

LEXICAL COHESION FOUND IN STAND-UP COMEDY: JOE LIST

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Abstract

*Lexical cohesion has been widely examined as a key mechanism for creating coherence in discourse but most previous studies have concentrated on written texts with limited attention given to spoken discourse. In particular, stand-up comedy remains underexplored. This lack of research creates a gap in understanding how lexical cohesion operates in comedic spoken performances. This study aims to identify the types and functions of lexical cohesion found in Joe List's stand-up comedy performance entitled "I Hate Myself" on YouTube. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method. The primary data source is a YouTube video from Comedy Central Stand-Up featuring Joe List. The data were collected by repeatedly watching the video and producing a detailed transcript of the performance. The analysis is based on the theory of lexical cohesion proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976) in *Cohesion in English*. In addition, the functions of language are analyzed using Halliday's (1975) framework presented in *Learning How to Mean*. The findings reveal that five types of lexical cohesion are present in Joe List's stand-up comedy: repetition, synonymy, superordinate, general words, and collocation. Among the language functions proposed by Halliday, only four are identified in the data, namely informative, interactional, personal, and heuristic functions. The study demonstrates that lexical cohesion contributes to maintaining coherence and meaning in stand-up comedy discourse, while also supporting various communicative functions used by the comedian to engage the audience.*

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INTRODUCTION

Discourse refers to communication in either spoken or written form that extends beyond the level of a single sentence and operates within a broader social and linguistic context. It involves the way language is used to convey meaning, organize ideas, and construct relationships between speakers or writers and their audiences. Through discourse, language not only communicates information but also reflects how individuals interpret experiences and construct perspectives about the world. According to Gorobat (2023), discourse is constructed through the integration of linguistic and visual element, images, and text work together to convey messages.

In linguistic studies, discourse analysis focuses on how language functions in real contexts of communication. It examines various elements of language use, including aspects of spoken interaction such as gaze, gesture, and action, as well as written forms of communication that contribute to meaning-making processes. As explained by Gee (2010), discourse analysis pays attention to details of communication that are considered relevant to the context and the purpose of the analysis. However, discourse analysis does not necessarily examine every physical or linguistic feature present in communication. Instead, it selects elements that are meaningful for the objectives of the analysis and the context in which the discourse occurs. Nunan (1993) emphasizes that not all potentially meaningful features need to be analyzed, but rather those that contribute directly to the interpretation of the discourse. Bebis and Fajardo (2024) state that discourse examines how languages produces meaning from its context. While Fitra et al. (2025) emphasize that discourse function not only to convey information but also to express emotion. From the perspective that language involves both form and meaning, relationships within discourse can be categorized into two main aspects namely form and meaning. Form which is referred to as cohesion, and meaning which is known as coherence.

Cohesion in discourse analysis refers to how all the components of a text or work are interrelated and work together to create meaning for the reader of the text. The reader can understand the work's structure and meaning by examining cohesion in a text (Sakuntala,et.all, 2025). According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesion refers to grammatical cohesion (reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction) and lexical cohesion (reiteration and collocation). Reiteration functions as a cohesive mechanism that strengthens semantic links between sentences and ensures that the message remains accessible to the audience (Claria, 2022).

Lexical cohesion is about meaning in the text (Claria, 2018). Lexical cohesion refers to the way a text and its concepts are connected through various types of word associations among the vocabulary or lexical items within the text (Zhou, 2022). Halliday and Hasan (1976) stated that lexical cohesion is the cohesion created by the choice of vocabulary. Additionally, lexical cohesion serves as the main tool for unifying texts and observing the relationships between words within a text or discourse (Zhao & Mao, 2021).

The analysis of lexical cohesion has been carried out in previous research. The first analysis was conducted by Nuzulia (2018) entitled *Lexical Cohesion Used In The Speech Of Donald Trump To The Un General Assembly 2017*. The theory by Halliday and Hasan (1976) and Renkema (2004) was used by the previous authors. None of the lexical cohesion types were identified by the previous author, and repetition was identified as the most dominant type.

Based on Nurwahidah, et al., (2022) an analysis of *Lexical Cohesion In News Article On The Jakarta Post Entitled “Why Full Day School Will Not Work In Indonesia?”* was conducted. Six types of lexical cohesion was revealed in the analysis, with repetition being identified as the most commonly used type in prior research. However, antonyms were not addressed in this article. The same research was conducted by Batubara, et al. (2021) and found that lexical cohesion in writing was shown to have helped convey the overall meaning of the text to readers in a clear and accessible manner.

Referring to Ahya (2021) and the study entitled *An Analysis of Lexical Cohesion Used in Joe Biden’s Speech on the Coronavirus Pandemic*, Halliday and Hasan's theory was used by the previous author. The results of the analysis indicated that five types of lexical cohesion were identified, with the types of repetition totalling 61 items or 53%, synonyms totalling 15 items or 13%, superordinate totalling 5 items or 4%, general words totalling 4 items or 3%, and collocation totalling 31 items or 27%. The type of lexical cohesion most prominently used in the speech was identified as repetition.

Furthermore, Batubara, et al., (2021) A study on *A Discourse Analysis of Lexical Cohesion on Naila Farhana’s Videos* analyzed 3,643 words from three videos, identifying 601 lexical cohesion devices, including repetition, synonyms, superordinates, general words, and collocations. In the other hand, Ahya (2021) consistently used all five types in her research showing that the study focused on how lexical cohesion was used and which types were most dominant, revealing her frequent and structured use of these devices to enhance discourse coherence. In the other hand, Rajistha & Claria (2023) found that ELIA which has the lexical item and used multimodal strategies in chatbot systems shows it can improve accessibility, effectiveness, and coherence of digital interaction. While Claria, et all (2022) examines the lexical items of COVID-19 terminologies into the Indonesian language illustrates a

dynamic process of vocabulary expansion at the word level. From a lexical perspective, this process enriches the word stock, introduces new semantic fields, and demonstrates how the lexicon adapts to communicative demands by absorbing foreign vocabulary while gradually aligning it with the structural patterns of the recipient language (Rajistha & Claria, 2021). All the use of lexical item has strong relation with how the meaning of the text is shaped (Satyawati, et.all, 2021).

Similar to previous studies, this research analyzes lexical cohesion in discourse. Most existing studies have focused on identifying types of cohesion in written or scripted texts such as song lyrics, short stories, and speeches. However, relatively little attention has been given to the use of lexical cohesion in stand-up comedy performances. This indicates a research gap in the analysis of cohesive devices within comedic spoken discourse.

Stand-up comedy is a significant form of spoken discourse because it relies heavily on language to construct humor, convey personal experiences, and build interaction with the audience. Comedians strategically employ linguistic patterns, repetition, and word associations to structure their narratives and maintain audience engagement. Therefore, examining lexical cohesion in stand-up comedy can provide valuable insights into how meaning, coherence, and humor are constructed through language in live performance contexts.

To address this gap, the present study examines the use of lexical cohesion in stand-up comedy. Specifically, it analyzes lexical cohesion in the American stand-up comedy performance by Joseph Alberth List, professionally known as Joe List, entitled *I Hate Myself*. The performance was published on YouTube by Comedy Central Stand-Up in 2020 and has a duration of approximately fifty-six minutes. This research contributes to discourse analysis by expanding the application of lexical cohesion theory to comedic spoken discourse and by demonstrating how cohesive devices function to organize ideas and support communicative and humorous effects in stand-up comedy.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the use of lexical cohesion in stand-up comedy discourse. A qualitative approach by Creswell (2009) is appropriate because it focuses on interpreting meanings and understanding language use

in a particular social context. The data source of this study is a stand-up comedy performance by Joseph Alberth List, professionally known as Joe List, entitled *I Hate Myself*. The video was published on YouTube by Comedy Central Stand-Up in 2020 and has a total duration of approximately fifty-six minutes.

The data consist of utterances delivered by the comedian during the performance in the form of a monologue. Data were collected by repeatedly watching the stand-up comedy video to understand the context of the performance and to identify utterances that contain lexical cohesion. Afterward, a detailed transcript of the performance was produced based on the video. This transcription process enabled the researcher to examine the language used in the performance systematically. After the data collection process, the data were analyzed by identifying, clarifying, and classifying lexical items that demonstrate lexical cohesion.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applies theoretical triangulation by integrating the framework of lexical cohesion proposed by Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan (1976) with Halliday's (1975) theory of language functions. This combination allows the findings to be examined from both structural and functional perspectives, thereby enhancing the depth and validity of the analysis. In addition, peer debriefing was conducted by consulting with experts or colleagues in the field of linguistics to review the data classification and interpretation. This process helps minimize researcher bias and ensures that the findings are credible and consistent.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This chapter presents the results of the lexical cohesion analysis in the stand-up comedy performance of Joe List. The analysis is based on the framework of lexical cohesion proposed by M.A.K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan (1976), which includes repetition, synonymy, superordinate terms, general words, and collocation.

The findings show that all five types of lexical cohesion are present in the data. Repetition is the most frequently used type, followed by synonymy, superordinate, general words, and collocation. These cohesive devices contribute to maintaining coherence and supporting the flow of the comedian's monologue.

To examine the functions of lexical cohesion, this study applies M.A.K. Halliday's (1975) theory of language functions. The results indicate that four functions are identified in the data, namely informative, interactional, personal, and heuristic functions. These functions demonstrate how lexical cohesion is used not only to organize meaning but also to deliver humor and engage the audience

Reiteration

According to Nunan (1993:123), reiteration is a type of lexical cohesion where two cohesive elements refer to the same entity or event. Reiteration is defined as the occurrence of a lexical item or synonym of a type in a referential context. As a result, reiteration determines semantic relationships by using the same terms and repeating previous words. Explanations of various types of repetition, synonyms, superordinate, common words, and collocations will be discussed in the following explanation.

a. Repetition

Repetition is the first type of lexical reiteration. Repetition is a form of lexical cohesion where the same word is used multiple times within a sentence or across sentences. It occurs when a word from the beginning of a sentence appears again in another sentence, or when certain words within a sentence are repeated. Based on the data source, some examples of repetition are as follows:

1. To be honest, I felt like a couple of you were like, I'm **gonna** be the guy, I'm **gonna**, you're **gonna** hear me. At least four of you are like, I can't wait to watch this. 'Cause I'm **gonna** point out my voice, going hey! That's fair. (00:00:38 – 00:00:52)

The first example, the data was taken from Joe List's stand-up comedy YouTube video. The comedian conveyed how some people in the audience seemed too enthusiastic to express themselves or shouted to attract attention. The repetition found in the example above was the word **gonna**. The word **gonna** appeared four times and was identified as a repetition. By repeating the word **gonna**, Joe List highlighted their determination to stand out, reinforcing the humorous illustration of their attention-seeking behaviour. The function of repetition here shown by the word **gonna** is interactional. The word **gonna** here had the function of creating a relationship with the audience, imitating their speech patterns, and attracting attention in social interactions.

2. I'm very **attracted** to my wife. I want her to be **attracted** to me. I don't know, it's hard because when you're married, you want the person to be **attracted** to you. (00:49:06)

In the second example, the comedian talked about the challenge of maintaining attraction in marriage. The repetition found in this example was the word **attracted**. The word **attracted** appeared three times and was identified as a repetition. There were different functions of repetition. "I am very **attracted** to my wife" is a personal function because it expresses the comedian's emotions and feelings towards his wife. Meanwhile, "I want her to be **attracted** to me", was an instrumental function because, by expressing a desire or need, the comedian wanted his wife to feel the same way about him. "It's hard because when you're married, you want the person to be **attracted** to you." The function of repetition is interactional, because comedians shift the conversation from personal statements to generalizations, engaging the audience by making it a shared experience of marriage.

b. Synonym or Near-synonym

The next type is synonym or near-synonym. Two words or phrases are considered synonyms when they are similar in meaning or can be used interchangeably in certain contexts. There were four findings of synonyms based on stand-up comedy, there are:

3. Which I was **scared** of everything, if you get **frightened** by something, you can just urinate right in your pants. (00:33:57 – 00:34:01)

In the third example, the data were taken from Joe List's stand-up comedy YouTube video. The comedian uses humour to describe a childhood fear of wetting pants when feeling scared. In the example above, the words **frightened** and **scared** are identified as synonyms. Both words convey the feeling of fear or being afraid. The function of the synonym **frightened** and **scared** is a personal function. Because it is used to express emotions and feelings. The comedian, reflecting on his childhood fears, makes it a statement of self-expression.

4. The lady was fine, by the way. She wasn't **injured**. I would not make a joke if she was **hurt**. She was completely fine. I think she might've been on meth. (00:42:45 – 00:42:50)

In the fourth example, Joe Lists stated that an excessive reaction that a person makes after being beaten and the comedian speculates the woman using drugs. Joe List mentions the words **injured** and **hurt**. The function of the synonym here is informative because used to convey information to the audience that the woman is fine. Its function is informative because the comedian uses synonyms **injured** and **hurt** to provide clarity and detail about the woman's physical condition. Thus, the comedian shares information interestingly and clearly, which is in line with the informative function of language.

c. Superordinate

The term **superordinate** refers to a higher-level category and is used to classify or describe a broader type of something. Superordinate also refers to a broader category that contains subcategories within it. From the data source there are some examples of superordinate, as follows:

5. I was at a plane one time, the lady next to me, she was watching "**50 shades of Grey**" on her laptop. Did you guys see that **movie**, great documentary. It's a classic and a documentary really. (00:08:54 – 00:09:06)

In the fifth example, the comedian sarcastically calls *50 Shades of Grey* a "great documentary," implying it is over-the-top or unrealistic. The word *movie* serves as a **superordinate** of *50 Shades of Grey*, linking the specific film to a broader category and creating lexical cohesion while avoiding repetition. This usage aligns with **Halliday's Informative function**, as it classifies and describes *50 Shades of Grey* as a generic film before the comedian humorously reclassifies it as a documentary. This shift sets up the joke while maintaining an initial factual tone.

6. And I was like, "Right. The **sound** I'm hearing is **white noise**. Like I have a white noise machine in my head. That's the issue. You're telling me to get surround sound of the problem, I'm telling you I have." (00:25:55 – 00:26:04)

In the sixth example, the comedian shared an experience where he heard a sound he described as white noise. Joe List also mentioned the words **sound** and **white noise**. Here, the **sound** is a superordinate of **white noise**. **White noise** is an example or subcategory of **sound**, so that **sound** functions as a broader superordinate word. The function of superordinate here is the informative function. It has an informative function because the comedian describes and explains the problem to the audience.

d. General Word

The last type of reiteration is a general word. A general word is a word that is used generally, rather than a special word that has been mentioned previously. General words usually do not have a specific meaning. Words like “things,” “places,” “people,” “animals,” and “idea” are some examples of common words. There are 2 examples of a general word found in this stand-up comedy:

7. I was on a plane the other day. The guy next to me was eating a **lollipop**. Don't you think that's an inappropriate airplane **food**, a lollipop. It's too noisy, he's like (slurp), I was like, sir, you're turning me on. Could you relax a little bit? They don't even sell lollipops at the airport. (00:01:31 – 00:01:51)

In this example, the comedian talked about someone eating a lollipop on a plane and described it as inappropriate airplane food. **Food** is a general word for **lollipop**. The function of the general word is informative because the comedian made a statement about airplane food, which provided a general framework before settling on lollipops as an example. This structure conveys factual or observational information to the audience, albeit in a humorous manner.

8. It is hard to be healthy, it's hard for everyone. I'm like on the road all the time. I'm travelling so it's like hard. Like sometimes I eat **McDonald's** 'Cause it's the only **thing** open. (00:14:46 – 00:14:52)

The word **thing** is a general word for **McDonald's** because it is a vague, nonspecific term that replaces a more specific noun. The language function of the general word is informative because the comedian shares factual information about the difficulties of staying healthy while travelling. The comedian gives a real-life example of eating at McDonald's because it was the only option available. This is in line with Halliday's Informative Function, where language is used to convey facts, observations, or explanations.

Collocation

The last type is collocation. Collocation is a combination of words that occurs when two words frequently appear together and can be analyzed in linguistics to enhance fluency, and writing style, and accurately convey a message. Below is an example of collocation in stand-up comedy by Joe List:

9. Then I went to the **dentist**. I've been going to the **dentist** a lot. I didn't go to the **dentist** for like 10 years. Don't skip years. I thought you could just skip over those years, but, they make you make up for the time you missed. I hate the **dentist**. I love my dentist, personally. Like, he's a good guy, we're friends, I love him. But, **dentists** are the **doctor**, I trust the least. I think they're just making shit up. Like **cavities**, I feel like those are completely made up, by the **dental industry**. Nobody's on board with this, but My **dentist** is like, "You have a **cavity**." And I was like, "Do I? It doesn't hurt." And he's like "**Cavities** don't always hurt." And I was like, "I don't see anything." (00:26:29 – 00:26:58)

The finding discussed by Joe List was his distrust of dentists, as it was thought that they might be making up cavities. Here, Joe List mentions the forms of the words collocation such as **dentist**, **doctor**, **cavities**, and **dental industry**, because both often appear together in discussions related to health care, especially dentistry. The function of this collocation is the informative function. The words **dentist** and **doctor** refer to the comedian comparing **doctors** and **dentists**, presenting factual information about their roles in healthcare. Additionally, The term **cavities** is used to describe the condition of teeth, but the comedian humorously questions its validity. Meanwhile, the phrase **dental industry** refers to the business aspect of dentistry, used to imply doubt about the dentist's motives.

10. I was hanging out my **sister-in-law** and my **wife** texted and she wrote, "How's things going with my sister?" I wrote back, "Great, she's a lot of fun, I wish you were her." That's a bad text. I meant to write, "I wish you were here," obviously. I felt bad, I had to call her. I was like, "Hey, I didn't mean to write that, I was distracted. I was trying to fuck your sister, but I got a little confused but I wish you were here so we can all fool around a little, you know, like in the movies it's weird when you **date** or **marry** someone with a sibling because siblings tend to look alike because they have the same parents but you're not supposed to be attracted to the sibling because it's inappropriate, but they look alike. (00:47:57 – 00:48:43)

Joe List humorously recounts a mistaken text message to his wife, where he accidentally implied he wanted her as his sister, creating an awkward situation. He uses **collocations** like *sister-in-law*, *wife*, *date*, and *marry*. *Sister-in-law* and *wife* are

collocated as family-related terms, while *date* and *marry* relate to romantic relationships. The **interactional function** is evident in the text exchange with his wife and his joke about dating or marrying someone with a sibling. These word choices engage the audience through humor and social reflection.

Discussion

The findings show that all types of lexical cohesion proposed by Halliday and Hasan are used in the stand-up comedy performance of Joe List. This indicates that lexical cohesion plays an important role in maintaining coherence in spoken discourse. Repetition is the most dominant type, suggesting that it is an effective strategy for emphasizing ideas and enhancing humor. Other types, such as synonymy, superordinate terms, general words, and collocation, help maintain variation in language while keeping the discourse coherent. In terms of function, lexical cohesion supports informative, interactional, personal, and heuristic purposes, based on Halliday's theory. This shows that lexical cohesion is not only used to organize meaning but also to express ideas, engage the audience, and support communication.

Overall, these findings answer the research questions by showing that lexical cohesion in stand-up comedy is used both structurally and functionally. It contributes to coherence while also enhancing humor and audience engagement. This suggests that stand-up comedy is not random or informal language use, but a structured discourse that strategically uses linguistic features to achieve communicative goals.

The findings of this study are in line with earlier research on lexical cohesion, particularly the work of Halliday and Hasan (1976), who emphasize the importance of lexical relations in creating coherence within a text. Similar to studies conducted by Michael (1991), this study finds that repetition is the most dominant type of lexical cohesion, as it plays a key role in reinforcing meaning and maintaining textual unity.

In addition, the findings support previous studies such as Ahya (2021) and Batubara, et al. (2021), which highlight that lexical cohesion contributes not only to coherence but also to clarity and readability. The presence of synonymy, superordinate terms, and general words in this study reflects similar patterns found in written discourse, suggesting that these cohesive devices function consistently across different types of texts.

However, this study also reveals some differences compared to earlier research. While most previous studies focus on written texts such as academic writing, news articles, or textbooks, the present study examines spoken discourse in stand-up comedy. Unlike findings in formal written contexts, where all language functions are often present, this study identifies only four functions based on M.A.K. Halliday (1975): informative, interactional, personal, and heuristic. Functions such as instrumental, regulatory, and imaginative are not found in the data.

This difference may be explained by the nature of stand-up comedy as a performative and entertainment-based discourse. As noted by Attardo (1994), humor relies heavily on interaction, shared knowledge, and audience engagement. Therefore, comedians tend to prioritize interactional and personal functions rather than regulatory or instrumental ones, which are more common in instructional or formal contexts. Furthermore, unlike written discourse where cohesion is primarily text-based, spoken comedy combines linguistic features with performance elements such as timing, tone, and audience response. This supports the argument that the use of lexical cohesion is influenced by context and communicative purpose.

Overall, this study both supports and extends previous research by demonstrating that lexical cohesion operates similarly across discourse types, while also adapting to the specific characteristics of spoken comedic performance.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that all types of lexical cohesion. Repetition, synonymy, superordinate, general words, and collocation are employed in the stand-up comedy performance of Joe List. Among these, repetition emerges as the most dominant type, while the remaining categories contribute to maintaining lexical variation and coherence. In terms of language functions, lexical cohesion predominantly realizes informative, interactional, personal, and heuristic functions, with informative and interactional functions occurring most frequently.

The findings indicate that lexical cohesion functions not only as a structural mechanism for organizing discourse but also as a strategic resource for enhancing humor and audience engagement. The frequent use of repetition reinforces key ideas and supports comedic delivery, while other cohesive devices facilitate clarity and

variation. The prominence of informative and interactional functions suggests that stand-up comedy discourse simultaneously conveys content and fosters interpersonal connection with the audience.

This study contributes to the field of discourse analysis by extending the application of lexical cohesion theory to spoken and informal discourse, particularly stand-up comedy. Importantly, it addresses a significant gap in the literature by demonstrating how lexical cohesion operates in comedic spoken performances where the previous research only focused on written texts. The findings provide empirical evidence that cohesive devices function systematically not only to maintain coherence but also to support humor and audience interaction in spoken discourse.

This study is limited to the analysis of a single stand-up comedy performance, which may not fully represent the diversity of comedic styles and discourse patterns. Furthermore, the analysis is restricted to lexical cohesion and selected language functions, without incorporating other relevant aspects such as grammatical cohesion, prosody, or multimodal features.

Future research is encouraged to examine a broader range of stand-up comedy performances across different comedians and cultural contexts to enhance generalizability. Additionally, further studies may integrate other dimensions of discourse analysis, including grammatical cohesion and multimodal elements, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning and humor are constructed in spoken discourse.

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