

# A STYLISTIC STUDY OF SELF-DEPRECATATION IN AMERICAN STAND-UP COMEDY PERFORMANCES

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## Abstract

Self-deprecation is a type of humor when the speaker jokes about one's own weaknesses, faults, deficiencies, or personal limitations. This research analyzes self-deprecating humor in selected speech data from the stand-up comedy performance of John Crist in his *What Are We Doing?* (2019) comedy special. It specifically aims to address these questions: what types of self-deprecating humor are featured in the chosen samples? What stylistic devices are used to construct self-deprecation? How do these stylistic devices contribute to humor and to the audience interaction? Thus, this study is aimed to determine the types of self-deprecating humor used by the comedian, and to investigate stylistic means that realize self-deprecating humor.

The study selected ten utterances of data derived from comedian John Crist's comedy special *What Are We Doing?* (2019). This study applies a qualitative approach to stylistic analysis. It utilizes four types of self-deprecation as the basis of analysis along with the framework of Leech and Short (2007) in its stylistic analysis of lexical features, grammatical features, context and cohesion, and figures of speech. The results of this study show that the self-defeating type is the most dominant among the other three in the selected data. Meanwhile, the self-enhancing, the self-affiliative, and the self-referential types have the lowest frequency.

Furthermore, the result of the study demonstrates that the stand-up comics used simple and informal language, declarative sentences, and figures of speech such as irony, hyperbole and repetition to depict themselves as weak, inexperienced, unable, physically frail or morally corrupt. Based on the data analysis, it can be concluded that self-directed humor is used in comedy performances as a linguistic feature and a literary device to convey a message of a humorous personal weakness and imperfections through the medium of self-ridicule.

**Keywords:** Self-deprecation, stand-up comedy, stylistics, humor, Leech and Short, John Crist.

## 1.2 INTRODUCTION

Humor has consistently been essential to human communication. Humor enhances social bonding, entertainment, culture, and many facets of life. Among the various styles and genres of humor, stand-up comedy is notably one of the most engaging. A stand-up comedian engages directly with the audience and utilizes their language to craft a joke or comedic routine. In stand-up comedy, a solitary performer addresses an audience. The efficacy of the comedy depends on language. A prevalent form of humor is self-deprecation, which involves making jokes at one's own expense rather than targeting another individual, object, or entity. From a linguistic perspective, the effectiveness of self-deprecating humor depends on stylistic choices. The words, expressions, and narrative structures used by comedians influence how humor is produced and interpreted. Stylistics provides useful tools for examining these linguistic patterns and explaining how language creates particular effects in discourse. This study focuses on the stylistic components of self-deprecating humor in American stand-up comedy. The study seeks to identify the linguistic elements employed by stand-up comedians when playfully referencing themselves and revealing their vulnerabilities. The research adheres to the stylistic framework established by Leech and Short (2007), commonly employed in stylistic analysis.

### 1.3 STYLISTICS

Stylistics has been defined in different ways by scholars. Chronologically, Simpson (2004, p. 1) defines stylistics as “the linguistic study of style. It examines how language choices create meaning, effect, and interpretation in literary and non-literary texts. Stylistic analysis is concerned with the forms, patterns, and levels of language that help explain how particular meanings are made possible in a text.”

Similarly, Znamenskaya (2004) defines stylistics as “the branch of linguistics that examines how different linguistic elements are selected and used to convey meaning and emotion in various communicative situations. It focuses on expressive devices, the aesthetic function of language, and the existence of different synonymous ways of expressing the same idea.”

Crystal (2008, p. 454) defines stylistics as “a branch of linguistics that studies the characteristics of situationally distinctive uses of language and attempts to establish principles that explain the particular choices made by individuals and social groups in their use of language.”

Nørgaard et al. (2010, p. 1) state that stylistics is “the study of how meaning is created through language in literature and other types of texts. Stylisticians use linguistic models, theories, and frameworks as analytical tools to describe and explain how texts produce meaning and how readers move from the words on the page to interpretation.”

Richards and Schmidt (2010, p. 566) define stylistics as “the study of the diversity of language, or style, depending on the context in which language is used and the effect the writer or speaker wants to have on the reader or listener. It usually refers to the study of written language, especially literary texts, although it may also include spoken language.”

Finally, Wales (2011) states that stylistics is “the study of linguistic style. Since style can be understood in different ways, stylistics includes a variety of perspectives and methods.”

### 1.4 SELF-DEPRECATATION

Self-deprecating humor has also received considerable attention in the literature. Chronologically, Ziv (1984, as cited in Kitazume, 2008, p. 118) defines self-deprecating humor as “humor that presents one’s own weakness.” Norrick (1993, p. 78) describes self-deprecating humor as “a strategic communicative tool in which a speaker intentionally disparages or belittles himself or herself, his or her actions, or his or her characteristics for humorous effect.”

Andeweg et al. (2011, p. 760) define self-deprecating humor as “a special kind of humor that draws on a person’s or an in-group’s perceived social, behavioural, or physical shortcomings with a non-serious intention. Through self-deprecating, self-disparaging, or self-mocking humor, speakers use themselves as the object of a joke or comment. By making self-deprecating remarks, speakers show their ability to laugh at their own inabilities or problems.” Hopton, Barling, and Turner (2013, p. 6) define self-deprecating humor as “the use of humor to disparage oneself” and argue that it can help leaders reduce the perceived distance between themselves and their subordinates. It involves using oneself as the object of a joke or comment and is associated with high self-esteem and social confidence.

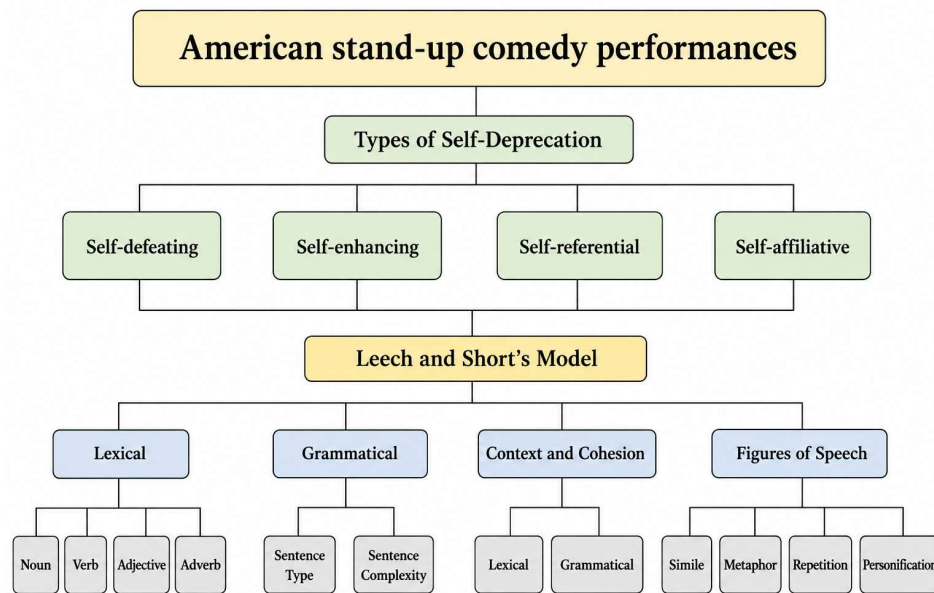
Friedman and Friedman (2023, p. 3) define self-deprecation as “a form of humor in which the speaker makes himself or herself the target of the joke or ridicule.” In general, self-deprecating humor is a form of humor in which speakers make themselves the target of jokes by highlighting their own weaknesses, shortcomings, failures, or personal limitations in order to create amusement, establish rapport, and engage their audience.

### 1.5 METHODOLOGY

The present study utilizes a qualitative stylistic method to analyze the use of self-deprecating humor in John Crist’s stand-up comedy special, *What Are We Doing?* (2019). The data consists of ten selected utterances which were taken from the stand-up comedy special that was uploaded to YouTube in 2022. The data were selected intentionally to capture self-deprecating humor clearly. After being transcribed, the data was analyzed with an integrated model, which incorporates four types of self-deprecation,

namely self-defeating, self-enhancing, self-affiliative, and self-referential, as well as Leech and Short (2007) stylistic model. The four types of self-deprecation were used to categorize the utterances in terms of their humorous function while Leech and Short (2007) model was used to explore the linguistic realization of self-deprecating humor.

In the analysis of style, the focus is on four major categories proposed by Leech and Short (2007), which are lexical features, grammatical features, context and cohesion and figures of speech. Lexical analysis analyzes the language used in the selected utterances. Grammatical analysis examines the grammatical structures and features used in the utterances. Analysis of context and cohesion explores the relationship between the selected utterances and their immediate context of utterance. The analysis of figures of speech examines the presence of different stylistic devices that are used by the comedian in order to produce humorous effects, such as irony, hyperbole and repetition. Therefore, the present study analyzes both types of self-deprecation, as well as stylistic strategies employed by the comedian.



## 1.6 DATA ANALYSIS

### Utterance (1)

**"I'm a very weak person."**

#### Analysis

Lexically, the utterance is composed of simple conversational lexical items. The adjective weak is the crucial lexical item, as it denotes a negative evaluation of the self. The intensifier very serves to intensify its negative, self-evaluative force. Grammatically, this is a basic sentence with subject I, verb am, complement a very weak person.

In terms of context and cohesion, it observes the comedian saying this in contrast to a former concept of strong while pointing to the weak modern man; adding himself as weak, making it about the whole of mankind rather than just others. On the part of figures of speech, the utterance makes use of the hyperbole. In the expression "a very weak person," the speaker is exaggerating his weakness in order to produce a comic self-image, and hence reinforcing the self-mockery.

In this utterance, the comedian self-defeatingly presents his character as weak and not powerful at all, thereby establishing himself as the butt of the joke. The utterance is mainly a personal deficiency and a negative self-appraisal for comic purposes as the speaker admits his weakness and becomes the target of the humor.

#### **Utterance (2)**

**"I'm weak, I'm the first guy to admit I got no skills at all."**

##### **Analysis**

Lexical analysis of the utterance reveals the presence of negative evaluative words such as weak and no skills which position the comedian as an inept individual with no practical skills. The lexical item at all serves to further emphasize the self-deprecating nature of the utterance. Grammatical analysis of the utterance shows that the utterance contains two declarative clauses. The repeated occurrence of the pronoun I positions the utterance as strongly personal and self-oriented.

In terms of context and cohesion, the utterance comes after the comedian makes a joke about men and practical skills. He then goes on to align himself with weak men and acknowledges his own incapability, which is something that would endear him to the audience. With regards to figures of speech, repetition comes in the repeated use of I'm. Hyperbole is present in no skills at all, as the speaker jokingly presents himself as being completely devoid of skills.

The utterance is a clear example of self-defeating. The comedian further enhances the self-depiction as weak by saying that he has "no skills at all". This kind of joke, in which a comedian ridicules himself, makes him appear inferior to the audience and encourages laughter.

#### **Utterance (3)**

**"I was in the backyard googling, how to start a grill."**

##### **Analysis**

Lexically, the speech sample contains familiar language words: backyard, googling and grill. The word googling is relevant, as it reveals the speaker's reliance on the internet, for an action of common knowledge. Grammatically, the speech sample is a declarative sentence, containing a main clause: I was in the backyard googling, with the embedded question how to start a grill.

With regards to context and cohesiveness the comedian says this after his friends ask him to start the grill. Since grilling is a task often associated with the ability and practicality of a man, it makes him seem somewhat weak and inexperienced due to his reliance on searching the web to find the answer. In regards to the figure of speech used is irony as he is expected to know how to start a grill but he shows that he does not. The comedic nature of it is due to the expectation of him knowing vs the reality of the situation.

The utterance is primarily an example of self-defeating. The comedian portrays himself as someone unable to do a simple, everyday thing. He claims that he needed help from the Internet to begin a grill which illustrates his inexperience with grills and lack of knowledge on the matter. Such self-mockery diminishes his status.

#### **Utterance (4)**

**"I don't think I'm a good person."**

Lexically, while the utterance uses basic vocabulary, the phrase good person holds a moral tone. The expression "don't think" negates the positive content and therefore, the utterance is a self insult in which a comedian presents himself as a morally bad person.

Grammatically, it is a negative statement composed of an independent clause I don't think and a subordinate clause I'm a good person.

Contextually, the comedian uses this negative self-declaration prior to narrating his selfish and immature thinking. As a result, his negative comment on himself can lead the audience to take the following stories as an evidence to justify his lack of a good personality, thus making him a joke. In terms of a figure of speech, the joke relies on self-irony; the comedian is openly making fun of himself

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and this makes it a self-deprecating joke, which is a type of joke in which the speaker attacks himself to make the others laugh.

The comedian's remarks are self-defeating, as he makes a negative assessment of his morals and not simply what he does. "Do you think I'm a good guy?" This is a far more devastating way to make a joke than just saying I did this thing that wasn't good. The comedian presents himself as a moral degenerate and uses that as the basis for the joke.

**Utterance (5)**

**"I had to call AAA 'cause I couldn't open my gas cap."**

**Analysis**

Lexically, the utterance is comprised of simple words that we encounter on a daily basis: call, open, and gas cap. The negative verbal form couldn't open is the focal point because it illustrates the inability of a person to carry out a very simple operation. Grammatically, the utterance is a declarative, which has a main clause, I had to call AAA, followed by a subordinate clause introduced by 'cause.

In relation to the context and the cohesion, the comedian maintains his topic of lacking the necessary skills. Calling AAA for a gas cap is funny as one associates it with much greater vehicular problems. When it comes to the usage of the figures of speech, exaggeration can be seen, as the incident at hand is of trivial magnitude. By portraying such a simple case as one in need of assistance from professionals, the comedian is reinforcing his self-deprecating humor.

The comedian's remarks are self-defeating, as he makes a story of a common thing seem like a testament to his own ineptitude. He needed someone professional to assist him when most men just do it themselves. By saying this, the comedian is making himself into an idiot for not knowing the solution to a common thing, and also making himself into a physically weak person.

**Utterance (6)**

**"I have too much moisturizer on my hands."**

**Analysis**

Lexically, the utterance includes the noun moisturizer, which creates a humorous contrast with the earlier discussion of masculinity and manual skill. The phrase too much works as an intensifier. Grammatically, the utterance is a simple declarative sentence. It consists of the subject I, the verb have, and the object phrase too much moisturizer on my hands.

In terms of context and cohesion, the sentence explains why the comedian could not open his gas cap. This makes the speaker appear delicate and physically incapable, which supports the larger self-deprecating image of weakness. Regarding figures of speech, irony appears because moisturizer, which is normally associated with care and softness, becomes the reason for his failure to complete a simple task.

The comedian's remarks are self-defeating because it gives the impression he's so weak and fragile he can't even complete a mundane task like opening a jar, because he has moisturizer on his hands.

**Utterance (7)**

**"I need Spotify to get through a shower, okay?"**

**Analysis**

Lexically, the utterance contains everyday vocabulary such as **need**, **Spotify**, and **shower**. The verb **need** is important because it shows emotional dependence on entertainment or distraction. Grammatically, the utterance is a declarative sentence followed by the discourse marker **okay**. The use of **okay** gives the sentence a conversational and informal tone.

In terms of context and cohesion, the comedian is talking about people who cannot stay alone with their thoughts. By saying that he needs Spotify even during a shower, he mocks his own dependence on

constant distraction. Regarding figures of speech, exaggeration is present because needing music to survive a simple shower is overstated for comic effect. The exaggeration makes the personal weakness humorous rather than serious.

Mostly self-enhancing in nature, the comedian's statement acknowledges a personal weakness, his dependence on entertainment even during a simple activity. However, it does not harm his self-image in any way; instead, it is presented in a playful manner and the comedian finds it easy to laugh about it.

#### **Utterance (8)**

"I get ticklish during a pedicure."

##### **Analysis**

Lexically, the utterance contains simple everyday vocabulary. The words ticklish and pedicure are particularly significant because they are associated with physical sensitivity and personal grooming rather than traditionally masculine qualities such as strength or toughness. The lexical choice therefore contributes to a humorous self-portrayal of weakness. Grammatically, the utterance is a simple declarative sentence consisting of the subject I, the verb get, and the complement ticklish during a pedicure. The first-person pronoun reinforces the self-directed nature of the humor.

Contextually, the comedian makes this statement while imagining a conversation with biblical figures such as Noah, Samson, and other heroic characters. By comparing his own experience of becoming ticklish during a pedicure with their extraordinary acts of courage and endurance, he deliberately diminishes his own status and presents himself as weak and unheroic. Regarding figures of speech, irony is employed through the contrast between the strength and heroism associated with biblical figures and the speaker's trivial personal experience. The contrast creates a humorous self-deprecating effect by portraying the comedian as lacking the toughness and resilience expected of a traditionally masculine figure.

Mostly self-affiliative, a somewhat embarrassing personal experience with which many people can probably relate is discussed. Rather than hurting his ego severely, the comedian self-mockery helps to form a bond with the audience members.

#### **Utterance (9)**

"Here's when I knew I wasn't a good person."

##### **Analysis**

Lexically, the statement includes the phrase "wasn't a good person," which constitutes an evaluation of my personhood. By using the word "knew," the confession becomes more emphatic and conveys certainty.

Grammatically, the utterance is a declarative sentence. Its main clause, Here's, is followed by a subordinate clause introduced by when.

Contextually and cohesively, the statement introduces the narrative of my sitting in an exit row of an airplane and being secretly uncooperative. It provides cohesion by linking the narrative with my character. In terms of rhetorical devices, the statement is ironic as the character is being admitted of his major moral flaw humorously. It is also a self-referential humor because by making the remark, I am making a joke about myself before I am about to tell this comedic tale.

This utterance is self-referential as well as self-defeating, and the latter category is prevalent here. The comedian admits his own moral fault, making himself a target of humor, which is self-defeating humor. However, the remark also works as a metadiscourse marker which signals a joke to follow. It also serves as a self-congratulating comment on his performance as a comedian.

#### **Utterance (10)**

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**“That’s why I couldn’t be a pastor. My dad is a pastor. I could not be, I don’t have the gift.”**

### Analysis

On a lexical level, there are religious terms present, such as pastor and gift. The use of I don’t have the gift suggests that the speaker doesn’t have the spiritual or emotional aptitude. In terms of grammar, there are a number of short declarative sentences. There is a repetition of a negative structure in the phrases couldn’t be and could not be that reiterates the speaker’s inability.

Regarding context and cohesion, the comedian makes a connection with his father, the pastor, suggesting that he is not empathic or compassionate, which is the reason for the joke. Concerning the figures of speech, repetition is present as the speaker states over and over that he couldn’t be a pastor. Additionally, there is irony since the comedian grew up in a religious family and states that he has not got what it takes to become one himself.

The utterance is mainly self-defeating. The comedian contrasts himself with his father and admits that he doesn’t deserve to be a pastor. He makes fun of his inferiorities and inadequacy in comparison with his father, which reflects self-defeating humor. The joke makes himself a target of humor.

## 1.7 FINDINGS

**Table (1) Types of Self-Deprecation in the Selected Data**

| Type of Self-Deprecation | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Self-defeating           | 8         | 80%        |
| Self-enhancing           | 1         | 10%        |
| Self-affiliative         | 1         | 10%        |
| Self-referential         | 1         | 10%        |
| Total                    | 11        | 100%       |

**Table (2) Figures of Speech in the Selected Data**

| Figure of Speech | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------|-----------|------------|
| Irony            | 8         | 57.14%     |
| Hyperbole        | 4         | 28.57%     |
| Repetition       | 2         | 14.29%     |
| Total            | 14        | 100%       |

**Table (3) Sentence Types Used in the Selected Data**

| Sentence Type | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------|-----------|------------|
| Declarative   | 10        | 100%       |
| Interrogative | 0         | 0%         |
| Imperative    | 0         | 0%         |
| Exclamatory   | 0         | 0%         |
| Total         | 10        | 100%       |

**Table (4) Lexical Categories in the Selected Data**

| Lexical Category     | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------|-----------|------------|
| Nouns                | 15        | 30.61%     |
| Verbs                | 19        | 38.78%     |
| Adjectives           | 10        | 20.41%     |
| Adverbs/Intensifiers | 5         | 10.20%     |
| Total                | 49        | 100%       |

**Table (5) Context and Cohesion Features**

| Context and Cohesion Feature | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Lexical Cohesion             | 10        | 50%        |
| Grammatical Cohesion         | 10        | 50%        |
| Total                        | 20        | 100%       |

According to the chosen data, the predominant category of self-deprecating statements in John Crist's comedy is self-defeating self-deprecation. This suggests that humor that makes fun of oneself to the extent of highlighting one's flaws and limitations in order to make an audience laugh and win social acceptance is known as self-defeating self-deprecation. The comic is portrayed in most of the examined self-deprecating statements as being weaker, more inexperienced and unskilled, physically weaker, or morally inferior. Irony is the predominant style element, according to the analysis. This implies that the humorous aspect of self-deprecating statements is primarily attained by comparing the comedian's self-presentation with societal standards. For instance, he mocks himself for being incapable of carrying out basic tasks that are typically associated with being capable, physically fit, and male. The humorous effect of self-deprecation and the audience's subsequent laughter are enhanced by these ironic contrasts.

Hyperbole ranked second among the most utilized devices. The comic employed exaggeration to amplify his own shortcomings and failures, so creating a humorous portrayal of himself. This outcome corresponds with prior studies indicating that exaggeration is a prevalent mechanism in humorous conversation. The exclusive usage of declarative sentences indicates that the primary origin of self-deprecating comedy derives from such utterances. The reason may be that declarative statements are more comprehensible than interrogative, imperative, or exclamatory sentences, which serve different purposes. The discovery indicates that John Crist employs self-deprecating humor in comedy performances and interpersonal relationships. The comic employs self-deprecating humor to establish relatability with the audience. Self-deprecating humor is not only entertaining for his audience but also serves to attract them, as they perceive him as relatable, human, and personable.

## 1.8 CONCLUSION

The study examines occurrences of self-deprecating comedy in John Crist's stand-up special, *What Are We Doing?* 2019. This analysis of the chosen utterances integrates the four categories of self-deprecation, self-defeating, self-enhancing, self-affiliative, and self-referential utilizing Leech and Short's (2007) stylistic framework to examine the lexical, grammatical, contextual/cohesive, and figurative elements of self-deprecating humor. The results show that self-defeating self-deprecation was the most prevalent type that the comedians used, while self-enhancing, self-affiliative, and self-referential self-deprecation are used relatively few times by him. This shows that John Crist is using self-defeating humor by depicting himself as weak, naive, incompetent, physically weak, or immoral by intentionally using his flaws as an opportunity for the joke and becoming the object of the joke.

As regards style, the self-deprecating humor was realized by way of using simple and colloquial vocabulary, thus establishing the conversational tone of the stand-up performance. In terms of grammar, each selected utterance is expressed by using a declarative sentence, meaning that self-deprecating humor often comes as a straightforward declaration of the speaker's circumstances, qualities, and defects. In relation to context and cohesion, it can be concluded that the humorous effect of each utterance is highly dependent on the immediate context and the comedian's general self-portrait.

On the front of figures of speech, irony has the highest rate, followed by hyperbole and repetition. Irony allows the comedian to be funny, especially in contrast to social expectation and his inadequacy, while hyperbole exaggerates the comic depiction of his weakness and failure. Repetition is used to highlight the negative assessment of self and to intensify the humor. From this study, it is understood that self-deprecation in stand-up comedy is more than just the comedian making fun of himself, but it is also a conscious application of a particular style and linguistic device; the comedian creates the humor from his weaknesses, failures and deficiencies through combining different types of self-deprecation and particular stylistic devices, but at the same time he is trying to establish a rapport, to be understood by the audience, to make them laugh, to connect with them, and, most of all, to entertain them. It is therefore, this study showed the importance of using particular style in producing and interpreting self-deprecating humor in contemporary American stand-up comedy.

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