

Editorial: Dis laf fit kill person – An overview of Nigerian humour

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1. Introduction

Humour has emerged as the technical term which is used to refer to anything that is perceived as funny, amusing, and laughable (Attardo 2011). It is often associated with laughter since the commonest and most expected response to humorous stimuli is laughter. Scholars, however, have argued that laughter may not necessarily denote the enjoyment or presence of humour (see Attardo 1994). Humour, therefore, has been conceptualised as the discovery and enjoyment of incongruity (Attardo 2009; Morreall 2009). Theorists like Oring (2003) have described humour as one of the cultural universals, and as a condition for humanity. It is a part of everyday living. Humans, as social beings, adopt it for diverse purposes: communicative, rhetorical, political, and social intentions. For the average user, it is often perceived as an innocuous entertaining phenomenon for leisure. On the other hand, for the specialist humourists, humour is more than entertainment – there is subtle power in humour! In sociocultural spaces, humour expresses cultural beliefs, attitudes, and ideological dispositions. It also serves significant interactional functions.

In Nigeria, in relation to the aforesaid functions, everyday citizens and professional humourists use humour to express their expectations of and disappointments in the socio-political leadership of the country. Common Nigerian jokes indicate the country's travails with ethnicity and failed political leadership. They also enunciate populist perspectives on nationhood, identity and the challenges of everyday living. In spite of the centrality of humour to daily life in Nigeria, scholarly interests in its sociocultural, political, rhetorical, interactional, and interpersonal dimensions have been very minimal. According to Obadare (2016), it is as if once something is categorised as humour, it is expunged from any serious interrogations. There are diverse and numerous dimensions of humour in Nigeria, given the country's extensive and still expanding popular culture landscape. A handful of these dimensions are examined in the papers that make up this special issue of EJHR.

2. Humour in Nigeria

Because the commonest and expected response to humour is laughter, I shall begin this section by looking at how the act of laughing at things, situations, and people is lexicalised in two Nigerian languages: Yoruba and Nigerian Pidgin¹ (NP, as it is now known in some academic circles as Naija). If we go by recent developments in Cognitive Linguistics, especially metaphor research, the way laughter is conceptualised and its cross-domain

mapping in the conceptual system whenever we talk about the laughter derived from humour will provide a window into Nigerian ideologies on humour.

One way by which interlocutors in the Yoruba language describe the act of laughing or being made to laugh is to employ the verb *pa*, which translates ‘to kill’, in encoding the action. This is illustrated below:

- i. Ó n pamí lérin
Literal Translation: You are killing me with laughter.
Idiomatic translation: You are making me laugh.
- ii. Má pamí lérin.
Literal Translation: Don’t kill me with laughter.
Idiomatic translation: Don’t make me laugh.
- iii. O ti lè pàyàn lérin jù.
Literal translation: You can kill one with laughter.
Idiomatic translation: You can make one really laugh.

Similarly, the verb *kill* could be evoked in NP in describing the act of laughing as seen in the following sentences:

- iv. Laf wan kill me die!
Translation: I almost died laughing!
- v. No kill me with laf!
Translation: Don’t kill me with laughter.

In these conceptual systems, what does the use of the verb *kill* portray? I believe the answer can be found in the conceptualisation and domain mapping of the lexeme as projected in the conceptual theory of metaphor by Lakoff & Johnson (1980).

In Examples i-v, a macro-concept – murder (the act of killing) – is evoked in describing the act of laughing. As opined by metaphor theorists, interlocutors subconsciously employ a pattern of inference that demands exploiting the domains of space, place, and objects to deduce inference and intentions from the domains of subjective judgments that are enshrined in and developed from sociocultural spaces (see Lakoff & Johnson 2003; O’Halloran 2007). This mapping may be done in an overt or covert manner; however, language users will not naturally question it. Rather, they exploit it in communicative exchanges. When the mapping of ‘killing’ into the act of laughter is analysed in conceptual metaphor theory terms, a number of cultural meanings will be uncovered. Such an analysis indicates that when humour evokes laughter, the murder metaphor “becomes partially constitutive” of the thinking of the individual(s) that initiated the humour and those that enjoyed it (O’Halloran 2007: 171).

The metaphor of ‘killing with laughter’ aligns very well with a fundamental thesis in the superiority approach to humour. As Morreall (2009) opines in his synthesis of the superiority approach, the moral force of humour is to correct shortcomings. This conceptual mapping recognises laughter as a deliberate and attentive pulling down of the targets of the humour who have behaved in an inappropriate manner. Since laughter “stings” and “devalues its object in the subject’s eyes” (Morreall 2009: 6, 8), the people being laughed at are likely to readjust and realign themselves so that they would no longer be the object of humour. Although superiority theorists point to the aggressive use of humour, they also show the positive significance of humour. For these theorists, humorous texts are targeted at people whose attitudes or actions do not align with sociocultural specifications on living.

The Bergsonian idea on humour comes handy in explaining further the metaphor of “killing with laughter”. Morreall (2009) suggests that, in Bergson’s (1913) terms, laughter is socially corrective; and humour is targeted at human behaviours or actions rather than individuals. He asserts, “the essence of the ridiculous is mechanical inelasticity – someone acting in a rigid, repetitive way instead of a flexible, context-sensitive way... while laughter stings, it brings the ridiculed person back to acting like a human being” (cited in Morreall 2009: 8). In fact, when someone behaves in an unexpected manner or in a socially incongruous way, s/he becomes the target of jokes. And laughing at such individuals is meant to make them align their actions with the socially acceptable norm.

An important aspect of humour and how the ensuing laughter is lexicalised in languages is shared knowledge. Shared knowledge here is defined after Clark (1996) and it is based on community membership and joint experiences. All humour is based on shared knowledge and is understood by people who have joint experiences of its subject and target. Shared knowledge makes cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system possible. Since the cognitive dimension of discourse is also social (van Dijk 2006), the interpretation, cross-domain mapping and even the conceptual system are all influenced by shared knowledge. Shared knowledge in joking has been conceptualised in terms of two types of contexts: context-of-the-joke and context-in-the-joke (Filani 2017). The first is grounded in the shared beliefs that exist between the joke teller and its recipient, while the second underscores the contextualisation cues in the joke. Of course, the metaphor and the cross-domain mapping it involves are determined by the context-of-the-joke. In addition, the shared knowledge is also employed in uncovering what is being “killed”. Shared knowledge specifies what constitutes laughter and why such should be made the object of laughter. Certainly, the participants-of-the-joke know what kinds of (in)actions should be laughed at and the kind of sentiments and stereotypes that define targets of jokes in their sociocultural imagery.

3. The social dimension in Nigeria

Bergson’s (1913) theory of laughter helps us comprehend the social dimension of humour in Nigeria. The social repositioning function/use of laughter and humour underscored by Bergson’s (1913) thesis is commonly foregrounded by theorists and practitioners. In this sense, humour is conceptualised as not just a tool for causing laughter but as a tool for social awareness and positive sociocultural and political change. Using humour as a tool for sociocultural change dates back to the pre-colonial traditional societies in Nigeria. For instance, Adeleke’s (2005, 2006) analysis of laughter and fool tradition among the Yoruba people underscores the social, cultural, and political dimensions of humour within the Yoruba cultural group of Nigeria. Adeleke (2005) emphasises the communal nature of humour and its pervasiveness in various discursive acts and arts in the Yoruba culture. For example, the *Ètíyẹ̀rì*, a masque which wears a rabbit-like mask, employs verbal humour while giving information about scandals in its society. The *Ètíyẹ̀rì* and humour spectacle within Yoruba culture are meant for social control and reformation (Adeleke 2005: 58).

Today, the domains of stand-up comedy and internet communication have provided more spaces for the performance of humour and the instantiation of its diverse sociocultural significance. These domains have brought about an increase in the sourcing and use of humour in Nigeria, and have generated more sociocultural awareness, socio-political activism, and self-consciousness among the country’s citizens. One dimension being generated within Nigeria is the place of ethics and morality in joking. Should there be a limit to what comics can joke on? This question may be difficult to answer since comedians operate with a “license for deviant behaviour and expression” (Mintz 1985: 74). Traditionally, comics are

meant to be ridiculed since they possess social defects. However, contemporary comics may not necessarily present their own personal social defects; rather, they point out the deformities in their societies, cultures, and other individuals. The sociocultural contexts in which humourists operate have constraints on joking; however, humourists have been found to manipulate social restrictions to perform their jokes. I consider the localisation of the subjects and targets of humour as well as the limits of humourists a social paradox.

Turner's (1982) theory on liminal and liminoid spaces can be used in uncovering this paradox. On one hand, comedians' jokes largely depend on the existence of a sense of community and belonging in the context-of-the-joke. In a liminal space, much of individual identity has been removed and replaced with community uniformity. On the one hand, since the participants in this space are constantly playing with elements of the familiar and defamiliarizing them, there is so much inversion of social order, values, and culture. On the other hand, the context is also a liminoid space, since the participants may still keep their idiosyncratic and personal identities. Since the liminoid space is defined by individuality, it could be eccentric and participants in it have an option of resisting the community stance. What Turner's thesis points to is that whatever a comedian focuses on is potentially and strategically an appeal and a counter-appeal, since as much as it fascinates a group of audience, it would repel another. The subjects and targets of humour will definitely interest and attract participants who associate with the community, while it will nauseate those who reject the in-group identity so as to keep to their egocentric beliefs. Basketmouth's joke on rape exemplifies this.

On January 4, 2014, Basketmouth, one of the foremost stand-up comedians in Nigeria, posted a "rape" joke on his Facebook wall (the joke has since been removed). The joke describes two types of dates: one with white ladies and a second one with African ladies. In summary, the white ladies yield to males' sexual advances on the third date, while the African ladies refuse such until the ninth date by which time the man already feels a bit of rape is required. The joke became viral in a short while and it received over 5,000 likes and comments. However, the comedian also received critical responses and condemnation from individuals across the continent and even outside Africa (see Muomah 2014). Among many other things, the joke touches on different stereotypes within the African continent about the dating behaviour of females and tends to justify some masculine inhumane actions in dating. The joke is represented below:

White girls:

First date: Coffee

Second date: Kiss

Third date: Sex

African girls:

First date: Fast food

Second date: Hug

Third date: Chinese restaurant

Fourth date: Kiss

Fifth date: Attempted sex but failed

Sixth date: Shopping

Seventh date: Cinema, new phone, more shopping

Eighth date: Attempted sex but failed

Ninth date: RAPE!!

A perspective which could be generated from the joke borders on the subject/target of the joke. As a researcher, one is concerned with questions like “Is the joke really on rape?” and “Why did Basketmouth weave rape into the joke?” Existing theories in linguistics and pragmatic approaches such as the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH; see Attardo 1994) provide insights on this. A GTVH analysis will show that the joke is not about rape; however, it will also show that using the word *rape* as the punchline of the joke heightens the “enjoyment” derived from the joke. The Knowledge Resources of the GTVH, specifically the narrative strategy and the logical mechanism, will indicate that the humour from the joke is derived from comparison of the dating behaviour of (European) white ladies with that of African ladies. The situation of the joke activates shared knowledge about dating behaviour in Africa and Europe. It appears that Basketmouth seems to say that African ladies demand more than the necessary financial inducement from dating relationships. The target, which is the *ladies* that got raped, the African ladies, and the foregrounding of the word *rape* in the punchline, also activate shared knowledge on gender politics and discrimination of women in Africa. Unfortunately for Basketmouth, the shared knowledge which could have helped him to achieve his intention did not acquire ostensive quality for all the recipients of the joke. By foregrounding *rape* in the punchline, some of the recipients rejected the garden path the comedian intended; for these recipients, *rape* activates a different assumption from the shared knowledge: the devaluation of and gender politics against and discrimination of women.

As this Basketmouth’s joke has shown, humour will always allude to sociocultural issues as well as political ones even when humourists do not intend their jokes for such purposes. Joking and humour interpret the social life and political situations of the community of the joke teller and recipient. In Nigeria, many internet jokes and stand-up routines have political dimensions as they lampoon political actors and their actions. There is a comic dimension to the socioeconomic and political realities of Nigeria (Obadare 2016; Yeku 2016). In Obadare’s (2016) words, humour serves “both personal and political purposes”. In the first instance, it helps individuals that have been marginalised to cope with the troubled Nigerian life. Politically, it is a tool of engagement and subversion. As Yeku (2016) observes, humour in Nigeria mirrors the citizenry laughing at themselves and the government. However, the political dimension of humour is not exclusive to the Nigerian situation. European and American humourists do adopt jokes for political ends, too (see among others Poprawa 2012). Nevertheless, in the context of Nigerian humour performance, one cannot but recognise how jokes serve as a pragmatic strategy of speaking to power. Another dimension of political humour in Nigeria is the appropriation of humour by politicians. As much as the citizens use humour to speak to power, the political class also adopt it to demean political opponents.

4. Dis laf fit kill person: Perspectives on Nigerian humour

The essays in this issue focus on diverse areas of the forms and functions of humour in Nigeria. Of course, we do not pretend to have covered all areas of Nigerian humour; we have only explored few areas of its large territory. The genres covered in this issue are humour in the broadcast media, internet humour, stand-up comedy, comedy skits, and literary humour. Currently, these are the popular areas where Nigerians express their creativity and experiment with humour; a gamut of Nigerian humour is produced through these channels and they propagate a form of “Nigerianness”. To better understand humour in the Nigerian context, one needs to examine its foundational philosophy, and to look at this, a question must be asked: Do Nigerians joke for humour’s sake or for society’s sake? The question borders on the outcome of humour in the context where it is used and its capability to reflect any form of social or cultural reality. Because the participants of humour could decide to ignore the

serious implications of humour or capitalise on them, scholars have suggested a distinction between pure humour and applied humour (Mulkay 1988; see also Tsakona & Popa 2011). In the first instance, participants “ignore the serious potential of humorous utterances and texts”, while in the second, participants consider humour “as a vehicle for serious meanings” (Tsakona & Popa 2011: 10). In Nigeria, most theorists and practitioners place emphasis on the applied sense of humour (Adeleke 2005; Obadare, 2016; Yeku, 2016; Azeez, this issue). The papers in this volume conceive humour as an enterprise with a serious social end.

The fact that there are three papers on stand-up comedy in this issue on Nigerian humour reflects the popularity of the genre in Nigeria. It seems that stand-up comedy has emerged as the leading source of humour in the country. Azeez Akinwumi Sesan’s paper on the art of stand-up calls attention to the rhetorical dexterity and adaptation of stand-up performance to and for different audience via different platforms. Technological advancement and development in internet communications offer more opportunities for the audience to access comedic entertainment, while they also provide avenues for comedians to propagate their crafts. The comedians, therefore, must be prepared for the exigencies of mediated performances while still focusing on live audience(s). The essay on masking tradition by Bernard Eze Orji highlights localising humour within the joking contexts where it is produced. I have argued that, in stand-up comedy, the analysis of humour should consider both the context-of-the-joke and the context-in-the-joke (Filani 2015, 2017). This affords the analyst a two-way explanatory movement which underscores both the text as well as the physical and sociocultural situations that give birth to them. Furthermore, as argued by Bernard Eze Orji, cultural dialectics and the background of performances give credence to the “masks” of stand-up comedians. The mask portrays the manipulation of personality and different identities, indexing diverse dimensions of (sub)consciousness. What is being camouflaged or veiled in stand-up performances is what is presented to the audience. As the writer suggests, we must perceive the mask as a metaphor in the context of stand-up art. As a cultural signpost, this art points to the sociocultural context where it is generated while the metaphor is meant to uncover what is veiled, mystified, and forbidden in the sociocultural context.

By adopting multimodality as a framework, Felix Ogoanah & Fredrick Ojo present an innovative methodological perspective to the analysis of stand-up routines that caters for both verbal and nonverbal dimensions of joking within an ESL context. Generally, studies on humour have been focused on the analysis of verbal humour. The quality of jokes depends on the contents and its success emanates from the adoption of multiple embodied modes in the routines by the comedians. The authors show that distinct gestural resources enrich the performance of jokes, while physical movements on the stage complement the cognitive linguistic structure of the comedians’ verbal texts.

One of the tools employed by humourists is absurdity. Two papers in this collection touch on the deliberate use of absurdity to evoke humour. Absurdity entails deviating from conventional reasoning and employs incongruity, exaggeration, or any form of violation of expectation. Ronke Eunice Adesoye’s paper is on phonological absurdity in skits. Her analysis is better understood when it is considered within the Nigerian ESL context where English pronunciation is modified by the citizens’ first language. We must note that the comic, Falz the Bahd Guy, whose skits are investigated in the paper, deliberately violates and substitutes standard pronunciation with/for substandard and uneducated pronunciation. Adesoye’s analysis has wider implications. The first is that it mirrors the reality of Nigerian English, as Falz’s pronunciation is a representation of the performance at the phonological level of a group of Nigerian English language speakers. The second is sociocultural and, to uncover this, Falz’s pronunciation must be seen as mimicry. Mimicry is a discursive process for constructing otherness – the feeling of “us” versus “them”. In Falz’s use, he associates

with the “them” and contextualises it for mockery. Bearing in mind that most speakers of English as a second language never fully gain native-like mastery of English pronunciation, recipients of the skits would associate Falz’s pronunciation with theirs, or at least recognise a stage in their acquisition of English where their performance is the same as Falz’s. The acceptance of, and laughter from, the skits constitute a collective affirmation of the kind of pronunciation that deserves ridicule.

Apart from recognising the role of absurdity, Blessing T. Inya & Onwu Inya’s paper on conversational humour in a radio news programme identifies other social dimensions of humour. Specifically, within the boundaries of entertainment and creativity, a new form of journalistic discourse which is based on humour could be employed in news broadcast. This new form is capable, among other things, of attracting large followership.

Politics has been described as a struggle over alternate realities (Callaghan & Schnell 2005, as cited in Waisanen 2011); Akin Tella’s essay on framing through humour of electoral candidates in the 2015 Nigerian Presidential Elections in political memes shows how these alternative realities are framed in Nigeria. Of course, humour provides a frame for interpretation and, within political contexts, its communicative intention is to enhance or attenuate the electoral values of a candidate. Tella offers a classification of framing through memes: individuated, which portrays political actors separately, and collective, which represents political actors jointly as possessing a singular quality. These frames could be either positive or negative.

The other two papers are about humour in Nigerian literature. Stylistic research has shown that there is a connection between patterns of style and aspects of verbal humour (Simpson 2006). In Elijah Adeoluwa Olusegun’s paper on humour in Wole Soyinka’s *Alápatà Apátà*, verbal humour is established as the nexus of traditional form of humour, comic actors, and humour in literature. The humour in the play is based on the “interplay between tone and meaning in Yoruba language, its usage, its abuses, and its confusions” (Elijah, this issue). In the analysed text, verbal play is derived from misappropriating tones in the Yoruba word *Alápatà*. Punning on the word through tone brings about semantic and situational incongruity. Another aspect of the text is the dramatic irony which is based on discrepancies between character’s expectations and the eventual turn of events. As the author points out, the significance of Soyinka’s humour in the text lies in how the writer appropriates diverse discourses – linguistic, political, religious and domestic – in a way that reflects all areas of life in the Nigerian context. Bartholomew Chizoba Akpah, on his own part, investigates the deployment of satire and parody as shades of humour within the poetry of two selected contemporary female poets in Nigeria. These poets use these facets of humour as devices for criticising female devaluation and relegation within the Nigerian sociocultural context. With humour as a stylistic device, the female poets deconstruct the objectification of womanhood. Humour serves as a device by which social actors construct gender, Akpah’s essay has shown that it can also be used to deconstruct gender and reject female devaluation.

This handful of papers on humour in Nigeria provides an insight to the possibilities of the use of humour within the Nigerian context. Research into humour in Nigeria is still at the nascent stage. It is hopeful that there will be more scholarly investigations of Nigerian humorous worldview.

Notes

¹ These two languages are selected as instances of the way humour and laughter is lexicalised and conceptualised in Nigeria. The examples are not meant to offer a generalisation of what is obtainable in Nigerian languages and cultures.

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