

Linguistic Devices and Rhetorical Strategies in Nigerian Stand-up Comedy

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Abstract

This paper analyses how Nigerian stand-up comedians utilize and manipulate aspects of the syntax of Nigerian Pidgin and other sociolinguistic features of the various languages in which they ply their act. The data, derived from recorded videos of five Nigerian stand-up comics, is analysed using M.A.K Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar and Myers-Scotton Matrix language frame (MLF). The study reveals that the comedians adopted communicative strategies: language alternation and code switching, to foreground certain exigent socio-cultural themes in their jokes. They also utilize the interpersonal metafunction, parallel structures, and sentence fragments to engage the audience and highlight incongruities to elicit laughter. The study also examines the structural patterns of sentences used by the comedians and notes that Nigerian pidgin is not the only language employed by Nigerian stand-up comedians.

Keywords: linguistic devices, syntax, incongruity, language alternation, systemic functional grammar.

Introduction

Comedy is any literary work, a stage performance that creates a humorous effect and induces laughter from the reader or audience. Attardo (2011:113) defines humour as 'anything that is perceived as amusing or laughable.' Comedy can be either verbal or non-verbal and it is a genre of popular culture. Gates and Weinberger (2006) perceive humour as a creative endeavour when they state it is 'any informal speech or writing with the aim of amusing and arousing laughter in either hearer or listener'. Toppc (1993:235) defines stand-up comedy, a subtype of comedic performance, as "a live comedy show between a comedian and an audience." although it is a recent development in the country, stand-up comedy now occupies a prime position in Nigeria entertainment industry.

This paper discusses the salient themes and investigates the linguistic strategies employed by stand-up comedians to foreground their comedic art. Political, religious, and other socio-cultural occurrences principally drive Nigerian stand-up comedy. Comedians often rely on, and manipulate, shared communal social-semiotics that underlies these occurrences to create humour (Emama, 2020). A substantial number of Nigerian stand-up comedians ply their verbal art in Nigerian Pidgin (henceforth referred to as NP). They also engage in code switching between NP, English, as well as some indigenous languages, to foreground their comedic acts. They also engage in language alternation. Since NP is always used in the oral medium, the study also investigates how stand-up

comedians utilize the resources of orality to accentuate the incongruities and absurdities in their verbal art to elicit laughter.

The theoretical framework for the study is Halliday and Matthiessen's Systemic Functional Grammar (2014). This theory is used for structural analysis of the sentences used by comedians. It is used to analyze how the comedians deploy the textual, ideational and interpersonal metafunctions of language in their comedic acts. In addition, Myer Scotton's Matrix Language Frame (MLF) (2002a) is also applied to distinguish between matrix and embedded languages in the code switched structures in the jokes. Since NP is used mainly in the oral medium, the study identifies the features of orality employed by the comedians and they include repetition, parallel structures, anaphora, lexical cushioning, imagery, and metaphor.

Data for the study are collected from performances of Gordon's *Comedy Clinic 3, Nite of a Thousand laughs, AY Live, and Akpororo versus Akpororo*. Some of these performances are on CDs while others are downloaded from the internet. The comedies span three decades from 1997 to 2018

Background

Language is intrinsically linked to humour because comic acts are expressed through language. The study of humour is multidisciplinary. A plethora of research papers has been written on the subject matter of stand - up comedy in the fields of philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics (Dynel, 2009). In linguistics, a significant body of research has been done on humour from the perspective of the subfields of cognitive linguistics (Geert and Feyaerts, 2003), conversation analysis (Scievs, 1972), gender studies (Holmes, 2006), and in translations studies (Vandaele, 2010). Although NP is the dominant language of comedic discourse in Nigeria, it is not a monolithic entity in the country. It varies from a trade language or minimal pidgin to expanded pidgin and to pidgin-Creole. Bakker, (2009:134) states that: "Pidgincreoles constitute a class in between pidgins and creoles. A pidgin Creole is a restructured language which is the primary language of a speech community or which has become the native language for only some of its speakers"

In practice, it is often hard to draw a line between pidgin and pidgincreoles or between pidgins and creoles. Pidgin-creoles may have a few native speakers. Bakker adds that examples of English based pidgin-creoles include TokPisin (Papua New Guinea); Pisin (Solomon Islands); Sango (Central African Republican) and NP (Nigeria).

There are two main reasons why NP is the dominant language of stand-up comedy in Nigeria. First, the first sets of prominent stand-up comedians are from the Warri/Sapele/Abraka speech communities where NP is a pidgin-Creole. These comedians include Ali Baba (Atuyota Akpobome, Warri), I Go Dye (Francis Agoda, Warri), Gordons (Godwin Komone, Warri, Delta State University), Bovi (Bovi Ugbome, Delta State University), Akpororo (Jephthah Bowoto Warri), Basket Mouth (Bright Okolocha, Ajegunle, University of Benin) and Whalemouth (Usiaphe Kevin, Ughelli Delta State). Second, the language is a lingua franca with the largest number of speakers in Nigeria; what is more, the language is tribe neutral. (Caron, 2019:95; Emama, 2017: 3)

Historically, three eras have been identified in the evolution of Nigerian comedy. The first stage was in royal palaces where, according to Raheem (2018), court jesters and clowns in palaces entertained kings and members of the royal family. In addition, they add colour to social and traditional functions in the palaces. The second era was that of radio and television sitcoms after Nigeria attained her independence. This era includes television programmes like *The New Masquerade*, *Hotel De Jordan*, and *Samanja*. There was also Icheoku; a staple on NTA Enugu where humour was created through the court clerk's misinterpretation and mistranslation of the utterances of the British District commissioner arising from the clerk's poor understanding of the English language. The evolution of comedy in Nigeria was also influenced by Yoruba theatre (Adeleke 2006). Some prominent comic characters in Yoruba theatre include Jagua, Baba and Mama Sala.

The third era marks the defining moment of stand-up comedy in Nigeria. It began in the 1980s when Ali Baba started his shows on the campus of Bendel State University, Ekpoma. It was during this period that standup comedy carved out a niche for itself as a unique form of comedy. Subsequently, stand-up comedy continued to evolve with the emergence of Opa William's a Night of a thousand Laughs. The foregoing contributed in no small measure to the entrenchment of the genre in terms of popularity, economic viability, and, consequently, helped to groom hundreds of present-day practitioners.

Although humour has been pervasive in the Nigerian entertainment industry, not much academic work has been done on it. Some of such studies done on it include Filani (2016); a PhD thesis, Odebunmi and Ogunleye (2003), Adetunji (2013) Adegaju and Oyeboode (2015). In these studies,

however, little attention is paid to how comedians manipulate language to foreground the theme of their respective jokes. Themes colour the comedians' use of language; syntax and rhetorical devices are dexterously employed by the stand-up comedians to foreground their trade.

Political Humour

A constant feature of Nigerian standup comedy is that it is driven by topical political and other socio-cultural occurrences in Nigerian society. One major problem plaguing the nation is erratic power supply arising from political misrule. Gordons draws from this pool of shared social semiotics to create politics-centred jokes. These jokes are based on the theme of unstable power supply.

Extract I (Gordon's Obasanjo and Clinton)

(Comedy Clinic Ward 3)

Bill Clinton come Nigeria. He see sey light no dey anywhere. Bill Clinton come tell Obasanjo 'come over to America you can even charge your phone.' When Obasanjo reach America, he come see say some part nor get light. Obasanjo provok give Clinton come talk sey " Na you say light dey your country. 'Why is there no light in that area'? Na im Obasanjo aide tell am 'oga no shout o, that part na Nigeria embassy.'

Interpretation:

Bill Clinton visited Nigeria and discovered that everywhere was plunged into darkness. He invited Obasanjo: "Come over to America, you can even charge your phone.' When Obasanjo got to America, he discovered there was no light in a part of the county and he asked Clinton in anger. "Why is there no light in that area?" Obasanjo's aide told him. "Sir, don't speak loudly, that part is the Nigerian embassy.'

A theme that pervades the joke lore of Nigerian stand-up comedians is that of the incessant power outages in the country, which has resulted in the country being plunged into darkness for most nights of the year. The incessant outages are a symbol of incompetence and corruption by the nation's political leaders since Nigeria gained its independence in 1960. Gordons internationalizes the national plague in Obasanjo's visit to the United States of America where the Nigerian embassy is also perpetually plunged in darkness.

Frequent electricity outage is a shared knowledge by all Nigerians. Therefore, the joke involves both informing and appraisal acts. Gordons highlights how endemic the problem of power failure is, through voicing when Clinton, a participant-in-the-joke, tells Obasanjo "You can even charge your phone there."

Therefore, the political humour analyzed above is in consonance with Poppa's (2011) assertion that political issues in humour mirror the "inconsistencies and inadequacies of political decisions and acts and the incompetence, recklessness, and corruptions of politicians and political leaders.'

Religious Humour

One major theme in the discourse of Nigerian stand-up comedians is the prevalence of churches and the concomitant avalanche of pastors or 'men of God' in Nigeria. They are prevalent in the southern part of the country. Two religious jokes in this study focus on a church and a pastor or 'man of God.'

Extract 2. (Gordons Comedy Clinic 3)

Mountain of fire catch fire. Why e no go catch fire when dem dey say ' fire fire fire

Interpretation:

Mountain of fire was engulfed by fire. Why would it not be engulfed by fire when they incessantly say: fire, fire, fire.

In extract 1, Gordons did not give background information on Mountain of Fire church due to his reliance on Halliday's Interpersonal metafunction. The lack of background information is based on the comedian's belief that most of his audience has shared knowledge about the salient features characteristic of the prayer patterns of members of Mountain of Fire church. This is a clear demonstration of the comedian's awareness of shared and topical sociocultural events and the peculiarities of communal lexico-semantics that they engender. It also indicates a keen awareness, and exploitation of, shared meaning created by the same social semiotic environment. Here, Gordons exploits the meaning potentials in the interpersonal metafunction to create humour.

At the level of syntax, he uses the Hallidayan functional categories of theme and rheme. He states the theme of his joke in a single declarative sentence (1). This is the given, the aspect of the discourse that is underpinned by shared social semiotics.

1. (S) Mountain of fire (P) catch (C) fire.

In (2) and (3) he provides the rheme. In discourse, the rheme is the part that provides further clarification on the theme. He does this by asking a negative rhetorical question. A negative rhetorical question is a forceful positive sentence.

- (2) Why (S) e (P) no go catch (C) fire?

A negative rhetorical question is a forceful positive sentence. Semantically, it asserts that the church must be engulfed by fire. He then gives reason for the fire outbreak with a sentence that has a reiterated grammatical constituent, which is the complement of the adverbial clause of time.

- (3) (A) When (S) dem (P) dey sey (C) fire (C) fire (C) fire.

Incongruity is also expertly deployed by the comedian to create humour and elicit laughter. This is done in two ways. The first is narrower and lies in the clash between the worshippers' perceptions and expectations, on the one hand, and the unexpected, negative way in which these expectations were manifested. In this case, the joke elicits humour because of the incongruity between expectations from perpetual invocation to God for destructive fire (to kill the worshippers' enemies/witches,) and the eventual, unexpected outcome; the inferno engulfing the church building and some of its worshippers.

The second is used in a much broader sense and is underpinned on the incongruous clash between two expectations; the first is the anticipation, from the wider public, that this category of churches ought to exhibit a more forgiving, Christ-like mien towards the failings of the wicked on the one hand, and the unforgiving, vengeful desire to destroy the wicked as practised by certain religious groups, on the other.

Extract III: Woli Arole (My Anointing' Akpororo VS Akpororo 2018, YouTube.com)

For those that know me and don't know me, I am the official prophet to all the comedians. A ti to she o rire and ti o she o ri re. I pray for Akpororo. O ti blow. Ah!Ti o ba fi wole re rin.A fi ori re rerin.Anointing mi yato.Pastor Adeboye, God called him. Me I called God.Akpororo, mo so fun wa ya were. Can you test my God? She o le da Olorun mi wo?

Interpretation:

For those that know me and do not know me, I am the official prophet of all the comedians. For those that are successful and those that failed. I told Akpororo that he will run mad. My anointing is unique. While God called pastor Adeboye, I called God. Can you test my God?

In extract 3, Woli Arole foregrounds himself as a unique prophet when he states: "I am the official prophet for all the comedians".

He then engages in language alternation by speaking in Yoruba.

1. Ati to sheori re atiti o she ori re (Comedians that are successful and unsuccessful.)

The utterance in (1) proves that his acts of prophecy are not efficacious. So, his prayers have no positive effect on the comedians. This is one of the incongruities of the joke. He then engages in English –Yoruba code-switching.

2. (S) Anointing mi (P) yato.

(S) My anointing (P) is (C) different.

Bullock and Toribio (2012:1) define code-switching thus: "Of all the contact phenomena of interest to researchers and students of bilingualism, code-switching has arguably dominated the field. Broadly defined, code-switching is the ability on the part of bilinguals to alternate effortlessly between their two languages.' In the above extract, Yoruba is the matrix language in the code switched structure because the language determined the syntactic structure of the sentence since the noun phrase (NP) is head initial. The prophet then tells the audience why his anointing is unique.

3. (A) Pastor Adeboye, (S) God (P) call (C) am.

(S) Me, (S) I (P) called (C) God.

The antithesis of his anointing is revealed here to foreground him as a fake prophet. He engages in what is known as left dislocation to the left periphery as a subtype of topicalization. Yu (2014:2594) asserts that "Topicalization is a process by which a constituent is made into the topic of a sentence by being moved into a more prominent position at the front of the sentence.' Here, 'me' and 'I' are in apposition. The antithetical sentence structures are one of the incongruities of the joke and it elicits laughter. At the level of interpersonal meta-function, he presumes that his audience knows Pastor Adeboye and understands Yoruba. His unique anointing is antithetical to that of Pastor Adeboye when he adds.

4. I prayed for Akpororo o de blow

5. I prayed for Akpororo and he became wealthy.

This is also a case of code switching. The comedian is the main participant-in-the-joke.

Like Gordons before him, Arole exploits aspects of the semantics of communal social semiotics that have become entrenched by the activities of fraudulent individuals who establish churches purely for economic and mercenary gains. He even parodies some of the outrageous claims, as seen in (4) and (5) above, that these fake men of god use to swindle the gullible.

A theme that pervades most jokes by Nigerian stand-up comedians is on ladies with a focus on the
the
crave for money, fashion and the façade they put forward to cover up their inadequacies or ignorance.

Extract IV: 'Ladies Misconception' (Akpororo vs Akpororo 2018, You tube.com)

Sisters let me advise you, No bi every man wey get big bele naim get money. Na fibroid he get. No be every man wey get tattoo na im come from abroad. You say "he just came back from abroad". Shut up. Some of dem na koboko mark we SARS take flog dem.

Interpretation

Sisters let me advise you. It is not every man with a bulging belly that is rich. He is suffering from fibroid. It is not every man with tattoo that has just arrived from abroad. You sey "He just came from abroad". Shut up. For some of them, it is the mark of horse weep used in flogging them by SARS.

The comedian employs parallelism premised on antithesis to foreground the gullibility of ladies who ascribe certain physical features in men to their being wealthy.

The negative marker "No bi" in NP is used to introduce contrastive focus construction which highlights the antithesis between the first part which is negative and the second part which begins with presentational focus, 'Na.' Harvath (2007:1350) states that "Focus is taken to be the non-presupposed new information part of a sentence i.e. information not shared by the speaker and the hearer at the point in the discourse where the sentence is uttered,'

The visual imagery of the disease known as fibroid for men by the comedian is a violation of selectional restriction rule since fibroid is a disease associated with women. The underlying meaning in the contradiction is that the image of men with bulging stomach may indicate the

presence of illness. The incongruity of the second part is that a man with a tattoo might be a criminal. Essentially, the joke warns ladies not to live in a deluded state while assessing men's financial capability. The joke warns ladies from being gullible. The comedian also employs voicing as a rhetorical strategy when the woman, who is a participant-in-the-joke, speaks English to identify a man she presumed came from abroad.

The comedian employs the rhetorical strategy of antithesis wherein a perceived positive attribute is negative while the perceived negative one is positive as shown below in parallel structures.

No be everyman wey get big belle na im get money. (It is not every man with a bulging stomach that is rich) Na fibroid he get (It is fibroid that he has)

No bi everyman wey get tattoo naim come from abroad (It is not every man with a tattoo that came from abroad)

You sey "He just come from abroad"? Shut up some of them na koboko.

For some of them, it is the horsewhip mark wey SARS take flog dem

(Scars resulting from them being flogged with horsewhip by SARS operatives)

The interpersonal metafunction based on shared cultural knowledge by the audience will enable them to know that SARS is the acronym for a notorious police unit known as State Anti Robbery squad known as SARS.

Extract V: MC Shakara "Brazilian Hair" (AY Live, Asaba Invasion)

You say you want to buy Brazilian wig for 150k. How much be Golf 1? You carry car for head. After one week you loose am. If na me you go use am for four years. Every world cup. If Nigeria no qualify, you go carry am for eight years.

Interpretation: You want to buy Brazilian wig for N150k. How much is the Golf 1 car? You carry a car on your head. A week later, you pull it off. If I am your lover, you will use if for four years. Every world cup. If Nigeria does not qualify, you will use it for eight years. The dominant feature of the joke is the analogy between the wig the lady puts on her head and the price of a car.

The extract above is about a lady who bought a Brazilian wig for one hundred and fifty thousand Naira. The effectiveness of this joke, like the others already analysed, also depends on the

understanding of the meaning embedded in the interpersonal metafunction; it is communally – driven social semantics. In recent times, the crave for expensive wigs and other fashion accoutrements have become a constant leitmotif in the narrative of contemporary Nigeria. The underlying negative semantic ambience associated with the fixation to acquire such items is what the comedian exploits to create humour.

6. (A) How much (Q word) (P) is (C) Golf 1?
7. (S) You (P) carry (C) car (A) for head.
8. (A) After one week, (S) You (P) loose (C) am.

Apart from the social semiotic strategy, the comedian also employs syntactic topicalization. Topicalization is a syntactic mechanism employed to establish an expression as the topic of the sentence or clause. This is achieved by moving the topicalised expression from its canonical or traditional position, usually at the rightmost part of the sentence, to the beginning or front. The topicalization of the adverbial clause of time in (11) above, is synonymous with throwing away a car a week after it was bought. He also employs topicalization to make the adverbial clause of condition to function as an adjunct by moving it to the initial position of the clause. This enables the comedian to state what he would do to avoid the lady using the wig transiently for just one week thus:

9. If na me, (S) you (P) go use (C) am (A) for four years.
(If I am the one, you will use it for four years.)

The extraposition of the two adverbial clauses foregrounds how ladies waste money on fashion.

Extract V1 "Asaba Ladies" WhaleMouth (AY Live. Asaba Invasion)

Asaba girls. Delta ladies. They are the best. But the problem wey I get with dem be say dem too show know know. I dey airport on Sunday here. I go newspaper stand. I sey make I buy newspaper. I see headline " A warrior goes home". One girl come say: 'eh, this warrior is dead? Ojukwu is dead. 'do you know him? 'Yes na. He is a wrestler'. Na im the other one sey" you don't even know him, it is Ojukwu that act Igbodo part 1 & 2".

Interpretation: Asaba girls are good but they pretend to know everything. I saw a caption in a newspaper at the airport: "A Warrior goes down." I asked one girl who expressed shock at

Ojukwu's demise as if she knows him very well. She said he is a wrestler while another one said he is an actor.

The caption on Ojukwu's demise in the newspaper is a simple sentence.

(S) A warrior (P) goes (C) home.

The two ladies who claim to know Ojukwu display ignorance. The first one said:

(S) He (P) is(C) a wrestler.

The statement is riddled with errors of concord. Since Ojukwu is late, the sentence should be: 'He was a wrestler.'

The second lady says:

(S) You (P) don't even know (C) him.

(S) It (P) is (C) Ojukwu (C) that act Igbodo part I and II

The negation in the predicate above highlights the fact that she knows who Ojukwu is. The incongruity in the joke is that both ladies are not competent speakers of English and they do not know who Ojukwu was.

It was earlier observed that one primary reason for the entrenchment of NP as the favourite code of comedians is the fact that a majority of the earliest, and most popular, practitioners used the Warri/Sapele variety of the language. It is unarguable that this variety has become intricately interwoven with the evolution of comedy as a dominant part of the entertainment industry in Nigeria. This trend has not changed. Arising from the foregoing, it is therefore not surprising that of themes that frequently features in Nigerian stand-up comedy is the juxtaposition of the city of Warri or its natives with that of other cities and individuals. In these renditions, Warri and her indigenes are characterized as bold, uncouth brutes who engage in incredibly brazen acts. 1 Go Dye's "Abuja versus Warri Boy" and Akpororo's "Akpororo wedding" are based on this theme.

Extract VI "Abuja versus Warri Boy" (A GO DYE IN, in 'Night of a Thousand Laughs Vol 2. 1997. You tube.com)

Area Area!

When I come when I look Abuja babes una too fine. And the boys dem sabi take care of babes. Today is the night of a thousand laughs, I will take you there. E go ask the babe what do you care

for? Rice ice cream? Warri boy can never carry you go party come ask you what do you care for? If una two just sit down small time, E go just frown face give the babe. She say I want to take something. You wan chop? You no chop come for house. Na here you want chop your night food?

Interpretation

Area Area! (Greeting to Warri people). Abuja girls are very beautiful and the boys know how to take care of their girlfriends when they take them out. They will ask "what do you care for? Rice ice cream?' A Warri boy will never take you out and ask what do you care for? If the girl says 'I want take something the boy will retort "You want to eat? Didn't you eat before you left home? Is this where you want to take dinner?"

A Go Dye's joke begins with a commencement act which separates Abuja's young men and ladies from those Warri ones when they go for a social event like Nite of a thousand laughs! He states that Abuja ladies are beautiful.

The Abuja boy will ask the girl; "what do you care for? "The Abuja boy's behaviour is incongruous with that of Warri boy because he will never ask the girl he took to a party "what do you care for? That if the girl says "I want to take something he will retort brusquely,

"You wan chop"? "You nor chop come for house"? Na here you wan chop your night food?
(Do you want to eat? Didn't eat at home before coming? Is it here you want to take your dinner)

The first major difference between the Abuja boy's behaviour and the Warri boy's attitude is that it is the Abuja boy that asks the girl what she would like to take as shown with the Wh- question in English. The question in English highlights the young man as refined, urbane and elitist. On the other hand, even after the Warri girl made a request, the Warri boy's response is a series of intimidating Yes/No questions in NP which have the communicative functions of rhetorical questions that connote denial to the lady's request.

A Go Dye's rhetorical device of voicing above gives the joke verisimilitude. The focused construction below is negative and connotes a denial of the request.

10. Na here you wan chop your night food? (is it here you want to take your dinner?)

A peculiar feature of this joke is that A Go Dye uses the basilectal sociolect of NP and not the mesolectal or acrolectal sociolects. Below are some examples

‘You go chop’? Basilectal
 ‘You go eat’? Mesolectal
 You wan to eat? Acrolectal

‘Na here you wan chop your night food’? Basilectal
 ‘Na here you want chop dinner’? Mesolectal
 ‘Na here you want take dinner’? Acrolectal

The contrast between Abuja and Warri boy is highlighted in :

11. Dem sabi take care of babes (They know how to take care of ladies)
12. Warri boys can never take a lady out and ask her what she wants.

The negative marker "can never" for Warri boys distinguishes them from Abuja boys. So, while A Go Dye uses the basilectal sociolect for Warri boys in voicing to show that they are the typical street boys of Warri, in his utterances he uses an admixture of basilectal and mesolectal sociolects.

Extract VII: "Akpororo Wedding" (Akpororo vs Akpororo 2018 You tube.com)

I neva eva serious for my life. The only day wey I serious na the day wey I dey marry. As the pastor say: "Will you take her as your lovely wedded wife?" As I say 'Yes I do.' After that place, craze start. Since that day, I nor normal again. People wey normal nor dey make am now. Dem dey get money?

Interpretation

I have never been serious in my life. My only moment of seriousness was only during my wedding ceremony when the Pastor asked me if I will marry my wife. After I said "yes I do" I ran mad again. Normal people do not become rich. Do they get rich?

Extract VII, Akpororo informs the audience that he has never been normal except on his wedding day. This is a denigrating act that he foregrounds with a scene at his wedding ceremony with voicing thus: As the pastor say "Will you take her as your lovely wedded wife? As I say "Yes I do".

After that place craze start". The contradiction in the joke is foregrounded by Akpororo's assertion that madness is the source of his wealth thus:

13. "People wey normal nor dey make am now" (Normal people do not become rich)

He concludes with the rhetorical question.

14. Dem dey get money? (Do they become rich?)

In his state of madness, Akpororo speaks mainly in NP. Although there are no cases of code switching, there is language alternation since Akpororo and the pastor communicate in English when the Akpororo is normal.

Again, Akpororo utilizes shared social semiotics about society's impression of the rich. The expression

15. "People wey normal nor dey make am now"

projects the underlying meaning that the rich in Nigeria must be callous to be able to engage in the criminal activities necessary to make them rich.

Extract VIII: "I love to be Rich" (Gordons Comedy Clinic 1)

Everything about the rich is high. If they dwell in a society, the society is called 'high' society. Dem sit down for table, that table is called high table. When they become monarchs, they are addressed as royal highness. When they become judges, they are addressed as high chief judge. When they fall sick, it is called 'high' blood pressure. Everything about the rich is high.

I don't like to be poor because everything about the poor is low. When dem sick, dem get 'low' blood pressure or low sperm count. When dem pay dem salary na low income. Everything about the poor is low.

This extract does not require interpretation because it is almost wholly in English. The comedian is one of the participant-in-the-joke.

This excerpt highlights Nigerians crave for wealth. It begins with a double predicated clause.

16. (S) I (P) love (P) to be (C) rich.

Gordons uses parallel structures to highlight why he loves the rich. He is fascinated by the word 'high'. It is such an ephemeral reason. He uses parallel structures with the adverbial clause of condition thus:

If they dwell in society, the society is called 'high society'.

If dem sit for table, the table is called 'high table'.

He then begins another set of parallel structures with an adverbial clause of time

When they become monarchs, they are addressed as 'his royal highness'

When they become judges, they are addressed as 'high chief judge'.

The incongruity of the joke is that he also wants to imbibe the illness of the rich as seen in the expression below

17. When they become sick they have high blood pressure.

He uses negation (don't like) to highlight why he does not like the poor.

“When dem sick them get low blood pressure or low sperm count”.

“When dem pay dem salary, na low income”.

The use of parallel structures, which are foregrounded due to extraposition of adverbial clause of condition and time, highlight Gordons as a creative comedian. As social critics, contemporary Nigerian comedians are aware of the whole range of topical issues that define and negatively constrain the day-to-day existence of a vast majority of Nigerians. Arising from the foregoing, the yawning social/economic inequality between the poor and the rich, often inspire a significant number of their acts. A key feature exploited by the comedian to create humour is the use of lexical contrast to depict the gap between the rich and poor. This feature is exploited, not only as a discourse strategy but also semantically extended, to foreground the subject matter of wealth and poverty.

First is his obvious use of antonymous lexical contrast (high/low, rich/poor) to highlight the economic disparity between the rich and the poor. The most significant aspect of lexical contrast is that he compels them to carry new meanings by stretching their semanticity to express aspects of meaning they hitherto did not have. The use of positive lexical collocates (high table/ royal highness/ high society), and the somewhat negative ones (low sperm/ high blood pressure/ low blood pressure) are deployed by the comedian to create semantic elasticity. He displays lexical dexterity in this regard. He imbues them with meanings beyond the purview of the collocational range that define their use in the medical field. This is done to create humour and to elicit laughter.

Discussion

The themes of Nigerian stand-up comic acts mirror the political and socio-economic events in the country. Like African poets, they can aptly be described as committed stand-up comedians because they use humour to identify and attempt to correct the political, social, and economic ills plaguing the country. The major language used by Nigerian stand-up comedians is NP.

However, NP is not a monolithic entity as shown in the joke of A Go Dye and Gordons. Other languages found in the data collected are English and Yoruba. The NP used by the comedians is however not monolithic. While the comedians that grew up in the Warri/Sapele/Abraka speech Community like A Go Dye, Akpororo, and Gordon use an admixture of the basilectal, mesolectal, and acrolectal sociolects of NP, other comedians like Adviser, Woli Arole and Ajobota speak mainly the acrolectal sociolects. Woli Arole engages in language alternation; in fact, Yoruba is more predominant than NP in his jokes.

The comedians also engage in code switching. The most common one is NP - English code switching where NP is the matrix language and English is the embedded language. A grammatical feature of code - mixed structures is that the matrix language determines the grammatical structure of the sentence. The English words are there to conform to NP grammatical structure. In the case of Yoruba- English code switching where Yoruba is the matrix language, the English words conform to Yoruba syntactic structure. Woli Arole also engages in overt cushioning by providing an English interpretation of his Yoruba utterances so that non-Yoruba speakers in the audience can understand him.

All the comedians that engage in code switching are young adults. This conforms to Mysken (2000:113) assertion that "extremely frequent code-switching has been reported for age range 12-25; the age of adolescent and young adulthood. The use of sentence fragments and focus markers

in NP Na (it's) and No bi (it's not) and the emphatic marker o in NP highlight the fact that stand-up comedy is essentially an oral performance. Finally, the use of rhetorical devices by stand-up comedians foregrounds them as creative artists. Some of the rhetorical devices include parallelism, anaphora, and semantic extensions.

Conclusion

Nigerian stand-up comedians exploit aspects of the syntax of NP, English, and the indigenous languages to project the themes of their comic art as committed social critics. Since their art is mainly performed through the oral medium, they also exploit features of orature. These include the use of language fragments and the interpersonal metafunction. They also engage in code-switching and language alternation to foreground themselves as polyglots. It is hoped that this paper will stimulate further research in this fertile, but rarely explored, discipline of humour in Nigeria.

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