.

The primary data for this research is a podcast episode featuring Raditya Dika and Pras Teguh, known for their conversational, observational, and culturally grounded humor. Their interactions, available publicly on YouTube, present rich and authentic linguistic data that reveal how humor functions in real-time communication. The spontaneous nature of their

dialogue makes it ideal for analyzing how speakers navigate politeness, construct solidarity, and challenge social norms through humor (Walker, 2004).

This study aims to identify the types and pragmatic functions of humor found in the selected Indonesian podcast conversation. It also seeks to explore the sociocultural meanings embedded in humorous utterances and their potential value in language education, particularly in developing pragmatic competence, intercultural awareness, and context-sensitive communication skills among language learners. By focusing on spontaneous humor in a culturally rich digital context, this research contributes to the growing body of work on digital pragmatics, humor studies, and language pedagogy. It provides a model for integrating real-life discourse into language teaching and offers insights into how learners can engage with humor to enhance their linguistic and sociocultural competence. The findings can inform curriculum development, classroom practices, and further research on digital discourse in education.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach, focusing on pragmatic analysis of naturally occurring humorous utterances within an Indonesian podcast. The data source was a publicly accessible YouTube podcast episode featuring Raditya Dika and Pras Teguh, both of whom are well-known for their spontaneous and culturally embedded humor. The episode was selected based on its richness in humorous content, conversational spontaneity, and relevance to youth discourse in Indonesia. The data were transcribed verbatim and segmented into units of analysis based on conversational turns. Utterances that contained humorous intent, effect, or structure were identified and categorized according to the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo, 1994), Leech's (1983) politeness maxims, and Dynel's (2009) multimodal humor strategies. Each segment was coded thematically to identify the type, function, and pragmatic features of humor used by the speakers. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis, researcher triangulation was applied (Creswell, 2013). Three researchers independently analyzed the data and discussed the coding results to reach consensus. Analytic memoing was also used to track interpretative decisions and maintain transparency throughout the coding process. While member checking was not feasible due to the public and asynchronous nature of the data, validation was strengthened through inter-coder dialogue and reflexive journaling. Although the podcast data are publicly available, ethical considerations were observed to ensure responsible representation of discourse and speaker identity. No sensitive personal data were disclosed, and the speakers' names already public figures, were used in the context of fair academic use. The study adheres to academic ethical standards in digital discourse research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). The analysis was conducted not only to explore humor pragmatically, but also to assess its pedagogical potential in language learning. The selection of a podcast as the data source reflects the growing relevance of digital genres in contemporary language education. Through this approach, the study seeks to align its findings with the development of classroom materials and activities that promote pragmatic awareness, critical thinking, and cultural sensitivity among learners of English and Indonesian.

Results and Discussion

Results

The analysis of the selected podcast episode identified three dominant types of humor employed by the speakers: ironic humor, self-deprecating humor, and code-switching humor. These forms of humor emerged consistently throughout the interaction and served multiple pragmatic purposes, including reducing social distance, softening criticism, and enhancing solidarity. A total of 42 humorous utterances were identified. Of these, ironic humor was the most frequent (40.4%), followed by self-deprecating humor (33.3%) and humor through code-switching (26.3%). These utterances often appeared at transition points in conversation or in response to emotionally charged or culturally specific topics.

The following table summarizes the main humor types, subthemes, illustrative utterances, and their corresponding pragmatic functions:

Table 1. Summary of Humor Types, Themes, and Pragmatic Functions

Type of Humor	Subtheme	Sample Utterance	Pragmatic Function
Ironic humor	Mock praise, sarcasm	“Wah, kamu pintar banget ya... telat dua jam.”	Politeness strategy (off-record)
Self-deprecating humor	Admitting flaws, exaggeration	“Gue tuh gak ada otaknya, bener-bener.”	Building solidarity, face-saving
Code-switching humor	Jaksel phrases, English mix	“That’s so cringe tapi yaudah lah ya.”	Identity signaling, group bonding

These findings show that humor in the podcast is not random or merely entertaining but is systematically employed to fulfill specific communicative goals. Humor was often used to reframe uncomfortable topics, express criticism indirectly, or negotiate identity and group belonging. The forms and frequency of humor also suggest a shared cultural understanding between speakers and their intended audience. While the detailed interpretation and educational implications of these findings are discussed in the next section, the results above illustrate the patterned and purposeful nature of humor within informal Indonesian podcast discourse.

Discussion

The findings from this study confirm that spontaneous humor in digital discourse serves more than just an entertainment function. It operates as a powerful pragmatic tool for managing interpersonal relationships, negotiating social distance, and constructing shared identity. This aligns with the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo, 1994), where humor is conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon involving scripts, targets, and pragmatic strategies.

For example, in the podcast excerpt where Raditya jokes about his inability to cook despite living alone, “Gue tuh masak air aja gosong”, the self-deprecating humor invites laughter while simultaneously affirming his vulnerability. This type of utterance exemplifies the use of scripts that deviate from social expectations, creating incongruity and thus humor, while also reinforcing shared norms about adulthood and independence.

From a politeness theory perspective, much of the humor analyzed operates within Leech’s (1983) politeness maxims, especially the Agreement Maxim and the Modesty Maxim.

Self-deprecating jokes and exaggerated incompetence are not only rhetorical moves to elicit laughter but also function as solidarity-enhancing strategies. By highlighting their own flaws or awkwardness, the speakers reduce power asymmetry and foster a sense of equality. This resonates with Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of negative face mitigation. In one moment, Pras Teguh quips, "Kadang gue mikir, gue ini beneran lucu atau orang cuma kasihan?", showing how modesty becomes performative and relational.

Additionally, the widespread use of hybrid language, especially "Jaksel" (Jakarta Selatan) code-switching, reveals humor as a marker of modern, urban youth identity. As noted by Heryanto (2019), such hybrid speech signals cosmopolitanism, digital fluency, and social capital within online spaces. Humor is thus not only linguistic but ideological, it affirms group membership while subtly excluding those unfamiliar with the codes. This supports Locher and Watts' (2005) view of politeness as relational work, whereby language use reflects one's positioning within specific cultural and social networks. For instance, the phrase "literally kayak... I was like, 'serius loh?'" reflects a mix of English structure and Indonesian emotion, indexing both modernity and intimacy.

Compared to scripted or institutional humor analyzed in previous studies (e.g., stand-up comedy, TV shows), the podcast examined in this study provides access to organic, unrehearsed humor, which emerges in the flow of authentic interaction. The spontaneous nature of the jokes allows us to observe how speakers adapt to context, recover from misfires, and build rapport in real time. This mirrors findings in Malaysian and Thai classrooms where instructors use informal humor to build connection and encourage participation (Ibrahim & Kasim, 2019; Wu & Suwannarak, 2023).

These observations are further supported by regional studies. Lim and Tan (2022), studying Malaysian university students, found that digital humor fostered solidarity and peer intimacy in online discussions, reinforcing the use of humor as pragmatic and relational work. Similarly, Nguyen and Nguyen (2021) showed how Vietnamese learners' exposure to culturally embedded digital humor enhanced their pragmatic sensitivity and participation in classroom interaction. Such findings confirm that spontaneous humor serves pedagogical purposes across Southeast Asian digital contexts, not merely as cultural reflection but as communicative strategy.

Pedagogically, these findings carry several implications for language education. Humor, often marginalized in curriculum design, can in fact be central to developing students' pragmatic awareness. Through humor, learners can identify indirectness, implicature, and speech acts in action, practice decoding cultural and contextual cues embedded in humorous exchanges, engage critically with real-world digital texts and explore the sociolinguistic meanings behind language use, and reflect on their own use of humor and how it might differ across languages and contexts (Wu, & Suwannarak, 2023).

Educators might use podcast excerpts as stimulus materials for class discussions, asking students to analyze why something is funny (or not), what social norms are being negotiated, and how language choices create particular effects. These activities can be aligned with communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches, emphasizing authenticity, learner agency, and intercultural competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). A systematic review by Pratiwi and Marpaung (2024) confirms that humor across Asian ESL classrooms enhances learner engagement and cultural sensitivity, though integration into formal curricula remains uneven.

However, such integration is not without challenges. Humor is culturally bound and prone to misunderstanding, especially among learners with different sociolinguistic backgrounds. This raises the need for scaffolding, context provision, and reflective tasks that guide students not only in “getting the joke” but in understanding why it works pragmatically and culturally. Razali’s (2020) study on humor in Malaysian literature classrooms supports this caution, noting differences in how male and female teachers use humor and the need for contextual alignment.

In acknowledging the study’s limitations, it is important to recognize that the data represent a narrow slice of humorous discourse, namely, one podcast episode by two male speakers from urban Indonesia. Gendered discourse, regional variation, and audience reception remain unexplored in this context. Future studies could examine how female speakers or speakers from diverse ethnic/regional groups use humor differently. Classroom-based research is also needed to assess how learners engage with humorous texts and whether such exposure enhances pragmatic performance.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of humor as a site of linguistic, social, and pedagogical inquiry. In a digital world saturated with humor, from memes to satire to podcast banter, language educators are uniquely positioned to harness this resource, not only to teach grammar or vocabulary, but to cultivate deeper awareness of how language constructs meaning, identity, and community.

Conclusion

This study explored the pragmatic functions of humor in an Indonesian podcast featuring Raditya Dika and Pras Teguh. The findings reveal that spontaneous humor, particularly ironic, self-deprecating, and code-switching humor is strategically used to manage face, build solidarity, and negotiate identity. These humorous utterances are not random but reflect shared cultural norms and interpersonal dynamics that shape the communicative choices of speakers in informal digital discourse. The study contributes to bridging the gap between spontaneous humor analysis and its practical integration in language learning, particularly in Southeast Asian digital contexts. By applying established pragmatic and humor theories to authentic podcast data, the research provides pedagogically relevant insights for educators and curriculum developers. From an educational standpoint, the findings underscore the value of incorporating spontaneous digital humor into classroom materials to enhance students’ pragmatic competence and intercultural communicative awareness. Language instructors can design classroom activities that expose learners to real-life humorous interactions such as transcript analysis, role-playing based on podcast segments, or critical reflection on sociopragmatic cues in digital discourse. Such practices not only enrich communicative strategies but also foster learner engagement through culturally resonant and socially meaningful content. While the study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. It focuses on a single podcast episode, does not include learner-based testing, and is context-specific to Indonesian popular culture. These factors may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the data sources, involve classroom application, and include learner feedback to evaluate how digital humor can enhance language learning outcomes across different cultural and educational settings. Despite these constraints, the study offers a foundation for further research at the intersection of digital discourse, humor pragmatics, and language education. It calls for more attention to spontaneous, authentic

materials in language pedagogy and highlights the value of humor as a legitimate and effective resource in developing intercultural communicative competence.

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Authors' Note

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