

Making light of the burden of economic hardship: A socio-pragmatic analysis of humour in Ghana's post-COVID economic crises

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Abstract

Ghana experienced worsening economic crises following the COVID-19 pandemic, but this was expected since the country was already facing economic difficulties prior to the pandemic. To deal with the increasing crises, the government sought support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in July 2022. This sparked ridicule since they had criticised the previous government for seeking an IMF bailout. This study, therefore, offers a socio-pragmatic analysis of the humour surrounding this political discourse on Ghana's post-COVID economic crises. By analysing linguistic and paralinguistic features from an under-studied context, i.e. humour research in Ghana and on crisis, we examine how netizens used humour to lighten the burden of the economic hardship and, more importantly, as a tool to critique political actors for their alleged roles in the country's socio-economic challenges. Data was gathered from Facebook and Twitter. With reference to the bifurcation of the play frame, which distinguishes between serious and non-serious framing, we argue that the political humour that characterised

Ghana's economic crisis goes beyond 'this is play' and highlights citizen's frustrations and loss of faith, not only in the current government, but also in political leaders in general. Thus, behind the veil of humour, Ghanaians reiterate the endemic nature of the problems, something which goes beyond what an IMF bailout can solve.

Keywords: Political humour; play/humorous frame; Ghana's economic crisis, multimodality, socio-pragmatics.

Introduction

As one of the developing countries in the world, Ghana has often had issues with its economy. For example, from independence till the pre-COVID period, Ghana had already gone for its 16th bailout from the IMF. This is attributed to alleged economic mismanagement and corruption scandals (Rahman, 2018; Yeboah-Assiamah et al., 2014). It is, therefore, not surprising that the country faces severe economic challenges in the post-COVID era (especially in 2022 and the first half of 2023). This is because the crippling effect of the pandemic on the world's economy can be felt globally. Indeed, economic giants like the US, the UK, China, among others, also reported economic challenges post-COVID. For instance, the IMF's April 2022 World Economic Outlook report indicated that inflation had reached its highest level in more than 40 years in some advanced economies, including the US and some European countries (IMF, 2022a). The October 2022 report also forecasted global growth to slow from 6.0% in 2021 to 3.2% in 2022 and 2.7% in 2023 (IMF, 2022b), but the January 2023 report forecasted 2.9% for 2023 and an expected rise to 3.1% in 2024 (IMF, 2023). Unfortunately, these are still considered the weakest growth profile since 2001. Ghana was also not left out of the impact of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war. With the constant increases in fuel prices and rising inflation which stood at 53.6% in January 2023 (see Figure 1), every sector of the economy was affected, with heightened labour unrest (we return to this in Section 2).

To deal with the increasing crises, the minister of information sent a communique on July 1, 2022, about the government's intention to start negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), making it the 2nd time the government was going for relief from the institution since they assumed office in 2016. This sparked ridicule on social media, as many people shared the previous Twitter comments and videos of the president and his vice (who were then opposition candidates) in which they criticised the then government for going for an IMF bailout. This study, therefore, offers a socio-pragmatic analysis of the humour surrounding this political discourse on Ghana's post-COVID economic crises. Through the analysis of linguistic and paralinguistic features, we examine how netizens used humour to lighten the burden of the economic hardship and, more importantly, as a tool to critique political actors for their alleged roles in the country's socio-economic challenges.

Given the gravity of crises such as this, the relevance of (linguistic) humour research may not be immediately apparent to many because humour is often perceived as a means of entertainment (Ofori et al., 2021a). Some humour studies have rightly pointed out how it is often regarded as trivial, and discussions that are embedded with humour are therefore considered as partaking in that triviality (O'ring, 2003; Schnurr, 2005). Obviously, such a serious national or global crisis does not lie within the purview of humour research. However, as numerous studies have demonstrated, humour plays a crucial role in fostering solidarity, building bonds, and serving as a coping mechanism (see Fessell, 2020; Arthur, 2021; Andrew, 2012). As we shall also be arguing later, the dual nature of humour "allows speakers to convey *serious meanings*, while appearing to be '*only joking*'" (Dyrel, 2011b: p.226, emphasis added). By delving into the relatively underexplored area of humour research in Ghana, particularly within the context of crisis, this paper contributes to advancing research, not only in humour studies, but also in political discourse studies. It underscores

how humour can effectively highlight key national issues while simultaneously entertaining its audience.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: As a way of contextualising the study, Section 2 provides an overview of Ghana's post-COVID economic crises. Further contextualization is provided in Section 3 by situating the study within the scholarship on humour. Section 4 discusses Play Frames, Incongruity and Multimodality as useful conceptual/analytical underpinnings for the study. The data and methods are discussed in Section 5, followed by analysis and findings in Section 6. Section 7 concludes the paper.

Ghana's post-COVID economic crises

As noted above, the challenges facing Ghana's economy are not peculiar to Ghana. At the time Ghana was preparing to seek IMF support, the global economy had been described as being on a "mending path" from the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (IMF, 2022a, p. xiii). Unfortunately, the global economic prospects continued to worsen since the IMF's forecast in January 2022, during which time it was projected that global recovery of economic prospects was expected to strengthen from the second quarter of 2022. However, the outlook deteriorated further because of the Russia-Ukraine war and the frequent lockdowns in China which affected the global supply chain of key manufacturing hubs. The report predicted that the conflict would significantly impede global economic recovery, slowing growth and worsening inflation (IMF, 2022a; IMF, 2022b). In Ghana, some of the effects were seen in the astronomical increases in food and fuel prices, and high inflation rates in 2022 and 2023. For instance, with a starting inflation of 13.9% in January 2022 to as high as 54.1% in December 2022, it has been reported that Ghana has had its highest inflation reading since May 2001, with a month-on-month inflation for July 2022 (when Ghana decided to go for IMF bailout) being 3.1%. Figure 1 gives additional details.



Figure 1: Ghana's inflation chart: February 2022-January 2023

Source: Tradingeconomics.com, based on data from Ghana Statistical Service¹

The IMF reports also predicted that these increases could significantly increase the risk of social unrest in emerging markets and developing economies (IMF, 2022a, 2022b) - examples of which could be seen in the Ghanaian situation. For instance, Ghana experienced a number of labour unrest in 2022, with its peak being 4th July, when 4 teacher Unions declared a strike action, demanding for Cost of Living Allowance (COLA). This triggered more unrest as other labour Unions threatened to join if the government did not provide COLA for public sector workers across the nation. For instance, the Public Services Workers Union stated its resolve to embark on an industrial action on July 19, 2022, over the government's failure to pay them COLA. Around that same period, there was food crisis in Senior High Schools, which led to threats to close down

¹ Tradingeconomics.com: <https://tradingeconomics.com/ghana/inflation-cpi> and Ghana Statistical Service: https://statsghana.gov.gh/gssmain/fileUpload/Price%20Indices/CPI%20July%202022_Rev.pdf; <http://www.statsghana.gov.gh/headlines.php?slidelocks=NDQ2MDEIMDA0My42Mjg1/headlines/6388177363> (Accessed (24 February, 2023).

some schools. This, according to CitiNews, was due to the government's indebtedness to the National Food Buffer Stock Company². All these culminated into demonstrations by various youth groups.

By November 2022, Ghana had reached its boiling point in terms of the depreciation of the cedi (\$1 was GH¢14.50), which led to high increases in fuel and food prices. The impact of the economic crisis was seen in what was described by the President of Ghana Psychological Association as 'mental health inflation'³. It was therefore not surprising that on October 14, 2022, someone committed suicide over high living standards by climbing a high-tension pole⁴. In another development, a fight ensued between a bus conductor (popularly known in Ghana as 'mate') and a passenger over a transport fare increment of GH¢2 (i.e., \$0.07) in October 2022, and this led to the passenger being beaten to death⁵.

These examples suggest that the economic problem was obviously not a play issue; but as noted earlier, we would like to reiterate that humour is more than just 'play' (see sections 3 and 4 for further discussion).

(Political) humour studies

There is a plethora of studies on (political) humour from various disciplines and with different foci. From the fields of psychology, medicine and others, several studies have reiterated the therapeutic nature of humour, stressing on how it has often been used as a coping strategy or mechanism for various conditions and stresses (see Andrew, 2012; Ruch and McGhee, 2014; Fessell, 2020; Sim, 2015; Hayashi et al., 2016). It has

²<https://citinewsroom.com/2022/07/shs-food-shortages-govt-owing-buffer-stock-gh%C2%A2340m-education-minister/> (Accessed 25 November 2022).

³<https://citinewsroom.com/2022/07/shs-food-shortages-govt-owing-buffer-stock-gh%C2%A2340m-education-minister/> (Accessed 25 November 2022).

⁴<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Details-emerge-on-man-electrocuted-after-climbing-Kasoa-high-tension-pole-1643183> (Accessed 1 December 2022).

⁵<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Lapaz-trotro-drivers-mates-allegedly-beat-man-to-death-over-GH-2-transport-fare-increment-1653089> (Accessed 1 December 2022).

proven effective in managing fear and anxieties associated with ageing and death (Andrew, 2012) and COVID-19 infections (Fessel 2020), elevating life satisfaction (Ruch and McGhee, 2014), decreasing behavioural problems and increasing resilience in children (Sim, 2015), as well as lowering prevalence of cardiovascular diseases (Hayashi et al., 2016). Willem's (2011) work on Zimbabwe's politics suggests that postcolonial humour does not just target the powerful, but it can also mock the powerlessness of the oppressed within what appears to be an immutable system. This serves as a coping mechanism for individuals dealing with the daily challenges posed by social and economic crises. For Arthur (2021), her work on how Ghanaians coped with the COVID-19 pandemic reiterates how humour was seen as a capsule for tension reduction and as a means of disseminating critical information during those critical moments.

From linguistics, Chukumah (2021) also investigates how Nigerian humourists used language, signs, and performative actions to communicate the fears and challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on Goffman's (1974) concept of frames and Bateson's (1972) idea of mood-sign, the study examines the linguistic strategies employed by humourists to convey societal responses to the crisis. Through the analysis of keying events, transformations within play frames, and the use of linguistic indicators, the article delves into how humour serves as a tool for coping with disaster, reflecting social dynamics, and providing insights into human experience during global crises.

Scholars from political discourse studies have also demonstrated how language and/or visuals are often used in a humorous way to frame political actors in particular ways (see Tsakona and Popa [2011] for some of the studies; see also Tella, 2018; Billig, 2005). Through a multimodal analysis of internet memes, Tella's (2018) study on the 2015 Nigerian elections shows how supporters use humorous internet memes to portray

their favoured candidates positively but portray their opponents negatively. As he rightly points out, such representations are aimed at depreciating the electoral values of the opponents while increasing the chances of their own candidates.

Through the lenses of discourse analysis, pragmatics and conversation analysis, Săftoiu and Popescu's (2014) study on humour as a branding strategy in a Romanian parliamentary discourse shows how, under the guise of humour, a member of parliament (Corneliu Vadim Tudor) used ethnic humour to shift from the serious to a play mode. They note how he succeeded in depicting himself as a populist politician, voicing his nationalistic attitudes and rebelling against the establishment. This corroborates Archakis and Tsakona's description of humour in parliamentary discourse as a way of expressing one's aggression and criticism in a mitigated manner to avoid breaking parliamentary rules of conduct. Indeed, political humour as a form of criticism allows politicians and commentators to abide by politeness norms and avoid rude behaviour (Tsakona and Popa, 2011). Wilson (2008) also reports on the rhetorical use of humour as a tool of political action in selected stand-up comedy. His findings indicate that humour functions as a tool to enact critique, serving as a lens for the audience to provide judgement between the stated, and making inference on issues such as diversion, corruption, hijacking, etc.

These studies contextualize the current study by throwing light on various aspects. But important for us also is how this study highlights the affordances of the concept of 'play frames'. It does so by focusing on a serious economic crisis that has even claimed human lives (and thus 'not play'), and how the play frame is, nevertheless, useful for analysis.

Conceptual/analytical underpinnings

This study is mainly underpinned by the concept of play/humorous frames as inspired by Bateson's (1953) seminal work on frames. According to Bateson (1953, 1972), actions

can be framed in terms of play vs. non-play (i.e. non-serious vs. serious). What is considered as “this is play” is described as “these actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote” (Bateson, 1972, p. 69), hence, truth is suspended when conversation participants enter a play frame. This is similar, in part, to Goffman’s (1974) concept of “keying” (p.44), which includes “make-believe” as one of the keys (p.48). As Chukumah (2021) rightly points out, one of the variants of make-believe is playfulness. To distinguish between what is play and what is not and thus avoid miscommunication, conversational participants frame their talk or text as humorous by using signals like giggles, laughter, code switching, memes, smiling emojis, LOL, lmao, etc. These suggest “this is play” and thus not to be taken serious (Coates 2007: 51; see also Dynel 2011a, 2011b).

Bateson (1972) also raises an important point about the bifurcation of the play frame, i.e., a recognition of a more complex form of play which is premised on not just “this is play” but also the question of “is this play?” (p.70). This complexity arises from the argument that what is sometimes expected to be considered as play may actually be the real thing but shrouded in a play frame. For Săftoiu and Popescu (2014), the importance of the humorous frame lies in what it reveals about the serious frame. These align with Dynel’s argument that “while it may be argued that the playful frame is conducive to the suspension of truthfulness and to deviation from norms obtaining for serious talk”, it can also be postulated that “humorous duality allows speakers to convey *serious meanings*, while appearing to be ‘only *joking*’” (Dynel 2011b, p. 226, emphasis added). In other words, what is considered play may not be play after all (Diabah, 2020; Ofori et al., 2021b). For instance, Diabah (2020) notes how male students at a public university in Ghana resort to catcalling and singing profane songs but consider them as only joking, having fun or simply destressing with no harm intended. However, a critical analysis of her data reveals how

their intention is to create a niche for themselves and foreground their perceived superiority on campus.

It is from this angle of the play frame's bifurcation, i.e., non-serious vs. serious, that we would like to situate our study. We shall be arguing that the bifurcation of the play frame and the affordances of humour allow participants to have fun in a time of crisis (non-serious frame) while at the same time articulating their opinions and frustrations on this issue of national importance (serious frame).

Although the study is mainly underpinned by the concept of play frames, we find the notions of implications/implicatures and suppositions (van Dijk, 1995), incongruity (Attardo, 1994; Foot and McCreddie, 2006) and multimodality (Kress, 2011; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001) useful in our analysis since they throw light on various aspects of the study, while also working together with the play frame to reinforce the message being communicated. According to van Dijk (1995), implications/implicatures refer to when "meanings are not always explicitly expressed, but somehow semantically implied, or entailed by other, explicit expressions and their meanings" (268); and presuppositions are "the set of tacit cultural knowledge that makes discourse meaningful" (273). Both implications and presuppositions enable speakers or writers to make claims without directly stating them and, presuppositions, in particular, accept certain beliefs as given even if they may not be justified (van Dijk, 1995). These are useful in contextualising some of the comments in this study because the humour can sometimes be deduced based on the shared socio-cultural knowledge between the writer/speaker and reader/listener.

Incongruity emphasises "the absurd, the unexpected, and the inappropriate i.e., the out-of-context situations as the source of humour" (Foot and McCreddie, 2006, p.295). According to Attardo (2008), incongruity theorists generally agree that humour arises from mismatch between expectations and what is actually realised. It often occurs when a speaker violates the

expectation of his audience to create laughter (Morreall, 2012; Dai et al., 2017; Dynel, 2011a). As we shall be discussing later, the violation of the expectations, which may sometimes be implied, underlies the humour generation in this paper

Lamidi (2017) describes a mode as a channel (e.g., written, oral, graphic, gestural) through which a message is presented. Multimodality, which is rooted in social semiotics theory (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996), is therefore defined as “the use and combination of different semiotic elements, including design, layout, images, photographs, film, colour and scent” (Zebrowska, 2014, p. 9); and they are subsequently integrated to communicate a particular message (Kress, 2011; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). But it is important to note, also, that all modes can be treated as distinct and equal in their capacity to contribute meaning to a complex semiotic entity. In its application to this study, we shall show how the written texts, images (emojis, memes, photographs, cartoons) and postures all work together to communicate or reinforce a particular message. This is also important because in generating humour in multimodal texts like ours, the incongruous is often found not just in a single mode but a combination of them - for instance, when there is a disconnect between a written text and an accompanying image (see Section 6.2.3).

Data and methods

Data for this study were sourced from Facebook and Twitter between 1st July and 30th November 2022. To generate the relevant dataset, phrases and sentences like “Ghana’s economic crises; Ghana-IMF bailout; Ghana goes to IMF etc.” were used in our search. Through purposive sampling, we took screenshots of humorous posts on the economic crisis by award-winning journalists and the comments/reactions of netizens on these posts (where humorous posts here refer to incongruous texts, including emojis, memes, pictures, cartoons, etc). We considered posts from popular journalists like Bridget

Otoo, Manasseh Azure Awuni, Nana Aba Anamoah and Tilapia Da Cartoonist (an award-winning cartoonist). For copyright reasons, we focused on Facebook and Twitter handles that were set to ‘public’. We have, however, taken an extra step to anonymise the comments on the various posts, by covering the names and images of the participants who commented.

In all, 170 texts that address our research aims were selected for analysis, but 35 were cited here as examples since the rest reinforce already identified themes. We categorised the data into various themes through (a) pre-coding: by going through both written texts and images several times to get a general sense and noting down initial ideas (b) generating initial codes: by giving specific labels – e.g. the economy as war – to the ideas in the data that address our research aim; (c) collating the data relevant to each code or label; and (d) clustering units of meanings to form themes. For instance, the theme of ‘humour as a political critique’ is a cluster of meanings that focus on humour as a tool to critique political actors (see similar approaches by Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). The captions for the sub-themes in 6.2 were however taken from participants’ text.

Analysis and findings

Findings from this study were categorised under 2 major themes: (1) humour as a tool for lightening a serious problem and (2) humour as a political critique, with the following sub-themes: the economic war; economy on steroids and ‘we have the men’.

Making light of a serious problem

One of the emerging themes is making the burden of the socio-economic crisis in Ghana ‘light’ by creating humour out of it. By drawing on the notions of incongruity and play frames, the data for the study show how netizens downgrade the seriousness of the increasing economic crisis in Ghana. For instance, in a post on Ghana’s IMF bailout that went viral, a renowned journalist notes

the humour in the original post (Figure 2), thereby downgrading the seriousness of the situation. It is worth noting how she evokes a play frame by combining various modes (the text ‘funny’ and a smiley emoji with tears of joy) to communicate her message.



Figure 2: Ghanaians are funny

The above post is considered incongruous (see section 4). Based on Ghana’s economic crisis sketched out in Section 2, i.e. a serious problem that requires urgent attention, the expectation is that the citizens would rally behind the government in their quest for relief from the IMF. However, this expectation was cut short by rejecting the needed ‘solution’ (Figure 3 describes it as “*necessary support*”) and advising the IMF not to give the government any money, hence humorous. The abruptness and straightforwardness of the message also adds to its humorous nature. But drawing on the bifurcation of the play frame, we argue that beyond the veil of humour, the author sends across a very subtle but important message, i.e., loss of faith in the leaders to use the money for its intended purpose. This argument is based on an assumption of a shared socio-cultural understanding by the post. This shared understanding is reiterated in some of

the comments posted on Figure (2). We reproduce the comments here as Figures (3) and (4).



Figure 3: Ordinary Ghanaians vs. wicked leaders



Figure 4: A plea to IMF

In discussing the above posts, we draw on the discourse semantics properties of presupposition and implication as discussed by van Dijk (1995, see section 4; see also Grice, 1975). Implied here is the shared knowledge that ‘ordinary Ghanaians’ (Figure 3) is always contrasted with ‘corrupt politicians’ in Ghanaian political discourse. The rejection of an IMF bailout (which will be paid later through the taxes of the ordinary Ghanaian) is therefore justified because the politician is allegedly corrupt and “wicked” (Figure 3). Figure (4) even raises the bar higher and extends it to West Africa by advising the IMF to “cross that bridge when you come to it”. The use of an adverb of frequency ‘again’ in “we don’t need IMF funds again” presupposes a misuse of previous funds. Indeed, the issue of corruption in Africa is not new (see Driessen, 2019, for two jokes that highlight how corruption is deeply entrenched in Africa).

Still sharing in the humour of Figure (2), some netizens allude to humour as a tool for making light of the burden associated with Ghana’s increasing economic crisis. Figure (5) illustrates this (see also the last comment of Figure 10).



Figure 5: How can you be SAD in Ghana?

Through the use of laughing emojis, a meme and a rhetorical question “how can you be SAD in Ghana ...?”, the authors of the above comments evoke a play frame in a way that suggests lightening the burden or pain (represented here as ‘sadness’) Ghana’s economic crisis brings. First, they identify that there is a problem which is expected to bring sadness, but they cannot be sad because Ghanaians are making humour out of it. For instance, the rhetorical question in the first comment and “ur [your] own sadness” in the last comment work together to suggest that although they should be sad ordinarily, they cannot because of the humour being created. Thus, humour may be seen here as a coping strategy. As shown in the literature on humour, especially from the fields of psychology and medicine, using humour as a coping strategy or mechanism is one of the key functions of humour (see section 3 for some reviews). By creating humour out of a situation, people downgrade its seriousness, which can therefore help in coping.

Drawing on the bifurcation of the play frame (serious vs. non-serious; see Dynel, 2011b; Coates, 2007), however, we argue that the use of the upper case in “SAD” (what Bouvier [2020, p. 191] refers to as “shouting”) *also* reiterates the seriousness of the problem. This is evidence of how even though people may be having fun (non-serious), they are equally highlighting or ‘shouting’ that there is a ‘serious’ problem that needs attention.

Humour as a political critique

The second theme, which is the major focus of the participants, is when humour is used as a tool to critique political actors. Participants rely on various literary devices to paint a vivid picture of the economic crisis and how the leaders have handled it. Emerging sub-themes include conceptualising the economic crisis in terms of war, drawing an analogy between the economic problem and a medical problem, and trolling the government for lack of competence.

The economic war

In one of the posts from a renowned Ghanaian cartoonist⁶ (Figure 6), the economic crisis is described using a war metaphor. With reference to our multimodal discourse analytic approach (Kress, 2011; Jones, 2013), it is worth mentioning that the cartoonist conceptualises the crisis in terms of war, not only through verbal texts like “economic war”, but also through images that depict a war zone. Such images include grenades, sandbags for fortification, and the finance minister and the president (commander-in-chief) attired in military outfit.



Figure 6: Economy at war

As a metaphor of war, certain indicators of the economy like food, fuel, and transport fares are mapped onto grenades whilst the minister of finance and the president are mapped onto soldiers at war (see Lakoff and Johnson, 2003; Gibbs, 2006) with fire extinguishers as their ammunitions. This is incongruous to a war situation and, thus, humorous.

⁶ “Tilapia Da Cartoonist” is an award-winning Ghanaian cartoonist affiliated with TV3 Network. He features his cartoons on social, economic and political issues on his Facebook page, TV3 and their online portal 3news.com. <https://www.facebook.com/TilapiaCartoons?mibextid=ZbWKwL>.

To get a better sense of the political critique, we reproduce some comments on the above post as Figures (7) and (8).



Figure 7: Allusion to Russia-Ukraine war

The second comment in 7 draws attention to the incongruous nature of the depiction of Ghana’s crisis. Although the author (including the cartoonist) makes fun of the situation, he is also subtly criticising the government for their inadequacies in dealing with the problem. The subsequent comments reiterate this point in more stronger terms by perceiving the ironic use of fire extinguishers not only as a “recipe for disaster”, but also as a sign of hopelessness and damnation. This is reinforced by the rhetorical question in the last comment (“where is hope”?) and its supposed response (“there is no hope”). These emphasise loss of faith in the government’s ability to deal with the situation. Another point which also ties in with the loss of faith is in the first comment, where the author makes allusion to the Russia-Ukraine war. This allusion is first seen in the ironic question

posed (in Figure 6) by a somewhat malnourished person who seems to represent ‘the ordinary Ghanaian’ - the one at the mercy of the economic hardships (note the discussion on Figures 3 and 4). This allusion is also considered humorous because the government is often criticised for playing the blame game by blaming their perceived inadequacies and failures on the Russia-Ukraine war⁷. The question in Figure (6) then ridicules the government since there had been reports at the time that Ukraine (with the support of some economic giants) was making progress in resisting the Russian intrusion⁸. But even more interesting is how through the bifurcation of the play frame, the first comment in 7 (which can be interpreted as a response to the question in 6) does not only share in the humour (note the use of smiley emojis for the suspension of truth/seriousness, Dynel 2011b), but it also reiterates loss of faith and irresponsibility on the side of government. Through the use of discourse semantics properties of implicatures (see van Dijk, 1995, Grice, 1975), it can be argued that since the fight is between Russia and Ukraine (not Ghana), irrespective of who wins or loses, there will always be someone to blame for Ghana’s problems.

Similarly, the last comment of Figure (8) uses allusion to reinforce the issues of loss of faith and lack of responsibility. The author alludes to a popular phrase by the president in his COVID-19 state of the nation broadcasts - he always ended with “the battle is the Lord’s”. By arguing that the battle is *still* the Lord’s, the author implies that this is a government who is not ready to fight (not to talk of winning); after all, it is the Lord’s, *not his*.

⁷<https://www.myjoyonline.com/blaming-economic-crisis-on-covid-19-and-russian-ukraine-war-is-propaganda-prof-gyampo/> (Accessed 7 November, 2022)

^b<https://www.myjoyonline.com/no-data-shows-ghana-is-worst-hit-by-russia-ukraine-situation-bright-simons/> (Accessed 7 November, 2022).

⁸<https://theconversation.com/unexpected-ukrainian-resistance-continues-to-thwart-russias-initial-plans-for-quick-decisive-victories-189507> (Accessed 20 April 2023)



Figure 8: The battle is the Lord's

While sharing in the humour, the author of the first comment in Figure (8) *also* points out criticisms often labelled against African governments (Mbandiwa 2020, Atti and Gulis 2016). They are often accused of using reactive (firefighting) rather than proactive measures in dealing with problems. The comment reiterates the government's lack of foresight. That is, they fail to think ahead of time or anticipate problems and proffer the necessary solutions. They instead wait for the problems to come and then tackle them with measures that do not measure up to the magnitude of the problem (i.e., fire extinguishers against grenades).

Economy on steroids

The second sub-theme uses an analogy from medicine, where the economic problem is viewed as a medical problem/condition. Figure (9) illustrates this further.



Figure 9: An economy with a medical problem

From a multimodal discourse analytic perspective, it is important to note how both the written text and the images work together to communicate a particular message. First, the image has the picture of a smiling minister of finance (note the hyperbole - an amplified pointed cheek) and the governor of the central bank acting as the ‘doctor’ injecting steroids (2 billion dollars). It is worth commenting that the leg with the injected money/steroids actually looks healthier, thereby confirming the governor’s claim that “that will reduce the inflammation of the dollar”.

The connection between the economic problem and the medical problem is seen in the fact that steroids are anti-inflammatory drugs, so the cartoonist draws on this to highlight one of the discourses around the economic crisis, i.e., the government’s claim that an IMF loan will boost the economy. Injecting 2 billion dollars into the economy, akin to using steroids to reduce inflammation, will reduce inflation and stimulate economic growth (note the use of the wordplay – inflammation vs inflation).

This cartoon can be interpreted as a ridicule to the government; thus, sarcasm or irony was intended. Indeed, there have been reports from various economic analysts that an IMF loan is not the solution to Ghana’s problems, and that austerity measures from the fund will rather worsen the situation⁹. It was based on such arguments that the announcement to go for an IMF bailout triggered more labour unrest in July 2022.

The perceived sarcasm/irony is reiterated in many of the comments that followed the post, some of which are reproduced here as Figures (10) and (11).

^{9a}. <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/New-IMF-deal-will-not-fix-Ghana-s-problem-Prof-Hanke-reiterates-1642253> (Accessed 17 February, 2023)

^b. <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/articles/c72ekvke8rvo> (Accessed 5 March 2023).



Figure 10: Comparison between economy and elephantiasis

The ridicule in Figure (10) is more pronounced when we consider how the author uses a rhetorical question to highlight a medical situation that appears impossible. He questions how hyper-reactivity of triggering factors can be tamed, implying the economic crisis is beyond repairs.

The author of the second comment also uses a medical jargon in a way that points accusing fingers at the ruling party. Worth noting here is the fact that the totem of the ruling party is an elephant. The author therefore uses wordplay to suggest that the elephant (conceptualised here as a sickness, **elephantiasis**) is the cause of the economic suffering. This could perhaps be linked to the comment in Figure (11) which alludes to corruption.

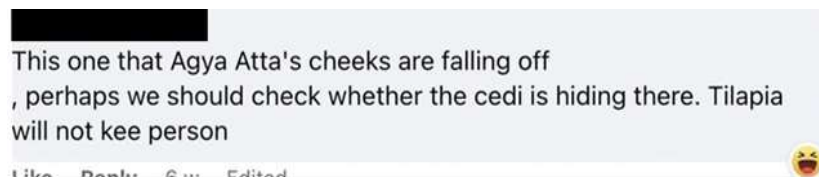


Figure 11: Allusion to corruption

The author here references the amplified cheek of the minister for finance (see Figure 9), which, in itself, is humorous. From the Ghanaian socio-cultural context, fat cheeks are symbolic of good-living. The author's comment, therefore, implies corruption – that the minister, and by extension the government, has misappropriated Ghana's money by fattening

themselves. As noted above, such corruption accusations are not new (see Rahman, 2018; Yeboah-Assiamah et al., 2014).

'We have the men'

On 4th September 2015, the President of Ghana (then in opposition), tweeted that they have the men and women to properly manage the affairs of the nation¹⁰. The message was retweeted on 4th October 2016¹¹, and it became a trending campaign messages towards the 2016 general elections. After they won the election, however, it became a criticism each time Ghanaians felt the government had failed to live up to expectation, an example of which is the increasing economic crisis discussed above. Unlike in previous times, this one took a humorous turn, as shown in a post by a very popular journalist in Figure (12).



Figure 12: When the 'men' are 'boys'

From a multimodal discourse analytic perspective, the

¹⁰<https://twitter.com/NAkufoAddo/status/639744021376684032?lang=en> (Accessed 20 November 2022).

¹¹<https://twitter.com/NAkufoAddo/status/783348790656954368> (Accessed 20 November).

text “we have the men” and the photo of the boy (including the facial expression and posture) work together to communicate a particular message in a humorous way. The post is incongruous for the following reasons: (a) one would have expected the picture of a man, not a boy to accompany the message “we have the men”, (b) the facial expression and the posture both exude power, control, authority and strength (key characteristics of manliness), but there seems to be no sign that the government has power and is indeed in control of the economic hardship (hence the need for IMF bailout). The facial expression and the posture of the boy are symbolic of what we say in Akan as *ye akeseɛm* ‘to fake power, authority and importance’, which reinforces the humour in the post. Following Hempelmann and Samson’s (2008) point about cartoon humour, this iconic picture (culled from a picture of the paramount chief of Akyem Abuakwa during a festival¹² in Kyebi) has a dual nature: the pictorial representation and the symbolic, and both must be understood in order to “get the joke” (p.609).

Ironically juxtaposing this image with the government’s own campaign message is intended to ridicule them. The significance of doing a multimodal analysis here, as indicated earlier, is in the fact that the incongruous is not found in one mode but a combination of modes.

In response to the above post, a number of people made comments which reinforce the ridicule and, more importantly, raise various questions about the government’s ability to fulfil its own campaign promises. Examples of these are reproduced as Figures (13), (14), (15), (16), and (17).

¹² It is typical of Akan paramount chiefs to attend functions with children sitting in front of them in their palanquins and dancing (like the child in this picture) to suggest that power and authority belong to the paramount chief.



Figure 13: Allusion to unmanliness

Like the original post in Figure (12), the combination of the written text “the men’ now” and an image of men running for cover in Figure (13) highlight the incongruity, hence humorous.

The use of the quotation marks in this example can be interpreted in two ways. First, it could be normal quotation marks, which suggests that “the men” is a direct quote from the campaign message. Secondly, and more important for understanding the humour here, it could be a scare quote which seeks to question whether indeed they have the men. This interpretation is only valid from a multimodal analytic perspective. In other words, when we juxtapose “the men” with the image of men running for cover, we get the sense of the humour, that these are not ‘real men’. This is important when viewed from the sociocultural context of the Ghanaian people, as to what constitutes manliness. For instance, in their study of masculinities in Akan proverbs, Diabah and Amfo (2018) argue that the Akan proverb *ɔbarima ne deɛ ɔako akɔ n’anim, ɛnye deɛ ɔako adwane* [A man is he who fights to the end, and not he who fights and runs away] suggests that “what makes a man is his

ability to fight (whatever storms there may be) to the end, even if it means dying in the process” (p.186). Obviously, running for cover in the face of trouble, as the above image suggests, is a sign of unmanliness. Situated within the context of the economic crisis, this humour suggests the government’s ineffectiveness in dealing with the situation. The reinforcement of the ridicule can also be seen through the use of a ridiculing meme, laughing emojis and a text which translates (from broken English) as ‘it has really pained you’.

The perceived incompetence is again emphasized in the following comments in Figure (14), which centres on lack of relevant ideas and solutions.



Figure 14: Allusion to lack of foresight

In the first comment from Figure (14) is the picture of the Minister of Agriculture, who looked dumbfounded and lost for words when he visited a group of farmers who had some challenges. Juxtaposing this picture with the text “we actually have the men” and a smiling emoji is incongruous. It is a ridicule which questions whether they indeed have men with the relevant solutions to the country’s problems. The perceived answer is ‘no’, as suggested by the second comment which indicates that the so-called men are “watching from the sidelines”. This statement is an indication of lack of vision/foresight and, thus, incompetence.

Again, from a multimodal discourse analytic perspective, the postures, and the facial expressions of the men in both images are significant for our analysis. In the first case, all three men having their hands on their waist and the facial expressions connote helplessness and frustration. These are not signs of manliness since, according to the Akan, “*Ɔbarima na ɔnom aduro a eye nwonon* [It is a (real) man who takes bitter medicine; a courageous man faces up to any situation]” (Appiah et al., 2007, p. 22). Similarly, all the men have their hands in their pockets in the second image. This posture and the accompanying statement are indications of standing aloof, unconcerned or not willing to do anything. All these suggest incompetence and a failure on the government’s part to fulfil their own promises.

Perhaps, it is in line with these that the picture of the Minister of Finance in Figure (15) will make sense and hence humorous, i.e., a failure to fulfil promises brings shame and embarrassment.



Figure 15: Trolling government officials

Juxtaposing the text “we have the men” with this picture suggests as though he is bowing his head and covering his face from shame for not delivering on their promises, thus questioning their competence.

In another example (Figure 16), the author alludes to a comment believed to have been made by a District Chief Executive (DCE). The DCE said he was ‘dead’ when a journalist asked about his whereabouts, since his assembly members complained about his persistent absence during meetings¹³.

¹³<https://www.facebook.com/joe.tetteh.31/videos/801044780809393/?mibextid=Nif5oz> (Accessed 9 December 2022).



Figure 16: The men are dead

Using laughing emojis and the text “the men are dead after all”, the author reinforces the humour while at the same time questioning the competence of the government since dead men cannot work and achieve anything.

Like in the previous examples, the authors in Figure (17) use various literary devices to not just create humour but also reinforce the message of the perceived incompetence.



Figure 17: The baby elephants

Through a combination of laughing emojis and a paradoxical statement “the men have grown into babies”, the first author reinforces the ‘we have the men’ humour. The absurdity of men growing into babies is what reinforces the humour. But beyond the humour, the author, more importantly, reiterates the recurring argument about the government’s incompetence, since babies are incapable of taking care of themselves, let alone a whole nation. This is further strengthened by the second comment, which combines text and image in an integrated way to foreground the message of the perceived incompetence. It is also worth noting that the elephant is the emblem of the ruling party and the baby elephant here is perceived as the young Minister of Communication who always needs (and sometimes struggles) to do damage control for the party. The imagery of a baby elephant tumbling on its head and struggling to carry its load signifies the government’s perceived incompetence. All these work together to question their ability to fulfil their own campaign promise.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper set out to do a socio-pragmatic analysis of the political humour on Ghana’s economic crisis after the COVID pandemic. Through the analysis of linguistic and paralinguistic features, the study shows how netizens use humour to make light of the burden of Ghana’s economic hardship. While this does not provide practical solutions to the problem per se, it does offer momentary relief to participants, a key ingredient to keeping their sanity in the face of such harsh economic conditions. Indeed, many studies, especially in clinical psychology and psychotherapy, have noted the therapeutic nature of humour, hence its use as a coping strategy for various life issues (Andrew, 2012; Arthur, 2021; Sim, 2015; Ruch and McGhee, 2014).

Drawing on the concept of play frames (see Dynell, 2011b), and corroborating other studies (e.g., Coates, 2007, Dynell, 2011b), this study has also reiterated how humour,

despite its so-called triviality, provides avenues for reiterating serious issues of national importance – and a critical analysis of linguistic and paralinguistic forms is key to connecting the dots between the non-serious and serious. To borrow the words of Săftoiu and Popescu, “the significance of the joking frame lies in what it tells us about the ‘serious’ frame” (2014, p. 314). Tsakona and Popa (2011, p.1) also argue that although politics is serious and humour funny, the boundaries can be blurred because “politics can be represented in a humorous manner and humour can have a serious intent”. For instance, by providing a distinct lens on political matters, humour not only prompts the audience to scrutinize the efficacy of political choices and norms but also functions as a tool for challenging political oppression and addressing social injustices. Similarly, Kuhlmann (2012) opines that while political jokes, cartoons and other satirical forms typically aim to elicit laughter, they concurrently seek to evoke what Billig (2005) terms ‘unlaughter’, thereby drawing attention to the gravity of everyday struggles such as social and economic hardships, or the weight of political oppression.

With reference to the bifurcation of the play frame, therefore, we conclude by arguing that the political humour that has characterised Ghana’s economic crisis goes beyond the veil of humour and, more importantly, highlights citizen’s frustrations and loss of faith, not just in the current government, but in political leaders in general. Acheampong (2022) states emphatically that the economic crises tell a story of government’s recurrent failure to effectively fortify the economy against internal and external shocks. He further argues that Ghana’s persistent lack of fiscal discipline, coupled with its recent reliance on foreign financing, renders the nation susceptible to fluctuations in investor confidence and subsequent selloffs in portfolio investments. Thus, behind and beyond the veil of humour, Ghanaians reiterate the endemic nature of the country’s problems: corruption, greed, non-performance, vain talk or political promises, lack of foresight, etc. These are issues which

go beyond what an IMF bailout can solve. They are problems that need to be tackled at the roots through the leaders' own introspection and by implementing structural reforms and policies to root out corruption and other vices.

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