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# The stand-up introduction sequence: Comparing comedy compères

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## Abstract

Two recurrent traits in contemporary research of humour and joke telling are an emphasis on the structure of joke texts and a lack of *in situ* investigation into audience laughter. This paper offers a different approach by exploring the introduction of stand-up performers by compères in comedy venues. Taking this neglected, but omnipresent, aspect of stand-up performance it argues that the introduction sequence plays an important role in framing a series of individual comedy sets into a single performance. It suggests that through encouraging audience involvement and interaction the introduction sequence provides a foundation onto which the comedy that follows is built. Further, the paper argues that these introduction sequences take a form which is common from compère to compère and venue to venue. Through the analysis of performance transcripts it is demonstrated that compère introduction sequences are built around a series of six turns which have a preferred organisation that is recognised both by performers and audiences. This structure is presented in both a rule-based and diagrammatic manner. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Stand-up comedy; Humour research; Introduction sequence; Interaction; Compères; Audience research

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## 1. Introduction

Social science research into humour, laughter and comedy has largely neglected the analysis of comedy performers and audiences in their natural setting. The ethnographic examination of the performative aspects of the telling of jokes has not been a prominent concern of 'humour researchers'. Instead, theorists and researchers (most influentially Raskin, 1985) have concentrated on how to understand the joke as a text that has a variety of canonical structures to which hearers respond in an unproblem-

atic and systematic manner. Humour research has tended to focus on finding ‘structures of humour’ at the expense of analysing how a joking frame is established and how interactional involvement between joker and audience is developed. With rare exceptions (such as Norrick, 1993) humour research has ignored the interactive foundation of joke telling by professional comedians.

This paper takes a step towards making up for that lack by examining in detail a number of the routinised sequences that can be identified in live stand-up performances. It focuses not on the joke telling of performers but on the sections of stand-up performances where comedians are introduced to their audience. Specifically this paper will look at the introductions that stand-up comedians receive prior to their entry onto the stage at comedy venues. It will show how stand-up compères dovetail the closing of their own act with their organising of the introduction of other comedians. This paper will demonstrate that there are structures which are regular enough to be present in British<sup>1</sup> stand-up regardless of venue, performer or audience, but flexible enough to be moulded to specific situations. It will establish and support a system of looking at stand-up introductions that is based around a series of six turns, each of which plays a specific role in either passing on information or involving the audience. Finally it will offer a rule-based, schematic conceptualisation of the ordering of the introduction sequence in stand-up performances.

## 2. Compère’s introduction

The compère is a constant figure in British stand-up venues. It is compères who manage proceedings and organise the performance and who act as an anchor for the evening’s events in the venue. It is they who have a responsibility to ensure that the evening’s entertainment coheres as a ‘social occasion’ (Goffman, 1963). Compères are more than just announcers who bring on the act. They provide continuity between acts who often have varying reputations, divergent styles and or different performance skills; perform routines between acts using their own material; pass comment on the performers; share details of the evening’s itinerary. Further, they encourage the audience’s participation in the proceedings on stage and may run a joke competition for the audience.<sup>2</sup> In short, compères act to frame a series of performances into a single event.

This omnipresence of the compère’s introduction and its location immediately prior to the entry of the comedian make it an ideal position for commencing an investigation of *in situ* stand-up comedy. The compères’ interaction at the end of each of their

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<sup>1</sup> Findings in this paper are based primarily upon tapes of comedians performing in venues in the North West of England. Many of the performance extracts contained in this paper were recorded by the author of this paper at a popular Manchester comedy club. The findings may be broadly applicable to stand-up elsewhere but not necessarily so.

<sup>2</sup> Joke competitions usually take the form of the compère providing a theme, subject, personality, or joke stem for which the audience writes down suitable jokes on paper provided. The jokes are read out by the compère and often judged by the audience through rounds of applause, booing, etc. Prizes most often take the form of brewery merchandise such as T-shirts or alcoholic drinks.

own sets with the audience and with other performers is a pivotal function. In this way the compère plays a major role in maintaining the organisation of comedy nights.

It is useful at this stage to provide a typical example of what a compère does and the form the introduction takes by considering an instance featuring Roger Monkhouse. An experienced comedian from Sheffield, Monkhouse has worked as a performer on the comedy circuit and has managed his own venue. In Extract 1, this distinctively shaved-headed and deep voiced performer provides a good example of a typical introduction by a compère (for an explanation of the symbols used, see the Appendix):

*Extract 1: Roger Monkhouse*

- 1 RM: >I wan you t show< HUge ↓love an appreciation for awl  
 2 the ↑acts as they come on tonight particularly for (the next  
 3 man) who's doing a short spot for you.  
 4 He's ↑POPin in on his way UP to Edinburah >just to keep  
 5 the Edinburgh (theme) going<  
 6 Aud 1: YAA:::  
 7 RM: Way::  
 8 Aud: hahhhhhhhhhh  
 9 RM: So ↑you'll be  
 10 >able to understand him< ( which is nice).  
 11 Aud: hahahahhhhhahhhh  
 12 RM: Please  
 13 welcome (.) O::n t the stage. All the way >from over there<  
 14 The excellent (.)  
 15 Graham Swanson.  
 16 Y- roundov applause please.  
 17 Aud: x-XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX-x-x

It is apparent from this example that a number of different moves are utilised to create the introduction that Monkhouse gives the younger comedian, Swanson. Further, it is notable that these moves do not merely act towards constructing an introduction in its most rudimentary form, but create a relatively complex piece of routinised interaction. Compères regularly contextualise and appraise the oncoming performers in addition to merely announcing them. Further it is noticeable that the introductory sequence is not made up solely from one turn produced by the compère. The audience contributes collectively with laughter and applause and lines 6–8 demonstrate an unplanned, but unproblematically negotiated, addition to the interaction of the opening sequence.

These rudimentary observations provide a starting point from which to refine the understanding of compères' introductions and demonstrate that the manner in which compères introduce acts tends to adhere to comedy's bias towards a common introductory sequence. That is, from venue to venue and from performer to performer, the features that structure the compère's spiel remain observably similar and contain an identifiable sequence of components. Each sequence in which a compère introduces a comedian is invariably constructed from, though does not necessarily include all, the following moves:



performed together before or that they have known each other for some time. An example of this is given in Extract 4:

*Extract 4: Roger Monkhouse*

1 I am now goin' to introduce

2 the first of the acts that I'm going up to Edinburgh with

3 >later on this week in fact<

} Context

In these two lines (2–3) Monkhouse passes on at least four items of information that contextualise the comedian about to enter. He indicates that:

- (i) he is going to Edinburgh [the Edinburgh Fringe festival]
- (ii) the act about to come on is going to the Edinburgh Fringe festival
- (iii) they are travelling to Edingburgh together (and by extension will be performing there)
- (iv) this performer is not the only one joining Monkhouse on his trip

Importantly, none of these items of information are vital to the appreciation of the act that follows. Items such as these are usually regarded as irrelevant to the audience's understanding of the joking that follows. Similarly, the standard methods of understanding humour (incongruity, superiority and relief outlined in many works, e.g. Piddington, 1933; Keith-Spiegel, 1972; Paulos, 1980; Morreall, 1983; Lippitt, 1994, 1995a,b, 1996) overlook such details. Yet their ubiquitous nature in stand-up comedy introductions suggests that they do play an important indirect role. While they do not influence the distribution and appreciation of joking itself, they nevertheless shape the performance that marks stand-up as a different interactive experience from conversational joking.

One aspect of the role taken by the compère to 'warm-up' an audience is to arouse their interest and expectations of comedians before their entrance. Contextualisation is one way of doing this. It plays its part within a controlled developing exposition by the compère, in which various pieces of information are typically given about comedians before they are introduced and their identity revealed. Contextualisation gives 'clues' to a performer's identity involving the audience in a developing 'puzzle' as well as shaping a context in which to understand the developing interaction.

#### 4. Framing of Response

This next typical move in an introduction sequence shows a shift of focus by the compère from the oncoming comedian to the audience. Through Framing of Response, the compère suggests an appropriate manner in which the audience should welcome the comedian's performance. This often takes the form of a request for some action. However, unlike Atkinson's "appreciation in the usual manner" (1984: 17), the request is highly specific and often includes a suggestion

of a response in which the audience is not only asked to perform an action (usually a greeting) but directed to do so in a particular manner. This may range from the enthusiastic requests to ‘go wild, go crazy’ to the rather more non-committal ‘please welcome’ through to the jokingly supportive ‘give him the benefit of the doubt’.<sup>3</sup>

## 5. Evaluation of Comedian

This move continues the building up of expectations for a comedian’s entry, as the compère passes a professional judgement of the performer waiting to come on. This evaluation is almost invariably favourable, even in instances in which compères introduce performers that they know to be poor or whom they do not like. In rare cases where evaluations are not positive, they tend to be framed as satirical. Implicit in the audience’s relationship to the compère’s Evaluation of Comedian is the assumption that the compère’s judgement is informed, and presented as such. However, this is not always the case. In situations where compères have never seen the act they are introducing perform before, they will still provide a positive evaluation of the comedian’s ability. The evaluation may be not so hyperbolic but it is none the less encouraging.

For example, when introducing two new performers on an amateur evening in Extract 5 and Extract 6, the compère Alex Boardman passes on a very positive view of the performers he introduces. He uses the superlative descriptions of ‘brilliant’ and ‘fuckin’ good’ as a frame for the audience to develop an expectation of the oncoming comedian in:

### *Extract 5: Alex Boardman*

- 1 Welcome the ↑brilli↓an’ ] Evaluation  
 2 (0.6)  
 3 ↑Nick ↑Finne↓gan

### *Extract 6: Alex Boardman*

- 1 An’ welcome onto the stage  
 2 This one’s fu ckin good ] Evaluation  
 3 his name’s Steve (Keyworth)

In Extract 7, Tony Burgess introduces a performer new to the venue, The Frog and Bucket, for an open mike spot. ‘Chris’ has sat near the stage throughout the performance and been the responsive butt of Burgess’ jokes throughout the evening. His

<sup>3</sup> This runs contrary to Clayman’s (1992) observations on American Presidential debates, in which rather than being encouraged to interact:

“Moderators in each debate urged audience members to restrain themselves. Admonitions to ‘please hold it down’, ‘please keep your responses as quiet as possible’, and the like were not uncommon”. (Clayman, 1992: 36)

set is the last of the evening, a spot traditionally held for the principal performer, even though Chris has never performed at the venue before nor come with any credentials as a comedian other than those gained that evening.

*Extract 7: Tony Burgess*

1 TB: N' Chris there jus' goin' "When the fuck am a gonna get  
 2 up?" huh ↑ha  
 3 Aud: hhhhhhhhh  
 4 TB: ↑Why am I gonna get up. Coz gonna come  
 5 on all Oscar Wildte an they're not gonna gedit.  
 6 Aud: h-h  
 7 TB: But I  
 8 reckon you'll sto::rm it. Because he'll be grea::t. >'E's be-  
 9 'e's bin grea::t tonight an' i?< NO. coz ri- cus 'e's bin- = ] Evaluation  
 10 Aud: =x-XXX-x-x-x=  
 11 Aud: (( Whistles ))  
 12 TB: 'An I think ( ) Keep that round ov applause  
 13 goin'.  
 14 Aud: =x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX=  
 15 TB: Welcome onto the stage >keep it goin'<  
 16 Aud: =XXX  
 17 (( Cheers and whistles )).  
 18 The one 'n' only Chris the prison officer (Hughes)

Contextualisation, Framing of Response and Evaluation of Comedian, the first three moves in the compère's opening sequence, can be seen to contribute to a 'building up' of the performer who is about to come onto stage. Without providing the identity of the performer of who is about to appear, the compère creates a series of expectations in the audience. These act towards raising expectations for the comedian and provide a positive basis for the compère to make the next move in the introduction sequence, that of a Request for Action. Further, these expectations draw the audience into the developing interaction that is so important for the successful organisation of stand-up comedy.

**6. Request for Action**

Like Framing of Response, Request for Action is a technique for inviting and precipitating a certain contribution from the audience. However, unlike Framing of Response, Request for Action has no directive connotation associated with it and is noticeably more singular in its intention. Whereas a range of responses might be sought by a Framing of Response, the action required by a Request for Action is always audience applause. This request may take the literal form of a solicitation of applause as in line 3 of Extract 8:

*Extract 8: Roger Monkhouse*

- 1 RM: Please welcome (.) O::n t the stage. All the way >from over  
 2 there< The excellent (.) Graham Swanson.  
 3 roundov applause please.  
 4 Aud: x-XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX-x-x

Or it might be more routinised or cryptic as in the implicature in Extract 9.

*Extract 9: Johnny Vegas*

- 1 JV: Ladies an gentlemen, please give  
 2 a MASSIVE Frog and Bucket welcome to:: (.)  
 3 PATR↑I:::ck  
 4 Aud: x-xxXXXXXXXXXXXXX-x-x-x

Here the compère does not directly introduce applause as a concept, instead Vegas uses the convention of welcoming by applause to suggest the request for applause. Occasionally, the moves of Introduction and Request for Action may be combined into the same utterance as in line 4 of Extract 10:

*Extract 10: Johnny Vegas*

- 1 JV: Ladies 'n gentlemen (4.3) .hh for your entertainment tonight.  
 2 Please (0.8)  
 3 >don't listen to the name its no indication of 'is ↑act.< The  
 4 one an ownly (.) Mister Robert ↑Pain  
 5 |————— 6.7 —————|  
 6 Aud: (0.6) x-XXXXXXXXXXXXX-x-x

However, this is more common in other forms of public introductions than in comedy; it is also the one that Atkinson (1984) centres on when examining applause in other forms of podium talk. Introductions which are followed by applause (such as the one in Extract 11) are described by Atkinson as “favourable references to persons” (p1984: 35).<sup>4</sup>

*Extract 11*

(8) (Conservative Party Conference, 1978)

*Speaker:* ... I beg to support the motion.

|————— (8.0) —————|

*Audience:* x-xxXXXXXXXXXXXXX-x

*Chair:* Now it's my pleasure to invite Mr Michael Heseltine, the member of Parliament for Henley,

<sup>4</sup> This extract is used again by Atkinson with addition transcription as an example of “projecting a name” (1984: 49). That is the Minister is described (i.e. contextualised) before being announced by name. This allows an audience to “anticipate what name will signal completion and get ready to start clapping as soon as they hear it”. (1984: 49)

Shadow Minister for the Environment, to reply to the debate.

Mister Heseltine |————— (9.0) —————|

x-xx-xx-XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXxx-x

Atkinson (1984: 35)

In stand-up, however, the notion of favourable reference is an over general one. Whereas this lauding may be the predominant method of introduction in other forms of podium talk, its presence is by no means overwhelming in stand-up as can be seen from Extract 8–10. All these examples are hardly effusive in their favourable references. Monkhouse in Extract 8 refers to Swanson as ‘excellent’ (line 2) but Vegas in Extract 9 is rather noncommittal and in Extract 10 somewhat unenthusiastic. This is why it is important to label this move in the introductory sequence around its function rather than around its textual evaluation.

## 7. Introduction

It is important that for most of the introduction sequence the name of the next act is not announced and known only to the compère and the acts themselves. The attention of the audience to the developing introduction sequence is encouraged by this withholding of what is perhaps the central piece of information contained within the build up. Alertness and involvement in the interaction between audience and performer are essential to stand-up comedy, and the introduction sequence bolsters that. The introduction is the point of revelation in the sequence in which the identity of the performer is revealed. This invariably takes the simple form of the announcing of the comedian’s forename and surname. Even though the compères’ style and performance personae may vary considerably, each adheres to the basic format of introducing comedians as demonstrated in Extract 12.

### *Extract 12: Roger Monkhouse*

- 1 An I want you to show ↑lo::ve, appreciation an HUGE
- 2 warmth (.) as I introduce you to (0.3)
- 3 the comedic talents of
- 4 (.) NEIL MASTERS

Monkhouse introduces Master’s in line 4 with a loud announcement of the oncoming comedian’s name. This typical Introduction can be seen more fully in context in Extract 13. Roger Monkhouse introduces a comedian who performed at The Frog and Bucket for the first time on the previous night and who is the first act on that evening. After doing sections of his own material, Monkhouse encapsulates the format that the proceedings are planned to take that evening.

### *Extract 13: Roger Monkhouse*

- 5 RM: Right! (.) We do have, as I say, a (surfeit) of comedy.
- 6 We ha’ er- three thirds to the show so >the will< be ↑ample

- 7 opportunity to go to the ↓bar, go to the toilet, do whatever  
 8 you want to enjoy yaselves >°durin the interval food  
 9 obviously will be available°< but (.) in the ↑meantime I'm  
 10 gonna introduce our first act for to↓night.  
 11 Erm:: this is er ooh an American London person (whose bin) } Context  
 12 giggin' away in London. First time in Manchester. }  
 13 An I want you to show ↑lo::ve, appreciation an HUGE } Framing  
 14 warmth (.) as I introduce you to (0.3) }  
 15 the comedic talents of } Evaluation  
 16 (.) NEIL MASTERS } Introduction  
 17 HUge applause please (0.3) huge applause. } Request  
 18 Aud: xxxXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX-x-x } Applause  
 19 Aud: ((cheers)) }  
 20 (RM) ( ) how about that!

This overview of the general running of the evening at the venue is specific to this first introduction sequence rather than a general trait, and at first sight this might appear to include redundant information. Parts of the announcement such as the forecasting that comedy will be performed (line 1) would appear self-evident. The uses of 'three thirds' is tautological<sup>5</sup> and (in line 3–4) Monkhouse appears to be reiterating a point to those already familiar with the conventional set-up at the venue when he says, 'during the interval food obviously will be available'.

The introduction sequence can be seen to start at line 6, when Monkhouse supplies a contextual background for the performer who is about to appear. It is noticeable that this background is always developed before the name of the comedian is announced. This serves both to involve the audience by gaining their attention with a puzzle (as suggested above) but also to provide a background against which particular comedians can be understood when their identity becomes known.

*Extract 14: Roger Monkhouse*

- 1 RM: I am now goin' to introduce  
 2 the first of the acts that I'm going up to Edinburgh with } Context  
 3 >later on this week in fact<. }  
 4 A→ [She is excellent. ] Evaluation 1  
 5 [Please welcome ] Framing 1  
 6 on the stage doing her ten minute spot,  
 7 B→ [please welcome, ] Framing 2  
 8 [the ↑excellent one-an-↑only (.) ] Evaluation 2  
 9 Lucy Porter! ] Introduction  
 10 Yeah! Lu:::c↑y Por↑ter: ] Request

<sup>5</sup> This is reintegrated later in the evening when Monkhouse labels the sections between the two intervals as 'part one, part two and part three'. In response to this a member of the audience asks if they are going to be in that order.

11 Aud:                   XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXxxx-x  
 12 Aud:                   ((    Cheers    ))                    } Applause

Extract 14 is significant in that it contains all six of the features I have identified as making up the introduction sequence in addition, there is a repetition of both the Framing of Response and the Evaluation of the Comedian. Monkhouse introduces Lucy Porter by providing a context to let the audience know that she will be part of the show due to run at the Edinburgh Festival.<sup>6</sup> However, contrary to expectation, Monkhouse follows this not with a Framing of Response but rather with an early Evaluation of Comedian. He says, ‘She is excellent’, (line 4) before suggesting that the audience ‘welcome’ the comedian. By doing so he has reversed the customary ordering of the Evaluation and Framing (Section A). However, Section B (lines 7–8) uses the conventional patterning of framing followed by evaluation. This can be seen as an attempt by Monkhouse to repair the error of the mis-ordered sequence in Section A and as such adds credence to the claim that the rules of a sequenced organisation govern the structure of a compère’s introduction of a comedian.

The patterning of the introduction sequence is noticeably consistent even when comedians with unusual or eccentric styles are examined. In Extract 15 Johnny Vegas delivers an unusually long and apparently unstructured introduction for a new comedian on an open mike night. Based in the north-west of England, Vegas has rapidly built a strong following among comedy goers in the Manchester area and is developing a national reputation as a comedian. He is a heavy man with a thick local accent who plays the part of some sort of cross between a worn out British pub singer and a seventies Vegas star caught out of time and place. His act is often highly improvisational but also filled with surreal similes,<sup>7</sup> gushing clichés,<sup>8</sup> mock attempts to flirt with female members of the audience and claims that, as he sings snippets from music standards and the *Love Boat* theme, he is ‘an entertainer’ rather than a comedian. Vegas is known for his meandering narratives when compèring, but even in the following (Extract 15) the core features of a introduction sequence can be seen.

*Extract 15: Johnny Vegas*

1 JV: Ladies and gentleman, our next act in this ↑’alf. (1.4)  
 2 I don’t know him from Adam. (2.7)                    } Context 1

<sup>6</sup> Although compèring involves a separate set of skills from performing a comedy set, compères are usually comedians themselves. Due to this, sections of their act often appear as part of the inter-act compèring.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Vegas warns a couple that displays of affection are not acceptable in public and that they should spend time with other people:

‘You need outside interests, and I don’t mean me, love. OK. You need something so you spend some time apart, but not too much time that you become strangers. ‘Coz outside interests are like public conveniences, an occasional necessity but no reason to stop going at home. Honey, I’m the lavatory of love’.

<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of his act and after dealing with a drunken and abusive heckler, ‘Thanks for making us your number one choice in socialising’ and at the end of his act, ‘Remember, I hold the mike but you make the magic’.

- 3 But (0.6) he assures me >he's brilliant< (2.7) ] Evaluation 1  
 4 ((A bang is heard))  
 5 Mi:nd. (0.8) So we've gotta believe tha' (1.2) even though  
 6 there's a niggly naggly thing in >the back of ya mind<  
 7 Aud: x-x-x-x  
 8 JV: called "The Tru:::th".  
 9 Aud: HHHHHHHHHHHhh  
 10 JV: Saying "he could  
 11 be shit," Framing 1  
 12 Aud: hHHHhhhh  
 13 JV: But he might not.  
 14 Aud: h-h-h  
 15 JV: Tif you want that niggly  
 16 naggly thing to go away (son) you'll ↑give ↑him ↑the  
 17 ↑benefit-  
 18 LADIES AN GENTLEMEN, GIVE HIM A ROUND OF Request 1  
 19 APPLAU:::SE  
 20 Aud: x-xxx-x-x ] Applause 1  
 21 JV: °We'll give him the benefit of the doubt.  
 22 He can come up here and kill himself in public if he wants  
 23 ↑to::: ° Framing 2  
 24 Aud: HHHHHh  
 25 JV: And if he does (.) we're gonna fuckin' enjo:::y it  
 26 Aud: HHHHHHHHHhh  
 27 JV: Allri:::te. (1.1) S:'our next victim. ( )  
 28 Aud: HHHHHHHhh  
 29 JV: I din write tha gag. (1.0) S'why I ma:de it obvious  
 30 it was s' bhad.  
 31 Aud: h-h-h  
 32 JV: ((Points to back of audience))  
 33 Ya sacked. (.)  
 34 LADies an' gentlemen. (.)  
 35 Er::: Is- He's only got one n↑a:::↓me (0.6) ] Context 2  
 36 but loadsa ga:gs. (0.9) ] Evaluation 2  
 37 Er::: >Let's not make it a night owt for the young man< let's  
 Framing 3  
 38 ma:ke it a memor.hhy. (1.1)  
 39 ((A member of the audience that Vegas has been pretending  
 40 is his long-lost son returns from the bar))  
 41 >Welcome back, son.<  
 42 Aud: HHHHHHHhh  
 43 JV: ((To an audience member who had been heckling earlier))  
 44 Not you (.) yuv not be ↑any good.  
 45 Aud: HHHHHHHHHh  
 46 JV: I jus mean

47 that in a kindov y'know (.) friend↓ship wa::y. (0.9) >Don't  
 48 be afraid of Johnny< (0.9) You do appreciate it (0.6) so ↓you  
 49 °should°. (1.9) You never spoke to me in schoowul.  
 50 Aud: hhhhh  
 51 JV: Now you wanna be me fuckin' ↑ma:te.  
 52 Aud: HHHHHhhhhhh  
 53 JV: °Two-fa::ced bastard °  
 54 Aud: HHH  
 55 JV: Ladies an gentlemen, please give ] Request 2  
 56 a MASSIVE Frog and Bucket welcome to::  
 57 PATR↑I:::ck ] Introduction  
 58 Aud: x-xxXXXXXXXXXXXXX-x-x-x ] Applause 2

The same set of six features are present in this 58 line extract as are found between line 7 and 15 in Extract 13 of the more efficient example from Roger Monkhouse. However, compared to Monkhouse, the ordering of Vegas's compèring is somewhat unconventional, as is the amount of repetition of introductory sequences. Vegas provides two instances of Contextualisation (lines 1–2 and line 35), Evaluation of Comedian (line 3 and 36), Request for Action (line 20 and lines 55–56) along with three instances of a Framing of Response (lines 5–17, lines 21–25 and lines 37–38) and there are two episodes of Audience Applause (lines 20 and 58).

However, this unusual ordering is not without its cost. Looking again at lines 15–25 of Extract 15: it is noticeable that having provided a Contextualisation and Evaluation of Comedian, Vegas guides the introduction through the sequence Framing → Request → Applause.

*Extract 15: Johnny Vegas*

15 JV: Tif you want that niggly Framing  
 16 naggly thing to go away (son) you'll ↑give ↑him ↑the  
 17 ↑benefit-  
 18 LADIES AN GENTLEMEN, GIVE HIM A ROUND OF Request 1  
 19 APPLAU::SE  
 20 Aud: x-xxx-x-x ]  
 Applause1  
 21 JV: °We'll give him the benefit of the doubt.  
 22 He can come up here and kill himself in public if he wants  
 23 -to::: ° Framing 2  
 24 Aud: HHHHhh  
 25 JV: And if he does (.) we're gonna fuckin' enjo::y it

The reversal of the usual pattern of framing followed by Evaluation of Comedian is similar to that found in Extract 14, but unlike Monkhouse, Vegas omits an Introduction before making a Request for Action (lines 4–5). This omission appears to have an effect on both the amplitude and duration of the audience's applause in line 20 which is isolated and foreshortened when compared to the applause received in line

58 of Extract 15. It is apparent that Vegas has not succeeded in utilising the accepted ordering of introduction sequences and therefore not provided the audience with the signposts that they are looking for.

Without the signposting that the Introduction of a comedian by the compère provides, Vegas' audience is unable to provide a satisfactory preferred response to the request for applause requests. This is recognised almost immediately by Vegas, and in line 21 of Extract 15 he resumes the process of Introduction with hardly any gap between the finishing of the line, '... round of applause' and the commencement of 'We'll give him the benefit ...'

*Extract 15: Johnny Vegas*

54 Aud:	HHH	
55 JV:	Ladies an gentlemen, please give	} Request 2
56	a MASSIVE Frog and Bucket welcome to::	
57	PATR↑:::ck	} Introduction
58 Aud:	x-xxXXXXXXXXXXXX-x-x-x	} Applause 2

## 8. Audience Applause

The applause in stand-up that follows either the Introduction of a comedian or a Request for Action from the compère is significant for a number of reasons: its invariable presence, its dual nature as both a reply to a request and as a summons to the entering performer; its rarity during comedy; and its value as one of the few periods of applause during stand-up which tally with Atkinson's (1984) mean duration for audience applause of six to eight seconds.

The Audience Applause that leads into and accompanies the entrance of the comedian appears without exception in the comedy performance. Even newcomers to performance trying to develop an act with an open mike spot on an amateur night can expect, and will receive, applause. Although the amplitude and apparent enthusiasm of the applause received by new performers may vary from that given to established and known performers, its duration does not. Comedy performers will receive a summoning round of applause regardless of their status, talent or reputation.<sup>9</sup> In Extract 16 Robert Pain, an inexperienced and new performer, receives almost seven seconds of applause on an amateur night.

*Extract 16: Johnny Vegas*

1	JV:	Ladies 'n gentleman (4.3) .hh for your entertainment tonight.
2		Please (0.8) >don't listen to the name its no indication of 'is
3		↑act.< The one an ownly (.) Mister Robert ↑Pain
4		(0.6)

<sup>9</sup> The section of initial applause may be accompanied by cheers, whistles, etc. depending on the comedian's status in the audience's view.

5           |————— 6.7 —————|  
 6 Aud: x-XXXXXXXXXXXXxxx-x-x  
 7 Aud:           ((Cheers))  
 8 RP:           (                    )

Despite the presence of a noticeable (and unusual) pause between the compère's introduction/request for applause (line 4), the duration as well as the structure of the applause is very similar to that received by semi-professional and regular performers at the venue such as Adrian Cook. Both rounds of applause last seven seconds +/- ½ second, start with quiet applause before rapidly building up, and finish with isolated quiet applause.

*Extract 17: Adrian Cook*

1 Aud: xXXXXXXXXXXXXxxx-x-x  
 2           |————— 7.2 —————|  
 3 AC:                                   Thanks erh: that wuz a nice  
 4           roundov applause.

This stability in the duration of Audience Applause suggests that the applause given to comedians at the beginning of their act serves not only as an indication of an audience's attitude towards the performer, as might a true greeting, but serves other purposes within the opening interaction. Audience Applause at this point in stand-up acts not only as a welcoming, but as a 'bridging turn' that joins the conversation between compère and audience and the one that takes place between audience and comedian. In terms of the pragmatics of performance management, Audience Applause helps to cover the exit of the compère from the stage area and the entrance of the comedian onto it. It smoothes the transition between performers and acts as a bridge between compère's performance and the oncoming comedian's turn. This is necessary as unlike the change over of DJs on a radio station, compère and oncoming comedian will not appear in the performance space or interact with the audience together. Although words, handshakes or glances may be exchanged as they pass each other offstage, this remains outside the 'official' performance frame. That is, while members of the audience may witness this exchange, it has a different place within the interaction than that held by the onstage events. Given this, it is useful to suggest that this is part of the performance's 'unfocused interaction' (Goffman, 1963). That is, its place within the development of the performance is in the information gleaned by the audience through a general sense of what is happening rather than through the usual 'focused interaction' of the audience member to the on stage performer.

On an interactional level this applause serves a dual function: first, it acts as a turn completion to the compère's request for applause but it also acts as a summons to the performer. This dual-purpose role is represented in Fig. 1. The applause from the audience is the preferred response to the request for applause from the compère and as such it fulfils Pair A. However, this same applause also acts as the first part of a

mock summons/answer pair<sup>10</sup> in which the audience’s applause acts as a call for the comedian to enter.

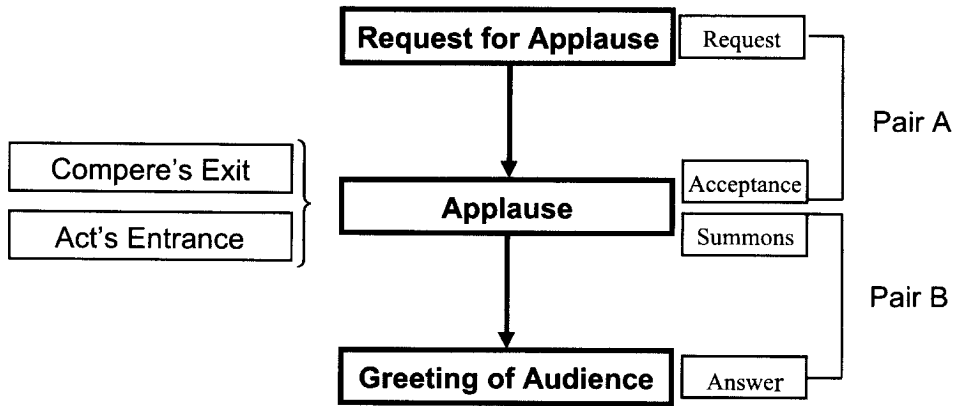


Fig. 1. Dual function of applause

The applause which completes Pair A in Fig. 1 can be seen as similar to the applause that is given to other kinds of a person introduced onto a stage. This Atkinson describes as a *claptrap* (1984: 49), a rhetorical device that is recognised by an audience as a cue for applause. An example of such a claptrap is given in Extract 18, in which the revelation by the announcer of the name of a prize winner immediately prompts a round of applause.

Extract 18

(26) (British Academy of Film and Television Arts awards ceremony, 1980)

Announcer: ...SHIRLEY RUSSE[LL FO[R YANKS  
 Audience: [HOOR [AAAAAAAAY  
 Audience: x- [xxXXXXXXXXXX...

Atkinson (1984: 25)

In this example there is no direct request for applause; unlike Extract 19, in which Vegas specifically requests applause from the audience, the delivery of the announcement and Shirley Russell’s name in Extract 18 acts as an indirect request.

<sup>10</sup> This is not a true summons/answer pair in the manner discussed by Schegloff (1968). It is hypothetically feasible that in a situation in which the audience withheld their applause for some reason, the comedian would still make his or her entrance.

*Extract 19: Johnny Vegas*

- 1 JV: 'Tif you want that niggly  
 2 naggly thing to go away (son) you'll ↑give ↑him ↑the  
 3 ↑benefit-  
 4 LADIES AN GENTLEMEN, GIVE HIM A ROUND OF  
 5 APPLAU::SE  
 6 Aud: x-xxx-x-x

The range of roles that this single section of applause plays is even more interesting when the rarity of applause during comedy is considered. Whereas a third of a successful performer's stage time may be taken up with audience laughter, applause is much more rare and is most often associated with extended sections of laughter. Sections of applause unaccompanied by laughter in comedy are practically non-existent<sup>11</sup> outside the opening and closing of acts and so can be assumed to be of special importance.

## 9. Structure of introduction sequence

From here it is possible to refine the outline of moves ordering an introduction sequence in stand-up given above by supplying the following rules (i–ix) for the sequence type that make up a stand-up opening:

- (i) The introduction sequence always contains the following: Contextualisation, Framing of Response, Evaluation of Comedian, Request for Action, Introduction and Audience Applause
- (ii) The first move of an introduction sequence is always Contextualisation
- (iii) The general order of Framing → Evaluation may be reversed
- (iv) The general order of Request for Applause → Introduction may be reversed
- (v) Neither Request for Applause nor Introduction will be found between Framing and Evaluation
- (vi) Framing, Evaluation or Applause will not be found between Request and Introduction
- (vii) The pairing of Framing/Evaluation always precedes Request /Introduction
- (viii) The final move of the introduction sequence is always Applause
- (ix) An introduction sequence which fails to achieve appropriate applause may be re-attempted.

This is represented diagrammatically in Fig. 2, in which the heavier path shows the preferred ordering of an introduction sequence but the lighter lines show alternative (but dispreferred) options for the sequencing.

<sup>11</sup> Applause during stand-up tends to follow non-comic events. These often include events such as the putdown of a persistent or aggressive heckler, the announcement of a competition winner or the offering of an ideological statement.

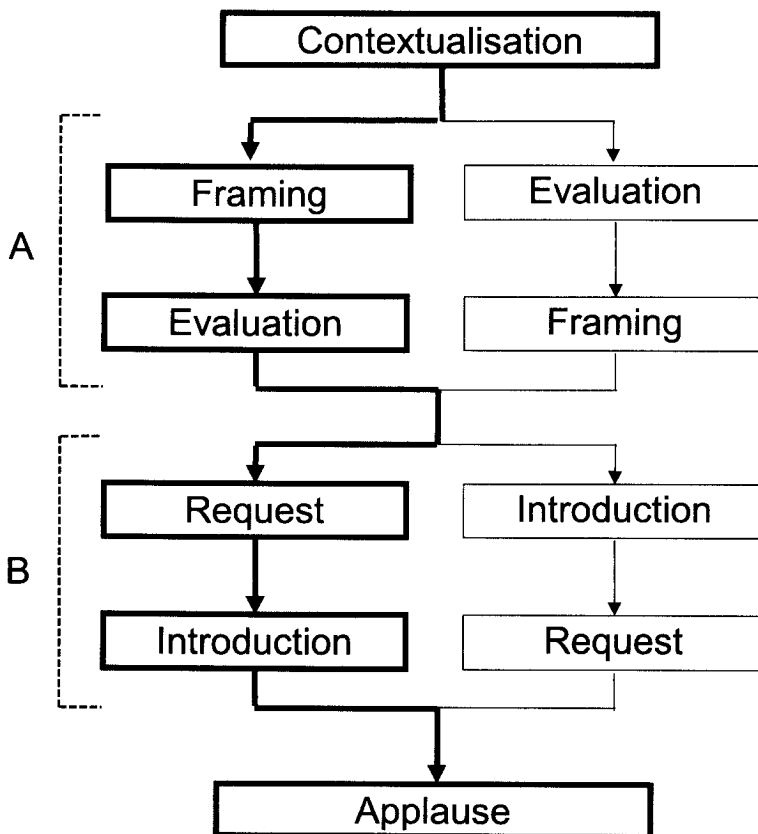


Fig. 2. The preference structure of introduction sequences in stand-up

Compères could start with Contextualisation and then proceed down the left-hand side of the diagram before reaching the audience's applause that is usual. However, they might also, but less commonly, sequence their introduction by following the right hand path going through a Context → Evaluation → Framing → Introduction → Request → Applause order of performance. Alternatively, an introduction may change sides of the diagram, for example Context → Framing → Evaluation → Introduction → Request → Applause. A compère will not mix features from level A and level B.

## 10. Conclusions

At the beginning of this paper I highlighted humour research's traditional focus on the joke text as a way of understanding humour, laughter and stand-up. However, as I have shown, stand-up is not made up merely from the telling of jokes but is an

ordered performance which develops through negotiation between compère, performers and audience. The organisation of this performance as well as the joking that takes place within it is profoundly interactive rather than, as suggested by many linguistic and structural approaches, merely responsive. With its mixture of humour, performance maintenance and audience involvement, the stand-up opening sequence provides a good example of this. This paper has, through an *in situ* perspective, shown that there is a set of moves that inform the structure of the introductions of comedians and that these moves are recognised and maintained by those involved. However, it has also demonstrated that the structure of these moves is not such that it is organised in a prescriptive or prescribed manner. The actions of both compère and audience are organised in a regular fashion but are sequentially managed in relation to the move that proceeds it. The moves, like the laughter associated with joking, rather than merely ‘happening’, are placed within the developing sequence of interaction. Because of this they receive both their meaning and their organisational value by virtue of their position within a developing sequence.

The introduction sequence is invariably a feature of stand-up openings and holds a position as forerunner to the entrance of comedians and their first joke. It provides a foundation for the performance and prepares the audience by establishing stand-up conventions, expectations and situation for the comedy to take place. Given this organisation, jokes performed by stand-up comedians cannot be seen as isolated texts. They cannot be seen as being hermetically separated from the ongoing performance, as they are located within, and part of, the developing interaction of stand-up. Once this is recognised, it becomes crucial in differentiating the telling of jokes from the performance which is stand-up.

As such, the introductory sequence in stand-up plays a similar role to that of the conversation openings discussed by Schifffrin (1977). The paced revelation of information about the comedian given by the compère both encourages the audience’s involvement in the performance interaction and provides a social context into which the audience can place the comedian.<sup>12</sup> The introductory sequence gives the audience an opportunity to begin to see the oncoming comedian not only as a generic performer, but as an individual comedian. It gives specificity to the performer, providing members of the audience with the opportunity to establish whether they have seen the comedian before and place him or her within the live context of the stand-up event. This, accompanied with moves such as Framing of Response and Request for Action, encourages audience members to be alert to and enter fully into the interaction. It both demonstrates and helps ensure the involvement of both audience and performers in the stand-up performance, involvement which is vital to the successful organisation of live stand-up comedy.

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<sup>12</sup> The comparison between compère introduction and conversation opening is useful here in that both sequences lead towards a ‘first topic’. However, to pursue this analogy further is problematic and not something I wish to do.

### Appendix: Notes on transcripts

The transcription system used within this paper is largely that developed initially by Jefferson and developed through others working in conversation analysis (Sacks et al., 1974; Psathas, 1979; Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). Those relevant to this paper are summarised below.

:	The sound proceeding is prolonged. Multiple colons indicate incrementally longer prolonging.
-	An abrupt breaking off of the word begun.
↑↓	An upward arrow indicates a rise of pitch in the sound that follows it. Similarly, a downward arrow indicates intonation lowering.
°text°	Indicates a lowering in volume of speech.
h	An intake of breath. The symbol preceded by a dot denotes an audible breath out.
>text<	Talk is delivered at a notably quicker pace than that which surrounds it. Conversely talk transcribed <thus> indicates a slowing in pace.
CAPITALS	Louder than the surrounding talk.
<i>text</i>	Indicates a stress.
=	An instance in which the talk of one speaker leads into the speech of another without any pause.
(0.8)	Denotes pauses in tenths of seconds.
(.)	Pause of less the three tenths of a second.
(text)	Transcription uncertainty often because of inaudibility. Empty brackets indicate that what was said was unintelligible on the recording.
((text))	Indicates elements for which either notation does not exist or would be unhelpful. In this paper it is also used to describe stage business or changes in voice quality.

In order to transcribe group laughter a number of non-traditional symbols have been used in this paper. To this end I have adapted the system used by Clayman (1992, 1993) to transcribe audience applause at political speeches. Building on Atkinson (1984), Clayman uses 'x's to denote applause and keeps with a similar basic pattern to the transcription outline above so that uppercase symbols indicate a rise in volume.

As such audience laughter is transcribed as follows.

hhhh	Quiet audience laughter.
HHHH	Loud audience laughter.
-h-h-	Quiet isolated laughter from individuals in the audience.
-H-H-	Loud isolated laughter from individuals in the audience.

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