

GE3108 Language in Art, Invention and Inspiration

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Investigating effective social criticism in Mrs. Maisel's stand-up comedy with RST and Theme-Rheme analysis

INTRODUCTION

Lots of studies on the difference between male and female language use have been carried out by linguistics (e.g. Coates, 2003; Lakoff, 2004; Ferreira, 2012), however, few of them focus on the how the female voice shapes the modern society and improve women's status. Performing stand-up comedy has long been regarded as masculine because it is not compatible with the discreet behavior traditionally idealized in women (Domingo, 1995). In contrast with this, the TV drama *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* features a female stand-up comedian who gained great success in the entertainment industry and advocated for women's rights in 20th-century America. In this term paper, we aim for discovering the patterns in Mrs. Maisel's comedies and how she achieves effective social criticism through humorous utterance.

METHOD

With reference to Mann and Taboada (2005) for the Rhetorical Structure Theory, we have analyzed 4 clips from *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* on the positioning of punchlines, inspiring messages and repetitive rhetorical questions. For the punchlines, we will examine how Mrs. Maisel arranged them to accumulate the climax to the fullest. For the inspiring statements, we will investigate its relationship with adjacent clauses and how they stand out from the rest of the script. For the repetitive rhetorical questions, we will analyze their position in the script and their relationship with other parts of the text. In addition, Using the framework provided by Thompson (1996), we shall further investigate the ideational and interpersonal meanings the repetitive rhetorical questions carry by focusing on their themes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONs

PART I

The Highlighted Positions

Introduction and Definition

In this section, we will examine how Mrs. Maisel structured her talk show. Through applying RST analysis on the position of punchlines in her script, we found that Mrs. Maisel tended to emphasize certain locations in the script, such as the ending element of a list, the last description of an event and the closing sentence of a passage. We named these locations "the highlighted positions." These highlighted positions are used by Mrs. Maisel to plot the punchlines, manage the tempo of a talk show and let her main messages stand out. Examples of how highlighted positions satisfy these purposes will be demonstrated in the following paragraphs.

Plotting the punchline

Adapted from Clip three:

Example 1

<c4>You can't have it all.

<c5a>You can't run the world

<c5b> and have all the pretty underwear, too.

Example 2

<c7a>That's like you're already fighting with some asshole

<c7b> who's trying to get in front of you in line

<c7c> and steal your cab at Bendel's

<c7d>while you got one arm full of shopping bags

<c7e> and the other holding onto your son

<c7f>so he doesn't run away

<c7g>and drink from the puddles;

<c7h> and then out of the blue a mugger comes along

<c7i> and hits you over the head with a piece of pipe

<c7j> he found at a construction site

<c7k> and completely knocks you out!

These two examples from clip 2 demonstrate how Mrs. Maisel plot her punchlines in her talk show. The first example follows the traditional way of arranging the punchline in the end, the second example shows how the arrangement of punchlines can influence the flow of a talk show.

Through applying RST analysis on example 1 (<c4> and <c5>), it is observed that two satellites (<c5a> and <c5b>) function as an elaboration of the nucleus (<c4>). The punchline is in <c5b>, not in <c5a>. This sequence is important because comedians tend to plot their punchline at the end of a passage to let the punchline stands out.

While ending passages with punchlines enhance the payoff, not every punchline appears at the end, especially when it comes to longer passages. Through examining the positioning of punchlines in RST schema of example 2 (<c7>), it is discovered that Mrs. Maisel distributed the punchlines evenly to manage the tempo of the talk show and grab the audience's attention.

The punchlines in <c7> are <c7c>, <c7g> and <c7k>. Though only <c7k> has the advantage position as being the ending clause of the entire passage, there is also a positioning pattern these three punchlines share: each of them is the ending description of an event. <c7c> can be viewed as the ending of the "asshole event"; <c7d> can be regarded as the ending of the "you and your son event" and <c7k> as the ending of the "mugger event." By arranging three events with comparable length, each of which ends with a punchline, Mrs. Maisel creates a rhythmic tempo. The rhythmic tempo helps Mrs. Maisel to finish the entire sentence without taking a breath and keep the audience intrigued.

In addition to creating laughter, Mrs. Maisel also revealed the pressure that has been imposing on women by society through humorous utterance. Both example 1 and example 2 are analogs of the overwhelming anxiety women feel when they are haunted by the misbelief that "women have to be beautiful."

Emphasizing the inspiring message

Adapted from clip three:

<c16a>And now, now I'm thinking:

<c16b> "A, I could have used the money I spent on this stupid book on a fourth lipstick,

<c16c>and B, what if I wasn't supposed to be a mother?

<c16d>What if I picked the wrong profession?

<c17a>If you're afraid of blood,

<c17b> you don't become a surgeon.

<c18a>If you don't like to fly,

<c18b> you don't join Pan Am.

<c19a>I...I can't change my mind and donate my kids to the library,

<c19b>like I'm gonna do with this book.

The highlighted position method also works for emphasizing the main message. An example of it is in clip 3 <c16>. <c16> is composed of two list items: A (<c16b>) and B(<c16c-d>). Notice that in this sentence, the punchline <c16b> is not at the end of a list, where the highlighted position is. Instead, <c16c-d> take the place of it. It implies that Mrs. Maisel wanted her audience's attention not on the joke, but on the questions (<c16c-d>).

Another example is in the following clauses, from <c17> to <c19>. <c19> stands out from <c17> and <c18> because of its highlighted position and its sentence structure which is different from <c17> and <c18>. Firstly, these three sentences are instances of the concept of "picking the wrong profession" in <c16>. The three professions given by Mrs. Maisel are surgeons, pilots, and mothers. Since Mrs. Maisel wanted her audience to focus on the dilemma mothers are facing, so she put it on the highlighted position and contrasted it with the other two professions. <c17> and <c18> share the same structure, with (nucleus clause) and <a> (satellite clause) linked together by conditional relationship. Secondly, if we compare <c19> to <c17>, we will find that the conditional clause is missing. A possible interpretation is that the idea of "women" and "motherhood" have been strongly connected and it is not acceptable by the convention to raise the question "If I am not supposed to be a mother...". There is no "if" for women at that time, 'women are supposed to be mothers'.

Overall, this example shows how Mrs. Maisel compared common sense (<c17> and <c18>) with the situation women are facing (<c19>) to reveal the contradictions that lie underneath the stereotypes people hold towards women.

PART II

The Repetitive Rhetorical Questions

Introduction

In addition to "the highlighted positions", another prominent feature in Mrs. Maisel's routine is the use of repetitive rhetorical questions. In this section, this feature will be examined through theme-rhyme analysis and rhetorical structure analysis to reveal the underlying linguistic patterns and to understand the effects of these patterns in Mrs. Maisel's humorous utterances.

Definition

The feature studied here specifically refers to the spans of text where more than one rhetorical question occurred consecutively, some of which may adopt similar structures. Therefore, we name it as "repetitive rhetorical questions" which will be abbreviated as RRQs in the analyses below. Although there are other rhetorical questions occurring in the four clips, they are not our main object of study. Here is an example of RRQs from clip one:

Example 1.1

<c10>Because so what if I work?

<c11> So what if I get divorced?

<c12>So what if I'm alone?

<c13>Why do women care about how people look at them or see them?

Theme-Rheme analysis

Interpersonal theme and topical theme both showed prominent patterns in the RRQs.

We first analyzed the frequency of interpersonal theme occurring in clauses of both clip one and three with and without the RRQs:

<i>Frequency of Interpersonal Themes</i>	<i>With the RRQs</i>	<i>Without the RRQs</i>
<i>Clip one</i>	21.54%	10.2%
<i>Clip three</i>	23.08%	19.05%

Figure 2.1

It is observed that, with the presence of the RRQs, the figure saw a rise of 11.34% and 4.03% in clip one and three respectively. To view this pattern more specifically, the structure “what if” and “so what if” appeared seven times collectively in clip one and three; “why do somebody...” occurred six times in clip one alone. This suggests that the RRQs are one of the main sources of interpersonal meaning in Mrs. Maisel’s routines.

Then we analyzed the frequency of different topical themes occurring in clip one. Scopes of both the part excluding the RRQs and the part of the RRQs are studied:

<i>Choice of Topical Themes</i>	<i>The part excluding the RRQs</i>	<i>The part of the RRQs</i>
<i>First-person singular: “I”</i>	23.08%	18.75%
<i>Third-person singular: “He” or “She”</i>	43.59%	0%
<i>First-person plural “We”, “Some of us” and “Women”</i>	0%	81.25%
<i>Others</i>	33.33%	0%

Figure 2.2

The results indicate that throughout the text, first person singular (I) and third person singular (she, he) dominate the topical themes, accounting for 23.08% and 43.59% respectively. Nonetheless, when the RRQs are raised, first person plural (we, some of us) and “women” suddenly become the prominent topical themes, reaching up to 81.25% collectively. This indicates that there exists a shift in topical themes in the RRQs, where the scale of addressed personas expanded from individuals to more generalized groups of people.

In conclusion, two points may be deduced from these patterns. Firstly, sophisticated meanings may be expressed through the RRQs. They are perhaps discussions of social issues judging from the shift in topical theme. This is in accordance with the traditional function of this feature, which suggests that rhetorical questions are a form of rhetorical device that is used to make arguments rather than to seek answers. Moreover, the conveyance of these important meanings to the audience is effective through the RRQs. This is achieved through engaging the audience with the discussion, enabled by the choices of using wh-questions as the interpersonal theme and “we” or “some of us” etc. as the topical theme.

Rhetorical Structure Analysis

Next, we looked at how the RRQs are linked to other clauses by analyzing the RST relations in both clip one and three. It is discovered that evaluation and interpretation most prominently connect the RRQs with the other clauses.

Below are some specific examples which illustrate this pattern. In clip one, the nucleus unfolded in clip one as Mrs. Maisel described her visit to a renowned female comedian's residence (<c16> to <c40>). She witnessed the incongruity between the comedian's public image and her real personality and was suggested by her that people do not find women funny unless they do some "wackadoodle" character. Then the satellite summarized and commented on the nucleus as Mrs. Maisel used four RRQs to evaluate and interpret this experience:

Example 3.1

<c41> *Why do women have to pretend to be something that they're not?*

<c42a> *Why do we have to pretend to be stupid* <c42b> *when we're not stupid?*

<c43a> *Why do we have to pretend to be helpless* <c43b> *when we're not helpless?*

<c44a> *Why do we have to pretend to be sorry* <c44b> *when we have nothing to be sorry about?*

<c45a> *Why do we have to pretend we're not hungry* <c45b> *when we're hungry?*

By questioning rhetorically, she criticized the common phenomenon that women must pretend to be something that they are not and encouraged all women to speak out their true desires. A similar pattern occurred in clip three. The first nucleus-satellite developed as Mrs. Maisel first shared her frustrating parenting experience (<c3> to <c15>) and then evaluated on this experience by doubting her suitability of being a mother, using the RRQs:

Example 3.2

<c16c> *And B, what if I wasn't supposed to be a mother?*

<c16d> *What if I picked the wrong profession?*

The second nucleus-satellite continued as Mrs. Maisel moved on to examine the traditional view that women are supposed to be mothers (<c24> to <c27>), and then interpreting this view by challenging it, using the RRQs:

Example 3.3

<c24> *I mean, are there exceptions?*

<c25> *What if some of us are just supposed to travel a lot?*

<c26> *Or run 24-hour diners out in rural areas wearing coveralls?*

<c27> *What if some of us are supposed to just talk to adults our entire life?*

To understand this pattern, we may first examine the growth of the character herself. While encountering the injustices in life, Mrs. Maisel's attitude evolved greatly through performing stand-up comedy. It transformed from default submissiveness of life to painstaking doubtfulness of individual experience and eventually matures towards the awareness of women's vulnerability. In the meantime, this process of awakening is reflected in Mrs. Maisel comedy routine as well. Through continuously raising the RRQs to evaluate and interpret on previous information, she upgraded her speech from the presentation of her personal life to the sharing of her independent and reflective thinking, and lastly, towards the discussion and criticism of social injustices in general.

If we observe this pattern from the audience's point of view, it is because of the beginning descriptions of the personal stories that they are immersed and struck with an empathy of the context. Therefore, the pattern makes it easier for them to accept the comedian's arguments hidden in the evaluative and interpretive RRQs later.

In addition, this pattern is in accordance with "relief", one of the three humor theories (Mills, 2011). It is a critical social function that humor performs, as the RRQs helped Mrs. Maisel express ideas that much of the public refused to discuss at that time, dauntlessly breaking the repression on gender inequality.

At last, to supplement the above interpretations, the following example may serve as a source of verification:

Example 3.4

<c7>*I've been trying to read more papers lately.*

<c8>*It's interesting.*

<c9a>*My father pointed out*

<c9b>*that my favorite part about a newspaper is the ads for shoes.*

<c10>*And I felt bad about that.*

<c11>*But now I think, maybe they just put those ads in newspaper to distract us.*

<c12a>*Because if women don't realize what's going on in this world,*

<c12b>*they won't step in and fix it.*

<c13>*Because they will fix it.*

<c14>*And accessorize it!*

In this particular case, although the contents of criticism are not delivered by the RRQs, the basic structure of speech present the same pattern (c7-c10: personal experience; c11: evaluation; c12-14: interpretation). The crowd responded with excitement as Mrs. Maisel made an impassioned speech on behalf of all women, a community of capable individuals that can not be overlooked any longer.

Repetition

Last but not least, we would like to emphasize the effect of repetition itself in the RRQs. According to Kolln and Grey (2017), rhetorical repetition has the significant effect of creating a rhyme in texts. Thus it is suggested that, in Mrs. Maisel's comedy, a rhyme is produced by the RRQs and such a rhyme could serve to accumulate and enhance the emotion within the script. In example 3.1, the repetition of "why do we have to" forcefully accumulated the comedian's anger and disappointment and eventually led to the explosion of such feeling:

Example 4.1

<c46> *Fuck you, Sophie!*

<c47> *Put that on your plate!*

This process powerfully channels with the audience as it brings about intense emotional responses, creating a climax of the entire comedy routine. Thus repetition is yet another factor contributing to the effectiveness of Mrs. Maisel's delivery.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the highlighted positions and the positioning of punchlines both serve important functions in the effective conveyance of social criticism in Mrs. Maisel's comedy.

On one hand, the highlighted positions are used to plot the punchlines and to emphasize the main ideas. Thus, a joyous atmosphere is created, in which the audience could have a good laugh while being inspired by Mrs. Maisel's reflective thoughts at the same time.

On the other hand, the RRQs delivered the content of social criticism as they evaluated and interpreted on the comedian's personal experience. The evaluation and interpretation process could be verified by the shift in topical themes in the RRQs and the content delivery function could be explained by the essential purpose of making rhetorical questions. Moreover, such delivery is particularly effective because the audience could be convinced by the processes of evaluation and interpretation within. They also became more engaged in the discussion due to being more frequently addressed with interpersonal themes and being more specifically referred to by the topical themes. Furthermore, the performer may channel more intensely with the audience through strong emotions created by the repetition element itself.

With reference to all these features, the power of Mrs. Maisel's humorous utterances for inspiration becomes on the edge for us to grasp.

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TRANSCRIPTS

Clip One

- <c1>No, I...I... I love my mother.
- <c2> I really do.
- <c3a> I just, I wish
- <c3b>that sometimes she would just...relax,
- <c3c>not worry about things.
- <c4a> I... I mean,
- <c4b> (that) it's not her fault.
- <c5> She just wants everything to be perfect.
- <c6a>No, no, she wants everything to seem perfect,
- <c6b>to look perfect.
- <c7>She's like a Jewish Dorian Gray.
- <c8>She's so focused on me.
- <c9a>And I don't understand it.
- <c10>Because so what if I work?
- <c11> So what if I get divorced?
- <c12>So what if I'm alone?
- <c13>Why do women care about how people look at them or see them?
- <c14>All women.
- <c15>Beautiful women.
- <c16>Successful women.
- <c16>Do you know Sophie Lennon?
- <c17>Sure, yeah, everyone does.
- <c18a>Queen of vaudeville,
- <c18b>conquered radio.
- <c19>She is a comedy icon.
- <c20>But you know what?
- <c21>You don't know the great Sophie Lennon.

<c22>I got to go to her house.
<c23>Sidebar——it’s not in Queens!
<c24> In fact calling that thing a house is like calling the Vatican a church.
<c25>I mean this woman drips wealth, you know?
<c26a>Like if she had been around during the Russian Revolution,
<c26b>the Bolsheviks would’ve told the Romanovs,
<c26c> “Ah, never mind. Take your diamonds, take your crowns. We got Sophie Lennon. That’ll do us.”
<c27>And her poor staff.
<c28a>I have a feeling
<c28b>that when company leaves,
<c28c>that’s when her butlers and maids do their real jobs,
<c28d>polishing her silver and her ego.
<c29> Fat Sophie Lennon, Right?
<c30>“Put that on your plate!”
<c31>Well, guess what?
<c32>It’s a fucking fat suit.
<c33>And there is nothing on her plate.
<c34>I ate with her.
<c35>All she did was suck a lemon down to the rind.
<c36a>When I had the audacity to take a bite of a cookie,
<c36b>she made me feel like I’d splashed her with a cup of syphilis.
<c37>You know, she gave me a piece of advice, right there in the Blue Room.
<c38a> She told me that no one would find me funny
<c38b> unless I do some whack doodle character, or have a dick.
<c39>“Sophie Lennon!” Really?
<c40a>You’re gonna sit in your million-dollar townhouse, on some chair that’s historical
<c40b>because the Mad King George got the trots on it,
<c40c>and tell me that men won’t think I’m funny
<c40d>because I don’t look like a dump truck?
<c41>Why do women have to pretend to be something that they’re not?
<c42a>Why do we have to pretend to be stupid
<c42b>when we’re not stupid?
<c43a>Why do we have to pretend to be helpless
<c43b>when we’re not helpless?
<c44a>Why do we have to pretend to be sorry
<c44b>when we have nothing to be sorry about?
<c45a>Why do we have to pretend we’re not hungry
<c45b>when we’re hungry?
<c46> Fuck you, Sophie!
<c47>Put that on your plate!

Clip Two

<c1> Is it really necessary to be that beautiful?
<c2> Because frankly, it’s incredibly unfair.
<c3a>It’s not enough that women have to compete with other women,
<c3b>now men are getting in the mix?
<c4>You can’t have it all.
<c5a>You can’t run the world
<c7a>That’s like you’re already fighting with some asshole
<c7b> who’s trying to get in front of you in line
<c7c> and steal your cab at Bendel’s
<c7d>while you got one arm full of shopping bags
<c7e> and the other holding onto your son
<c7f>so he doesn’t run away
<c7g>and drink from the puddles;
<c7h> and then out of the blue a mugger comes along
<c7i> and hits you over the head with a piece of pipe
<c7j> he found at a construction site
<c7k> and completely knocks you out!
<c5b> and have all the pretty underwear, too.

<c6>The competition wasn't stiff enough with the hoards of slutty secretaries roaming the Earth?
<c8>You see right?
<c9>It's fun to be up here.
<c10>The...the laughter..., the adoration, the power of the microphone.
<c11>It's intoxicating. Dangerous, too...

Clip Three

<c1>He pulled out a picture of his really cute baby, very adorable.
<c2a>And then somebody asked me if I had kids
<c2b>and I said yes,
<c2c>and they asked to see a picture,
<c2d>and I realized,
<c2e>I don't have one.
<c3>I've got two kids, no picture.
<c4>I've got everything else in the world in my purse.
<c5>I've got a...look, a...a Diners Club card, a compact; one two three lipsticks, three. Two lips, three lipsticks.
Nail polish, cigarettes, a corn pad, and a Kotex sanitary belt.
<c6>It comes in white now, ladies, so rush right out.
<c7a>I mean, if my kids got kidnapped,
<c7b> and I had to describe them,
<c7c>I'd have to say,
<c7d>"They look like kids. I...I don't know. The whosit's got a head, the other one's got a...head."
<c8>Anyone know this fucker? Dr.Spock.
<c9a>I had never read this,
<c9b>not until my son started doing this really weird thing
<c9c>where I wake up and he's staring at me like he's planning things.
<c10>So I turned to the expert.
<c11a>And one of the things he says is,
<c11b>"Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do."
<c12>Are you fucking kidding me?
<c13>That's his sage advice?
<c14>"You got this?"
<c15>Trust me, I don't got this.
<c16a>And now, now I'm thinking:
<c16b>"A, I could have used the money I spent on this stupid book on a fourth lipstick, <c16c>and B, what if I
wasn't supposed to be a mother?
<c16d>What if I picked the wrong profession?
<c17a>If you're afraid of blood,
<c17b> you don't become a surgeon.
<c18a>If you don't like to fly,
<c18b> you don't join Pan Am.
<c19a>I...I can't change my mind and donate my kids to the library,
<c19b>like I'm gonna do with this book.
<c20>God, I'm awful.
<c21a> I mean,
<c21b>women are supposed to be mothers,
<c21c>it's supposed to be natural.
<c22>It comes with the tits, right?
<c23>The equipment is pre-installed.
<c24> I mean, are there exceptions?
<c25>What if some of us are just supposed to travel a lot?
<c26>Or run 24-hour diners out in rural areas wearing coveralls?
<c27>What if some of us are supposed to just talk to adults our entire life?
<c28>Oh I never thought about any of this before tonight.
<c29>Ethan's gonna know.
<c30> He's gonna look at my face when I get home and figure out he has to accelerate the plan.
<c31>Fuck.

Clip Four

<c1>So...I don't live anywhere near here.

<c2>And I have absolutely no idea what's going on, at all.
<c3>I mean, five minutes ago, I was buying records for my son,
<c3a> and he wanted to walk through the park
<c3b>and then I stumbled upon this rally
<c3c>and I was like, "So many women in one place...two-for-one pantyhose?"
<c4a>And then I heard about you...
<c4b>and you...
<c4c>and this so called Robert Moses?
<c5a>Well, I mean, he's not "so-called",
<c5b>but he sounds terrible.
<c6>And I'm kicking myself for being so out of the loop.
<c7>I've been trying to read more papers lately.
<c8>It's interesting.
<c9a>My father pointed out
<c9b>that my favorite part about a newspaper is the ads for shoes.
<c10>And I felt bad about that.
<c11>But now I think, maybe they just put those ads in newspaper to distract us.
<c12a>Because if women don't realize what's going on in this world,
<c12b>they won't step in and fix it.
<c13>Because they will fix it.
<c14>And accessorize it!