

# Beyond rhythm and lyrics: pragmatic strategies of verbal humour in Nigerian hip-hop

**Ganiu Abisoye Bamgbose**

Pan-Atlantic University, Nigeria  
[gbamgbose@pau.edu.ng](mailto:gbamgbose@pau.edu.ng)

## Abstract

*Extant studies on Nigerian hip-hop have approached the genre as an act and as an art from psycholinguistic, social, sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions. However, the possibility of evoking humour through the careful deployment of language by Nigerian hip-hop artistes is a phenomenon which has largely escaped the attention of scholars within the ambit of applied linguistics. This research, therefore, investigates how Nigerian hip-hop artistes, beyond the rhythm and lyrics of their songs, poke fun at their listeners. The study employs Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory to analyse the humorous utterances in four purposively selected hip hop songs: Jo o, by Jahbless, Eyan Mayweather by Olamide, Penalty by Small Doctor and Lyrically by Lil Kesh. The choice of artistes was based on consideration for the two popular subgenres of Nigerian hip-hop, which are rap and dance hall, while the choice of tracks was based on consideration for their humorous potential. The humorous utterances are either name-induced or object/phenomenon induced. The study finds that simile, metaphor, hyperbole, punning, teasing, putdown and litotes, complemented with linguistic devices such as polysemy and repetition, are the humour techniques that are deployed to amuse listeners. Humour strategies adopted by Nigerian hip-hop artistes are comparing, contrasting and extending corresponding concepts, distorting collective knowledge of people, social events and situations and manipulating shared cultural representations. Nigerian hip-hop songs are spiced with humorous utterances which can only be deciphered by people who share the socio-cultural world of the artistes. The referring expressions used by the artistes can help enlarge the vocabulary of Nigerian English.*

*Keywords: Nigerian hip-hop, humour strategies, pragmatics, humour techniques .*

## 1. Introduction

Within the Nigerian space, comedy and music have been two distinct professions, even though they are both forms of entertainment. Although a few comedians like Julius Agwu have performed comedy musically, and a popular hip-hop artiste, 2Face Idibia, has also at some events performed short comedies before his musical act, the two forms of art have still been appreciated as different artistic ventures by both viewers and researchers. However, as distinct

as these fields are, the way one interacts with the other deserves scholarly enquiry. Huron (2004) reports, on the behaviours connected to music, that, “Among the handful of behaviours that can be observed unaided are dancing, foot-tapping, clapping, swaying, humming, weeping, smiling and laughing.” The last two, smiling and laughing, are most likely the result of the perception of humour in the verbal acts of musicians.

As an aesthetic category, humour is subtle, evasive, and extremely difficult to describe. It would seem that with so many theories and approaches, all with their own useful perspectives, none monopolizes the truth, and always, another wrinkle on the elephant of humour awaits discovery. This is a wise view, which has held true through long experience and scholarship. Despite the multifarious dimensions to the explanation of humour, Schwarz (2010) has held that “Humor represents a central aspect of our everyday conversation and it is a general fact that all humans naturally participate in humorous speech and behavior.” However, in terms of a working definition, the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2010) defines humour as “the quality of action, speech or writing which excites amusement, oddity, comicality or fun. It can also be the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing in speech, writing or other composition.”

Two types of humour have been identified; namely, verbal and non-verbal humour. The verbal humour exploits some verbal elements such as words, phrases, and sentences; while the other makes use of behaviour, kinesics, and so forth. Audrieth (1998) defines humour as “the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous.” “Ludicrous” is an adjective meaning amusing or laughable through obvious absurdity, incongruity, exaggeration, or eccentricity ([www.squaresail.com/onhumor.html](http://www.squaresail.com/onhumor.html)). This paper, therefore, aims at investigating verbal humour as a communicative strategy deployed by Nigerian hip-hop artistes in enthusing their audience. This study, which is carried out within the ambit of pragmatics, will analyse the incongruous expressions that provoke humour in the lines of the selected hip-hop artistes. The study will, therefore, answer the following research questions:

- I. What are the humour strategies deployed by Nigerian hip-hop artistes in their songs?
- II. How does incongruity, in relation to different humour techniques, contribute to humorous effects in the songs of Nigerian hip-hop artistes?
- III. What are the linguistic devices that aid the creation of humour in the songs of Nigerian hip-hop artistes?

## 2. An overview of Nigerian hip-hop

From a cultural perspective, hip-hop culture is a complex system of icons and symbols driven by music culture, youth cultural production, and reflections of social realities in the US inner city and the music industry (Kitwana, 2002). In Nigeria however, hip-hop is a relatively new musical genre. Genres of music such as Apala, Fuji, Afro, and others indigenous to Nigeria, and foreign music such as Disco, Afro, Blues, Jazz, were the familiar ones before hip-hop took centre stage (Omoniyi, 2006). Nigerian hip-hop began to gain popularity in the late 1990s with the advent of groups such as Remedies, Maintain, Trybesmen, and single artistes like Rasqie Mono. Even though there exist certain claims that hip-hop began in Nigeria before the late 1990s with a group called Sound on Sound in 1988, it did not begin to gain popularity until the late 1990s (Ojoawo 2016). Christopher (2012) argues that the first hip-hop record to achieve widespread popularity in Nigeria was “Rapper’s Delight” by Sugarhill Gang in 1979.

Since the late 1990s, hip-hop has been growing consistently and regularly in Nigeria, with many hip-hop artistes emerging from the music studios, often with new styles that differentiate

Nigerian hip-hop from the rest of the world. Some of the earliest Nigerian hip-hop artistes include Idris Abdul Kareem, Tony Tетуila, Eddy Remedy, and 2face Idibia. Later came the likes of D'Banj, 9ice, Rugged Man, and Azadus, among others. Ojoawo (2016) reports that Nigerian hip-hop has continued to enjoy universal acceptability as a result of its appeal. Artistes like Wizkid, Davido, Lil Kesh, Phyno, Sean Tizzle, Seyi Shay, Brymo, Omawumi, Olamide, and Tiwa Savage, to list a few, have demonstrated excellent musical talent, each with his or her unique style.

The hip-hop style of music has been fully Nigerianised and due to this, it is often referred to as Afro hip-hop by media professionals and lovers of the music genre in Nigeria (Ajayi, 2012:4). The music combines both the African-American and Nigerian indigenous cultures. Omoniyi (2006) posits that Nigerian Hip-hop artistes' choice of multilingual skill establishes a creative patch and a non-subordinate local identity, within the global hip-hop constituency. One instance of the unique creativity exhibited by Nigerian hip-hop artistes is the insertion of verbal humour into their act; this is achieved through code alternation and reliance on the socio-cultural common ground which exists between the artistes and their audience.

### **3. A brief on humour theories**

Classifying humour into different theoretical frameworks is a complex task. This complexity arises mainly for three reasons. First, there is no general agreement on how to define humour. Second, humour research has a long tradition. And, third, humour has attracted considerable interest from a number of disciplines: philosophy, psychology, linguistics, sociology and anthropology, and each field has applied a particular set of objectives and methodologies to the study of humour. These three aspects intersect with one another so that, for example, psychologists typically regard humour as a cognitive and/or emotional phenomenon, linguists are primarily concerned with the "joke text" and sociologists relate humour to social and cultural circumstances (Gunther, 2003).

Despite the diversity of the field, three categories of humour theories have been identified. They are commonly known as release theories, hostility theories and incongruity theories, although different scholars have adopted different terminologies. For example, Attardo (1994) gives a similar kind of clustering in *Linguistic Theories of Humour*, where he divides humour theories into cognitive (incongruity and contrast), social (hostility, aggression, superiority, triumph, derision, disparagement), and psychoanalytical (release, sublimation, liberation, economy) theories.

Attardo (1994: 47) highlights the aggression theories (for which every humorous experience arises as an expression of a superior feeling in a human being towards another human being), the release theories (for which humour is the effect resulting from a release of accumulated energy) and the incongruity theories (according to which humour is based on the discovery of a reality or a thought that turns out to be inconsistent with what was expected) within the schools of thought that have dealt with humour. This study tilts towards the incongruity theory, given the pragmatic framework of the theory.

### **4. Figurative devices as humour techniques**

Figurative devices are ways of using language to achieve aesthetics. Although these stylistic features are mainly used in literary studies, humour researchers have deployed them as analytical techniques through which humour is achieved in different kinds of discourse, such as stand-up comedy (Schwarz, 2010; Githatu and Chai, 2015), computer mediated communication (Inya, 2016), social media and blogs (Idowu-Faith, 2016; Tabe, 2016) and

many others. According to Schwarz (2010), the use of figurative language often allows the joke tellers to express their real intention without using direct and offensive language. The data for the present study also shows that hip-hop artistes comically convey some ideas without being explicit. Seven of such figurative devices, which are deployed in this paper, are discussed below.

#### 4.1. Simile

A simile is a direct comparison between two dissimilar things that share similarity in quality, through the use of the words “as” or “like.” Similes serve as veritable tools for script opposition interpretation of texts, thereby generating incongruity which results in humorous reactions. Ross (2009) holds that similes can be classed as “apparent contradictions” and as a type of “semantic incongruity”, insofar as the image they evoke “is bizarre or awkwardly incongruous”. The simile plays out as a humour technique in the data sampled for this study.

#### 4.2. Metaphor

A metaphor, according to Musyoka (2014), is an implicit comparison of two unrelated concepts—one familiar and the other unfamiliar—as a result of which the unknown one is revealed through analogy. Incongruity is achieved through metaphorical expressions in texts. Attardo (1994) holds that the metaphor is “a mismatch, disharmony or contrast between two ideas/elements in the broadest possible sense.” Incongruity in metaphors achieves humorous effects through: conflict between what is said and what occurs in the joke; conflict due to some ambiguity at some level of language; a punch line which is surprising because it activates meaning which is not expected since it is not compatible with the rest of the joke or previous discourse (Musyoka, 2014:18).

#### 4.3. Irony

The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2015) views irony “as an expression of one’s meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite for humorous or emphatic effect”. All ironic utterances are not necessarily humorous. That is to say that, a whole lot of studies on irony is carried out outside the purview of humour. The literal import of an ironic utterance is opposite to the implicit meaning intended by the speaker. However, as a humour technique, irony inverts all relationships and upsets all arrangements based on logic (Oladunjoye, 2016). The data below show the deployment of irony in the creation of humour.

#### 4.4. Sarcasm

Sarcasm is oftentimes used as a synonym for irony. This, however, should not be so, as sarcasm may not in any way be ironic, although the negative type of irony may be called sarcastic irony. Sarcasm usually involves a person verbalising something that is the opposite of what is appropriate, usually with the intent of ridiculing another person. An instance of sarcasm was when a Nigerian comedian said shortly before the Nigerian 2015 presidential election that former President Goodluck Jonathan should be allowed to recontest, since any child who fails a class must repeat the class. This was in no way a campaign in support of Jonathan, but ridicule in disguise. Paakinen (2010) succinctly differentiates irony and sarcasm thus: irony can be seen as a comment opposite to what is meant, and sarcasm as a

mocking remark of a similar nature. Sarcasm as a humour technique is usually a way of amusing some persons at the expense another, who serves as the butt of the humour remark.

#### **4.5. Pun**

Punning is one of the simplest forms of joke and one of the primary concepts examined in studies on humour. A pun can be defined as a humorous verbalisation that has (prototypically) two interpretations couched in purposeful ambiguity of a word or a string of words (collocations or idioms) dubbed the punning element. The punning element manifests itself in one form (or two very similar ones) but conveys two different meanings (Dynel, 2009). The punster designs an ambivalent expression with one meaning tilting toward understanding the preceding utterance and a second meaning also fitted to that expression but based on a contextually inappropriate interpretation of it. The punning turn consequently clashes with the topic and/or tenor of current conversation, while some linguistic element establishes its claim to a rather tenuous formal relevance. Ambiguity is an important element of punning, though Attardo (1994) explains that not every ambiguous word constitutes a pun. The realisation of pun revolves around either phonological mechanisms, such as homophony, or semantic ones, such as polysemy.

#### **4.6. Hyperbole**

Hyperbole is “an extravagant exaggeration by which something is represented as involving a greater intensity than reality (Gibbs, 1999:17). Hyperbole is deployed in discourse to enliven the readers or listeners. According to Schwarz (2010), hyperboles are not to be taken literally and are not necessarily funny as such, but are often used to increase the funniness expressed in a joke because they completely overstate the situation ridiculed.

#### **4.7. Litotes**

Litotes, which is also called meiosis, is the direct opposite of hyperbole. It is a deliberate attempt to understate a scenario as a way of laying emphasis. Sometimes, it deploys the use of negating particles such as “no,” “not” and “never.” However, as a humour generating technique, litotes is usually utilised to underestimate the butt of a humorous utterance.

#### **4.8. Putdown**

Putdowns are obviously confrontational utterances which are genuinely abusive without any intention to amuse the addressee. It can manifest as ridicule, mockery or sarcasm. The direct addressee of a putdown is the butt who may be present at the scene of communication or who might be reported to someone else through disparaging utterances. The deployer of a putdown primarily aims to get at a target and secondarily hopes to get others amused through this means.

### **5. Theoretical framework**

This study adopts both the relevance theory and the incongruity theory of humour as its theoretical framework. This is because incongruity, of all the humour theories, is the most pragmatic-inclined, while relevance is a pragmatic theory. The choice of the relevance theory

is borne out of its cognitive and cultural richness in the interpretation of texts with due consideration for contextual variables which help to make sense of discursive situations.

The incongruity-resolution theory is one of the first linguistic theories of humour, dating back to the 18th century. Morreall (1987) considers the incongruity theory to be “the most popular current philosophical theory of humour” and states further that it “holds that the formal object of amusement is ‘the incongruous.’” Many researchers share his view and see incongruity as the essential element in eliciting humour. Incongruity is a violation of a pattern in someone's picture of how things should be. What any individual finds incongruous will depend on what her or his experience has been and what his or her expectations are. The core of this theory can easily be explained by Schopenhauer's definition of laughter: “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity” (Attardo 1994:48).

The relevance theory was propounded by Sperber and Wilson in 1986. The relevance theory views the act of communication as a cognitive process with the ability of communicators to entertain representations of people's thoughts, desires and ideas based on stimuli such as utterances and gestures. According to the view of Sperber and Wilson (1995), communication is an ostensive-inferential process. From the perspective of a speaker, communication is ostensive and ostension involves two layers of information. “First, there is the information which has been, so to speak, pointed out; second, there is the information that the first layer of information has been intentionally pointed out”. In order to make the communication successful, the listener is supposed to select the right contextual assumptions, which are intended by the speaker. If the listener cannot draw inference from the speaker, he or she may not fully understand the utterance or cause conflict during communication. Sperber and Wilson also inherited certain aspects of Grice's theory, such as the importance of manifest underlying intentions in communication and the difference between what is said and implicatures.

Within the relevance-theoretic framework, the hypothesis of humour as a violation of Grice's maxims does not hold, as a more cognitive approach in which a mental search for an optimally relevant interpretation also covers the processing of humorous discourses and the derivation of humorous effects (Jodlowiec 1991). Bringing relevance to humour in a more specific manner, Yus (2012) argues that, attempting to make people laugh involves a prediction and manipulation of inference-centred interpretive strategies.

Humorous utterances can either be intentional or unintentional. The analysis of humour in Nigerian hip-hop falls within the category of unintentional humour. Unintentional humour explains those humorous feelings which are produced by an utterance without the sender's explicit intention to produce them, especially given that the ongoing discourse is outside the purview of canned or conversational jokes. Humorous effects found in music, advertising and other fields outside comedic discourse constitute unintentional humour. In a taxonomy of jokes presented by Yus (2012), unintentionally humorous utterances are based on social and collective information stored in the hearer's mind.

Humorous utterances, both in intentional and unintentional contexts, can be analysed based on the processing of the utterances and their explicit and implicit interpretations. As succinctly put by Yus (2012), the relevance theory predicts interpretation as an inferential activity in which the hearer makes a mutual parallel adjustment of explicitly communicated information, implicated conclusions and contextual information in order to reach a relevant interpretation. The inferential steps involved in the realization of the implicit or explicit meaning can be “predicted and exploited with a humorous intention” and this prediction and exploitation can be achieved within different humour theories; one of which is the incongruity-resolution theory which the analysis in this paper is anchored on.

Morreall (1987) considers the incongruity theory to be “the most popular current philosophical theory of humour” and states further that it “holds that the formal object of amusement is ‘the incongruous’”. Many influential researchers share his view and see incongruity as the essential element in eliciting humour. Incongruity is a violation of a pattern in someone's picture of how things should be. What any individual finds incongruous will depend on what his experience has been and what his expectations are. The core of this theory can easily be explained by Schopenhauer's definition of laughter: “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity” (Attardo 1994:48). The idea of incongruity is based on the notion that there is a certain pattern to the relationships between components of ideas. When the system of arrangement does not match with the expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous.

As a humour theory which is compatible with the relevance theory, humour is realised in incongruity through the extraction of explicit interpretation (explicature), the derivation of implicated conclusions or (implicatures) and by playing with alternative explicit and/or implicit senses that are both possible candidates to match the intended interpretation but are graded in terms of relevance (Yus, 2012:280). The explicated and implicated inferences resulting in the manifestation of humour in the selected Nigerian hip-hop songs are foregrounded through humour strategies such as implicature and audience's responsibility, comparing, contrasting and extending corresponding concepts and referring expressions, employing conflicting assumptions, distorting collective knowledge of people, social events and situations, and lastly, contradicting stereotypes. These humour strategies are proposed by Yus (2004) in his analysis of *El club de la comedia*, a comedy TV programme in Spain.

## 6. Literature review

Ortega (2013) proposes a method to study interactional ironic humorous utterances in Spanish. The paper has as its aim the analysis of real, colloquial conversation utterances where humour appears in the utterance without the listener expecting it, because it is not a humorous genre. Using Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humour, the author studies irony and humour in examples of conversations from Peninsular Spanish real sample corpuses (COVJA, *Corpus de conversaciones coloquiales* [Corpus of Colloquial Conversations] and CREA, *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual* [Reference Corpus of Present-Day Spanish]). He argues that in the cases studied, humour becomes a narrative and social strategy, exactly the same as irony and politeness. He concludes, therefore, that humour with a positive effect is one of the values which the ironic utterance can convey in conversation after breaking the listener's expectation. That study is similar to the present one in that it investigates humour in a non-humorous genre. This study is different from Ortega's in terms of data, since the present study focuses on humour in Nigerian hip-hop and the reviewed work studied colloquial conversations.

Huron (2004) analyses live recordings of Peter Schickele's music, and 629 instances of audience laughter were identified. The analysis focused on the laughter-evoking moments in order to account for possible reasons why the audience laughed. Excluding visual gags and language-based joking, the researcher's informal observation suggests that humour-evoking devices might be classified into nine categories which are: incongruous sounds, mixed genre, drifting tonality, metric disruptions, implausible delays, excessive repetition, incompetence cues, incongruous quotations and misquotations. Huron submits that while laughter is not a common response to music, it appears to share much in common with frissons ("chills") and awe ("gasping"). All three responses appear to be evoked by musical passages that involve

violations of listener expectations. Laughter appears to be linked to the greatest or most marked violations of expectation. Huron's study shares a line with the present one giving its focus on how laughter is triggered in music. Differences, however, occur in terms of the kinds of music being studied and the modes of performance, with this study focusing on recorded songs and the reviewed work looking at reactions to live performance. The studies also vary in terms of theoretical approach.

Ajayi (2012) investigates the abusive language deployed by Nigerian Hip-hop artistes, with a view to identifying the Face Threatening Acts (FTA) used in damaging one another's "faces". The study is anchored within pragmatics using Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. The study concludes that the FTAs used by the artistes are mainly to reduce their rivals to zero even in the absence of conflicts among the artistes or in the industry. He also contends that Nigerian Hip-hop artistes threaten one another's faces even when they do not have anything against one another. The threat is merely to gain social power and appeal to their fans and audience. This study is similar to the present one in terms of its subject of study being the Nigerian hip-hop but differs completely in focus.

## 7. Methodology

The study gathered its data from the songs of four Nigerian hip-hop artistes, namely Jahbless, Olamide, Lil Kesh and Small Doctor. The choice of artistes represents the two main categories of Nigerian hip-hop, which are rap and dance hall. A track from each of the artistes was purposively selected as data for this study. The track from Jahbless is titled *Jo o*, while *Eyan Mayweather*, *Lyricaly* and *Penalty* were chosen from Olamide, Lil Kesh and Small Doctor, respectively. A total of 8 excerpts were subjected to a qualitative pragmatic analysis.

## 8. Data analysis

The data for this study are grouped into two humour categories, namely: name-induced humour and object or phenomenon-based humour. Name-induced humour is a comic situation where the use of a name or the juxtaposition of two or more names results in the enactment of opposing scripts, thereby creating a feeling of amusement in the listeners. Object or phenomenon-based humour is a humorous feeling which is perceived by the listeners based on the absurdity in the reference made to a particular object or phenomenon. The classification used in this study is based on the nature of the nouns or entities around which the humour is created. Humour is greatly achieved through referring expressions such as names of persons or objects. A referring expression is any expression used in an utterance to refer to something or someone, according to Hurford, Heasley and Smith (2007:37). In generating humour through referring expressions in Nigerian hip-hop, the interpretation of the referring expressions in the context of the music tracks being considered depends on the listeners' ability to extract contextual assumptions from the names or objects being used by the artistes. This contextual assumption is realised through an incongruous manipulation of the referring expressions, which are realised through the enactment of somewhat contradictory scripts in order to create amusement for the listeners. It should be mentioned that, potentially humorous features do not necessarily cause viewers to laugh. One may be more inclined to smile and one's reaction may simply be an entirely internal feeling of amusement. The discussions that follow the excerpts will analyse the humour techniques, pragmatic strategies and linguistic devices that are used to foreground the humour in the excerpts.

### 8.1. Name-induced humour

The data in this category create their humorous effect in line with the names of known entities within or outside the locality of the artistes. Some of the excerpts reveal actual or proper names and other excerpts feature common or generic names as seen below:

Excerpt 1

*Jide Kosoko sho fe fi se Spartacus (joooo oo)? 1*  
*O de ni fe fi 9ice shey bouncer 2*  
*Iya rainbow sho le fi shey stripper? 3*  
*Sho le fi Obasanjo shey Chris Brown? 4 Jahbless Jo o*

Gloss

Do you want to use **Jide Kosoko** as **Spartacus**? 1  
And you won't want to use **9ice** as **bouncer** 2  
Would you like to use **Iya Rainbow** as **stripper**? 3  
Can you use **Obasanjo** as **Chris Brown**? 4

The excerpt above is a blend of metaphor and sarcasm. The metaphor has been defined as “a mismatch, disharmony or contrast between two ideas/elements in the broadest possible sense” (Arttardo 1994:48). The source artistes compared in the excerpt are evidently mismatches to the target artistes or personalities depicted, given their physical appearances and other features. Sarcasm captures any mordant critical comment not necessarily entailing oppositeness typical of irony, conceived of among others as evaluation reversal (Partington, 2006). The proper names in the excerpt are manipulated for the purpose of humour, given the evaluation reversal of the personages involved. The relevance theoretic humour strategy deployed in the excerpt is implicature. The audience, as those who listen to the music, will have to decipher the incongruity in the comparisons through the different mismatches.

All of the four instances of metaphor involve an incongruous comparison of personalities, which consequently arouses humorous feeling in the listening audience. Line 1 compares a Nigerian actor, Jide Kosoko, who is fat and relatively old, to a young energetic character, Spartacus, in an American epic historical drama titled *Spartacus*. The pictorial imagination of the former in the role of the latter, which comes with a series of physical activities, creates a feeling of absurdity which will in turn be appreciated as an attempt to create a humorous feeling in the listeners. Line two wonders if anyone would like to engage popular Nigerian musician, 9ice, as a bouncer. The absurdity lies in the physical dissimilarity given that 9ice is lanky; whereas a bouncer is expected to be huge. This, therefore, presents an inherently incongruous situation, as anyone who knows 9ice will be amused at the image of a graciously slim fellow as a bouncer. Line 3 talks about an elderly Yoruba actress popularly known as Iya Rainbow and wonders if she can be made a stripper. The age difference and expected attractiveness between Iya Rainbow and anyone who will work as a stripper projects a humorous frame which will help understand the utterance as merely humour-inducing. The last line, which also compares an old former Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, to a young American artiste, Chris Brown, also evokes humour as anyone who knows the duo will likely conclude that they are extreme ends of handsomeness.

Excerpt 2

*Lyricaly I big die*  
*Big like aunty Cossy boobs*  
*Igboro lemi*

*Ki lo kan mi pelu read your books*

Gloss

**Lyrically I'm so big  
As big as Aunty Cossy's breasts**

I am a lout

What's my business with reading books

Although the excerpt is an instance of a simile, it qualifies as a metaphor, as many authors have described simile as one of the manifestations of metaphor. Dynel (2012) argues that the general knowledge for the humorousness of metaphors is their novelty and surprising form, coupled with their recruitment of unconventional vehicles, sometimes in the form of elaborate ad hoc concepts. The incongruity in this excerpt, whose resolution results in humour, is the opposing scripts, with music (lyrics) as the source domain, and body parts (boobs/breasts) as the target domain and largeness as the *tertium comparationis*. There is the use of repetition as a linguistic device, seen with the use of the word *big* for the purpose of linking the opposing scripts.

The humour strategy adopted here is called comparing, contrasting and extending corresponding concepts and referring expressions. In communication, what happens in the encoding and/or interpretation of concepts is that, words are contextually used, and their interpretations are context-bound. Words and other expressions (including names) are used flexibly to encode the concepts in the speaker's mind (Filani 2016:134). In the excerpt, Lil Kesh compares the magnanimity of his lyrics (the message in his song) to that of a popular Nigerian dancer and actress, Cossy, who has very big breasts and who in many of her videos flaunts her breasts. This comparison and relating concepts, however, become humorous only to those who share the sociocultural context where the referring entity, Cossy, exists.

Excerpt 3

*Baddo ti wole de so e kun le*

***Ke ma ki mi bi ti ashamu***

***Af'oba je ni mi, Buruji Kashamu***

Gloss

Baddo has come in so kneel down

**And greet me like *ashamu***

**I'm the kingmaker, Buruji Kashamu**

The excerpt above is an instance of punning with the rhyming words, *ashamu* and *Kashamu*. According to Norrick (1993), the punster constructs an ambivalent utterance with one meaning oriented toward understanding the preceding utterance and a second meaning also fitted to that utterance but based on a contextually inappropriate analysis of it. In this excerpt, Olamide alludes to a popular prayer which precedes the Ramadan fasting among Muslims. This prayer is called *asamu* among Yoruba Muslims, and the prayer is always one that most Muslims strive not to miss, especially the first one which precedes the first day of Ramadan. He uses this word with another similarly rhyming name, *Kashamu*, a rich, respected and popular statesman in southwestern Nigeria. To foreground the humour, Olamide uses the linguistic device of polysemy to assign two different meanings to the Yoruba word, *ki*. The word in the first sense collocates with *asamu* to mean worship or pray and to initiate the script of religion, *ki asamu* (pray *asamu*). Olamide, however, creatively activates a second script

where *ki* means to respect and here, the word collocates with the pronoun *mi* in a syntagmatic relation, *ki mi* (greet or respect me) and this second meaning he links with the name Kashamu, that is, greet and honour me in the manner you greet and honour Kasamu and in the manner you pray *asamu*. The humour strategy deployed here is employing conflicting assumptions. Filani (2016) holds that a repeated observation in the incongruity approaches to humour is that, humorous utterances contain two opposing propositions and/or assumptions, as seen in the polysemous use of the Yoruba verb *ki* in the excerpt above. In the presentation of those lines, Olamide leads the listeners to entertain assumptions that they did not previously process. Such assumptions are not evaluated as true or false because the listeners have submitted themselves to be led in a garden path (Yus, 2004).

Excerpt 4

*Oni fe se prison break ni alagbon...*

*Pa de Rihanna loja bend down*

Gloss

You won't want to go through **prison break at Alagbon...**

You met **Rihanna at a roadside market**

This excerpt has instances of teasing, conceptualised as a higher-order notion embracing jocular utterances performing a variety of pragmatic functions, the meaning of which is not to be treated as truth-oriented and which invariably carries humorous force to be appreciated by both interlocutors (Dyner 2009). The first line talks about the impossibility of a break (an escape) which was planned and executed in the film *Prison Break* being carried out in a Nigerian prison popularly known by its location, Alagbon. The second line imagines meeting Rihanna in the type of market in Nigeria called *bend down select*, where already used clothes are sold in an open place and at a cheap rate. The humour in this excerpt is grounded by the humour strategy called distorting collective knowledge of people, social events and situations. With this strategy, the musician distorts what is collectively believed to be held and what is assumed to be the normal state of affairs. As seen in the data, anyone who shares the Nigerian socio-cultural reality and who also has watched the movie will know that a break, especially in the manner it happens in the said movie, is not possible in Nigeria, given the unavailability of the technological devices which aid Michael Schofield's break in the film. This underlying mockery therefore becomes a distorted knowledge which can poke fun at anyone who shares the reality of the two worlds—the film and the Nigerian prison. This distortion also extends to the second line, given the absurdity of an internationally acclaimed musician like Rihanna being found in an open market where used clothes are sold. The marriage of these two, the “bend down market” and the presence of Rihanna, evidently connotes humour to anyone who shares knowledge of this market and the personality of Rihanna.

## 8.2. Object or phenomenon-based humour

The excerpts in this category feature the names of objects and some phenomena which are combined in incongruous manners for the purpose of humour. Examples are presented in the excerpts below:

Excerpt 5

**Won se bonanza lorun apaadi se n bo 1**  
**Ororo igbala re shey o fi din dodo ni awe 2** Olamide 'Eyan Mayweather'

Gloss

**There is a bonanza in hell. Are you coming? 1**  
**Your anointing oil, did you fry plantain with it, young man 2**

The humour in this excerpt is achieved through the humour technique of irony, being a phenomenon that entails an interpretative use of language, which is explained as an echo or as a pretence (Sperber and Wilson, 1994), or even as an argumentative resource or polyphony (Anscombe and Ducrot 1994). The first line presents two unrelated and opposing scripts through an indirect speech act. The opposing scripts are those of a bonanza (anything which is a mine of wealth or yields a large income or return) and hell (the place, believed by different religions to be where the devil lives and where sinners are tortured after death). The processing of the extremes presented in this indirect speech act also becomes an instance of distorting collective knowledge of situations within the relevance-theoretic ambit and this distortion is evidently for the essence of humour.

The humour in the second excerpt is achieved through punning. Ritchie (2004) splits puns into paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes. In the paradigmatic variant, a particular substring appears in the text, and the joke depends on the similarity (or even identity) of that string to some other string not in the text. This is seen with the use of the noun phrase *anointing oil* which, in Nigerian English, is blessed oil used for spiritual purposes. It can be used as a cream, at other times is added to one's potable water for drinking and can also be sprinkled around for protection. However, even with all the purposes served by the anointing oil, it cannot be used to fry plantain, as this will amount to wastage (given the usually small quantity of the oil) and abuse of purpose. This, therefore, paradigmatically instantiates the idea of palm/vegetable oil in the listeners, even though it is not mentioned in the song. The humour in this, therefore, lies in its interpretation as a putdown, which are truly abusive and disparaging remarks, usually carrying no humour to be appreciated by the butt. The situation depicted in the excerpt is achieved through the strategy called distortion of a people's collective knowledge and since Olamide is not directing this putdown at any specific person, it can therefore be taken as an attempt to inject a humorous flavour into his song.

Excerpt 6

**I get bling bling all over my condom 1**  
*Sho le fi ladder gun maggi 2*  
*Ko tun fi parachute bole 3*

Gloss

I have **gold accessories** all around **my contraceptive** 1  
Can you climb **a seasoning with a ladder** 2  
And then **descend with a parachute** 3

The humorous frame in this excerpt is achieved with the technique of metaphor. This is because the scenario painted in the excerpt involves an extravagant exaggeration by which something is represented as involving a greater intensity than reality (Gibbs 1999:17). In line 1, *bling bling* is a word used by Nigerian youth to refer to gold accessories such as necklaces and rings. The humour in the first line however lies in the preposterousness of decorating a

condom with gold accessories. Line 2 also results in humour given the absurdity of climbing Maggi, a popular food seasoning, with a ladder and descending from it with a parachute. This is because Maggi, in the first place cannot withstand the pressure of the smallest human, not to then think of climbing it with a ladder and descending from it with a parachute.

The excerpt can also be analysed within the relevance-theoretic humour strategy of contradicting stereotypes. Stereotypes, which are widely held impressions of people, can be used as a tool for expressing bias or for correcting social vices. The excerpt is therefore an implicit attempt at mocking people, especially men, who brag about their possession and overstate their ability.

Excerpt 7

If you no get money hide your face. You can call me Small Doctor Omo iya teacher eh eh.  
**Won ti gba penalty lo throwing**

Gloss

If you don't have money, hide your face. You can call me Small Doctor, the son of a teacher eh eh. **They have played penalty to throw in.**

In line with the interpretation of litotes as a form of irony which though differs from irony given its preference for understatement or underestimation, the excerpt above humorously understates and underestimates an unstated butt (a butt being any target of a disparaging humour) as one who is unable to make a shot on target even in a penalty kick. The absurdity of anyone who is directly facing the goal post eventually playing to the throw-in side has a potential for amusement. This also amounts to the strategy of distorting collective knowledge of a situation as the imagination of a penalty kick to an entirely different direction will be resolved in the listeners' mind as a deliberate fabrication of the musician to achieve humour.

Excerpt 8

I'll like to see **a white girl go bleaching 1**  
*Sho le she mscheww fun MOPOL? 2*  
*Sho le fi werepe kun powder?*

Gloss

I'll like to see **a white girl bleaching 1**  
Can you make **a hissing sound** to a **MOPOL?**  
Can you use **Mucuna** as **powder?**

The idea of a white girl bleaching in line 1 has a humorous effect, given that the essence of bleaching one's skin is to be "white." A white girl therefore is not likely to bleach her complexion since she is already white. This line, therefore, is a form of teasing, since it combines elements of provocation and playfulness directed at others (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp, 2006). When teasing, the speaker does not mean to be genuinely offensive towards the hearer, challenging the latter jocularly, i.e. speaking within a humorous frame, even if simultaneously implicitly conveying pertinent meanings outside it. The line coincides with the humour strategy of joking with shared cultural belief, being an overt description of an issue drawn from Nigerian sociocultural experience. The phenomenon of bleaching is one found among Nigerian women and this line therefore, subtly and implicitly mocks them for trying to look like a white girl. The line only makes sense within the humorous frame in the light of a listener's residual knowledge of bleaching among the black race.

The sound of hissing in line 2 also becomes humorous to anyone who shares the sociocultural knowledge of the Nigerian military where force men occasionally harass citizens. Listeners are likely to get amused at the guts of anyone who will hiss at the MOPOL (Mobile Police), considered one of the most brutal forces in Nigeria. In line 3, *werepe* (mucuna) is a kind of seed found in Africa which is known for its notorious itchiness. Often, it is ground by people for the purpose of harming others. It is therefore absurd to imagine that anyone will want to deliberately apply this seed in its ground form as a powder, knowing how terribly it itches. The final process of the thought however will suggest to the listeners that the musician only sets out to amuse them with this absurd thought of self-punishment.

## 9. Conclusion and implications

Within the ambit of humour studies, this paper examines the place of humour in the songs of selected Nigerian hip-hop artistes. The study deviates from existing ones that have appreciated Nigerian hip-hop from social and sociological dimensions. Using Sperber and Wilson's Relevance theory, the study analyses the humour techniques, linguistic devices and humour strategies deployed by the Nigerian hip-hop artistes to create humour in their songs. The analysis in the data focuses on referring expressions which are divided into name-induced humour and object or phenomenon-induced humour. Deriving a feeling of amusement in the use of these referring expressions depends on the listeners' ability to extract contextual assumptions from the names or objects being used by the artistes in creating humour. This contextual assumption is realised through an incongruous manipulation of the referring expressions to create a feeling of amusement in the listeners. Drawing excerpts from purposively selected tracks of four hip-hop artistes, Jah Bless, Olamide, Small Doctor and Lil Kesh, the study finds that simile, metaphor, irony, hyperbole, punning, litotes, teasing and putdowns are the humorous techniques that hip-hop artistes employ to invoke humour in their songs. Humour strategies adopted by Nigerian hip-hop artistes are comparing, contrasting and extending corresponding concepts, distorting collective knowledge of people, social events and situations and manipulating shared cultural representations. The study submits that beyond the rhythmic and lyrical perspectives to Nigerian hip-hop, the artistes deliberately evoke humour through a careful manipulation of language.

The study has implication for the growth and development of Nigerian English<sup>1</sup>. Although Nigerian English is a full-fledged variety of English which depicts the socio-cultural realities of Nigerians, efforts are still at a very minimal stage at developing the variety. There is a need to intensify efforts at standardising and codifying this dialect of English. The data engaged in this study shows that Nigerian hip-hop can be a great source of lexical and idiomatic innovations for Nigerian English.

The expression, *bling bling* as seen in excerpt 6, for instance, can be adopted as the lexical item for jewellery in Nigerian English, especially since it conforms to repetition, which is a word formation pattern in most Nigerian languages. The expression *bend down* too can become a term for describing the unstructured markets in Nigeria where clothes are bought by the roadsides. Beyond its humour potential, the analogy created around *playing penalty to throw in*, in excerpt 7, can be a good etymology for an idiomatic expression which may

---

<sup>1</sup> English is the official language in Nigeria, while Pidgin can be described as the language of the street. Pidgin is, therefore, the dominant linguistic code in Nigerian hip-hop.

capture the experience of a person who makes a very silly mistake. Investigations have shown that many words and idioms in other varieties of English too have equally ridiculous etymologies, such as the genesis of the word *malapropism* in Standard English, which is traced to the name of a character in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's 1775 play, *The Rivals*. In the play, Mrs Malaprop frequently uses the wrong words for the things she means, and this led to the creation of *malapropism* as a word. The scenarios created in Nigerian hip-hop and the words used in capturing them can therefore also lead to the creation of words and idioms if well investigated by lexicographers and other researchers within applied linguistics.

## References

- Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. New York: Mouton.
- Attardo, S. (2001). *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*. New York, NY: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Attardo, S. & Raskin, V. (1991). 'Script theory revis(it)ed: Joke similarity and joke representation model'. *Humor* 4, pp. 293-348.
- Deuter, M. et al (2015) *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 9th Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dynel, M. (2009). 'Beyond a joke: types of conversational humour'. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 3 (5), pp. 1284-1299.
- Dynel, M. (2012). 'Humour on the House: Interactional construction of metaphor in film discourse', in Chovanec, J. & Ermida, I (eds), *Language and Humour in the Media*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 83-106.
- Filani, I. (2016). Humour strategies and acts in Nigerian standup comedy. PhD. Thesis. Dept. of English. University of Ibadan. x+189pp.
- Githatu, M. and Chai, F. (2015). 'Discursive structure of humour in stand-up comedy Kenya: Discourse topics and stylistic devices in Churchill's performances'. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*. Vol.3, No. 6, pp. 409-415. URL: [10.11648/j.ijll.20150306.24](https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijll.20150306.24)
- Gunther, U. (2003). What is in a laugh? Humour, jokes and laughter in the conversational corpus of the BNC. Ph.D. dissertation in English (advisor: Christian Mair). Freiburg: English Department, Albert-Ludwigs University.
- Gibbs, R.W. (1999). *Intentions in the Experience of Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hurford, J., Heasley, B. and Smith, M.B. (2007). *Semantics: a Course Book*. Cambridge: CUP
- Huron D. (2004). Music-engendered laughter: an analysis of humour devices in PDQ Bach. *Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Music Reception and Cognition*. Evanston IL.
- Idowu-Faith, B. (2016). 'Speaking in the free marketplace of Ideas: the stylistics of humour in "blogversations"', in Taiwo, R., Odebunmi, A., & Adetunji, A. *Analyzing Language and Humor in Online Communication*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference (IGI Global). 65-84.
- Jodlowiec, M. (1991). 'What makes a joke tick'. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics* 3: 241-253.
- Morreall, J. (1987). *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Musyoka, M. (2014). 'A pragmatic approach in the analysis of verbal humour: a case study of Athiani FM radio presenter, Sammy Mulinge'. Master's thesis. Department of Linguistics and Languages. University of Nairobi. viii-188pp.

- Norrick, N. (1993). *Conversational Joking*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ojoawo, A. (2016). 'A discourse analysis of sexual themes in Nigerian hip-hop music.' *Ife Studies in English Language*, 12(2) pp 104-140.
- Oladunjoye, F. (2016). A linguistic analysis of Klint Da Drunk's "Alcoholic" Talk Show, humour in "blogversations", in Taiwo, R., Odebunmi, A., & Adetunji, A. *Analyzing Language and Humor in Online Communication*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference (IGI Global).pp 115-131.
- Ortega, M. (2013). 'An approach to verbal humour in interaction'. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Science* 95: 594-603.
- Partington, A. (2006). *The Linguistics of Laughter. a Corpus-Assisted Study of Laughter-Talk*. Oxon: Routledge Studies in Linguistics.
- Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel. Ritchie, G. (2004). *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*. London: Routledge.
- Ross, A. (2009). *The Language of Humour*. London: Routledge.
- Schwarz, J. (2010). Linguistic aspects of verbal humour in Stand-up Comedy. PhD dissertation. Saarland: University of Saarland. iv-451pp.
- Sperber, D. and Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Sperber, D. and Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition (2nd edition)*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Stevenson, A. (2010). *Oxford Dictionary of English* 3rd Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tabé C.A. (2016). 'Language and humour in Cameroon social media', humour in "blogversations", in Taiwo, R., Odebunmi, A., & Adetunji, A. *Analyzing Language and Humor in Online Communication*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference (IGI Global). 132-163.
- Yus, F. (2003). 'Humour and the search for relevance'. *Journal of Pragmatics* 35: 1295- 1331.
- Yus, F. (2004). 'Pragmatics of humorous strategies in El club de la comedia', in R. Marquez Reiter & M.E. Placencia. *Current Trends in the Pragmatics of Spanish*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 320-344.
- Yus, F. (2012). 'Strategies and effects in humorous discourse: The case of jokes', in Eizaga, B. *Studies in Linguistics and Cognition*. Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, 271-296.