

**MEANING NEGOTIATION AND STRATEGIES IN NIGERIAN STAND-
UP COMEDY PERFORMANCES**

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Abstract

Nigerian Stand-up comedians, in spite of their “license” to deviate from social conventions about language for humorous effects, are not oblivious of the need to circumspectly negotiate potential “face threatening acts” to the audience. Existing Literature on stand-up comedy shows that it is mainly characterised with humour; and in creating the context of humour, stand-up comedians employ different linguistic strategies with the sole goal of entertaining their audience. The deployment of linguistic resources to mollify “attack” on the participants has been neglected. Therefore, using Levinson’s (1979) Notion of Activity Type as a theoretical framework, this study investigates how Nigerian stand-up comedians manipulate language resources to navigate their potentially face threatening and damaging acts. Fifteen purposively selected stand-up comedy performances in Nigeria were selected from seven comedy shows, owing to their rich meaning negotiation contents. Five levels of meaning negotiation associated with six meaning negotiation strategies were identified in the data: negotiating professional attack, negotiating censure, negotiating degradation, negotiating calumnies, and negotiating invectives. As meaning negotiation strategies, the study reveals that Nigerian stand-up comedians deployed hedges, deresponsibilisation, emotionalisation and orientation to celestial voice, social intimacy; and referent power which were applied either preemptively or reformatorily to absolve the performer of any vilification regardless of the “attack” within the joke context.

Key words: Meaning Negotiation, Stand-up Comedy, Humour, Notion of Activity Types

Introduction

The history of stand-up comedy is dated back to 1800s but it did not make any impact until the 1970s. The development of Nigerian stand-up comedy can be traced to jesting traditions through television shows then to professional stand-up practice in early 1990s. Stand-up comedy in Nigeria is often traced to Allelujah Atuyota Akpobome, professionally known as Ali Baba who has performed in many popular comedies shows as well as cooperate and non-cooperate events across the country. He has mentored several popular and upcoming comedians.

Stand-up comedy is a humorous performance, in which a comedian uses a series of funny short jokes or vulgar vibes to stimulate laughter from a live audience. It is important to say that the intent of the comedian is not the audience's critical perception of the message, but the eliciting of laughter or smile over the jokes or vulgar jibes. The performer in a stand-up comedy is regarded as a comic, stand-up comedian or simply a stand-up (Ngige, 2020). Schwarz (2010:7) sees stand-up comedians as individuals "who plant themselves in front of their listeners with their microphones and start telling a succession of funny stories, one-liner or short jokes, and anecdotes, which are often called bits, in order to make their audience laugh". Filani (2015:42) asserts that stand-up comedy is "a genre of popular culture which thrives on the production of humorous utterances". The crux of any comic performance is humour (Sturges, 2010). Apparently, the major goal of stand-up comedy is to create humour to entertain the live audience. After all, humor is "anything that is or may be perceived as funny, amusing and laughable" Attardo (2011:135).

Stand-up comedians utilize para-verbal cues such as gestures, eyeing and hissing in their displaying of jokes or humours but depend largely on the utilization of language, meaning, context and situation. Many issues in the society are relayed and corrected through the performances of these comedians who have the linguistic acumen to manipulate language, the meaning, the context and the situation that warrant the performances.

Meaning Negotiation

The meanings in stand-up comedy in most cases differ greatly from the actual meanings which such expressions by the comedians convey. In the performances of stand-up comedy, meanings are negotiated between the comedians and the audience.

Meaning negotiation in stand-up comedy is a communication strategy where the speakers and the listeners agree on a common ground in the use of language in order to bring out the intended meanings of the conversation outside the real meaning, as stand-up comedy involves two-way-traffic: the comedians and the audience. This phenomenon of meaning negotiation helps to avoid any form of social rancor and bias. When meanings are negotiated between a comedian and his audience, it helps the comedians not to step on the toes of the audience and the audience will not see the comedians as being bias or overstepping the mark, especially when the performances are based on politics, religion, government and certain society.

Nigerian Stand-up Comedy

The Nigerian stand-up comedy genre has risen to be a veritable medium of live artistic entertainment. Stand-up comedy within the Nigerian context of entertainment industry has become a serious business that has grown from a “state of nothing to an enviable state of something” (Ayakoroma 2013:1).

To some people, stand-up comedy shows are just for the purpose of entertainment; nonetheless, a critical perspective shows that it is an outlet to view the society from a different angle. Mainly, humour and its performance mirror the sociocultural context of its users. In Nigeria, humour has been described as being central to the pragmatics of everyday survival (Obadare 2016). Therefore, it has been observed that stand-up comedy is one of the most popular forms of entertainment in Nigeria today. It is one of the few platforms Nigerian stand-up comedians use to speak humorously but frankly about the social vices in the different sectors of the Nigerian society.

In the last two decades, the comedy industry in Nigeria has gained a lot of scholarly attention and has been studied and explored from different perspectives by seasoned scholars in Nigeria. The concept of humour, ideologies, psychological and socio-cultural contexts, satiric and performative devices, activity and discourse types, pragmatic and linguistics strategies etc. in Nigeria stand-up comedy have been investigated to a large extent (Adekunle 2014; Adetunji 2013; Filani 2013; 2015). Adetunji (2013) highlights the major pragmatic strategies used by Nigerian stand-up comedians to create “interactional context of humor” for their audience while Adekunle (2014) explores the satiric and performative devices employed by Nigerian stand-up comedians to serve as a source of “socioeconomic consciousness and a medium of social criticism”. Filani (2013, 2015) in his studies of stand-up comedy analyses the ideologies in selected Nigerian stand-up comedy shows. He

conceptualises different discourse types that can be found in Nigerian stand-up acts by hypothesizing two contexts in stand-up joking stories: “context of the joke and context in the joke”. He argues that “the context of the joke interacts with the context in the joke and vice versa”. He also examines the use of mimicry in stand-up comedy. In his study, he recognizes verbal and non-verbal mimicry that comedians use in their performances since they have a background knowledge and shared experiences of the audience (Filani 2013, 2015 & 2016). A similar work to this present study is Nwakwo (2014). He discusses the manifestations and meanings of "time" and "place/space" in standup comedy performances. Using Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's "joking relationships" as one of the basic frameworks, he identifies the understood pact between the performer and the audience which permits the former to insult the latter at will without consequences. Radcliffe-Brown (1940) asserts that joking relationship is “a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence”. The assertion above simply implies that, as soon as one buys a ticket and attends a stand-up comedy show, one indirectly freely gives up the right to be offended. So, one can either react through banter or simply ignore when directly insulted by a stand-up performer.

This present work, however, differs from the study above, as it claims that in spite of the comedians’ license to insult through jokes and notwithstanding the joking relationship between the comedians and the audience, comedians are not oblivious of the need to circumspectly mitigate potential face threatening/damaging acts. The aim of this study, therefore, is to investigate how Nigerian stand-up comedians employ different meaning negotiation strategies to manipulate and renegotiate meanings of offensive concepts in a witty way to induce laughter rather than stir up antagonism. Meaning negotiation can be used as a communication strategy to make meaning comprehensible for participants in an ongoing activity. In stand-up comedy, performers and members of the audience may employ meaning negotiation strategies to achieve an unwritten mutual agreement in order to avoid misconceptions. Nwankwo (2019) states that stand-up comedians have devised “specific means through which they circumvent the stringency of eliciting mirth through insult. Hence, their jokes and those of others who have learned their trade well, often elicits hilarity rather than offence”.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on Levinson's (1979; 1992) Notion of Activity Type (AT). Based on Wittgenstein's concept of "Language game", Activity Type centres on the view that there are constraints in language usage which regulate the functions and roles that language is meant to perform, and these constraints are dependent on the nature of the activity going on. Wittgenstein's submission that meaning is reduced to usage or that the meaning of utterances is rooted inside human activities is what Levinson seeks to empirically validate with his notion of activity types (Ogunsiji, 2018). Odebunmi (2016) explicates more on Wittgenstein's submission by maintaining that "utterances meaning is derived from status and role of interactants, topics and other local interactional circumstances which all change as activity changes, thereby making the interactional context to influence meaning and function of what is said".

Thomas (1995) identifies six tools that aid the description of AT. However, focus will be placed on those we find relevant to this study. They are: the goal of the participants; allowable contributions; turn-taking and topic control; and the manipulation of pragmatic parameters such as power, social distance, right and obligation.

The goal of the participants: In addition to the overall communicative goal of an interaction which is called 'ends' in Hymes' (1964) term, each participant enters a communicative event with their own goals; and once conversation commences, the task of directly or indirectly projecting the goal begins. For instance, the overall communicative goal in stand-up comedy is to create amusement and relaxation. The comedian may, however, seek to present themselves as not being disdainful. The joke recipients may also want to elicit from the comedians a recognition of their 'face' (Goffman, 1981).

Allowable contributions: Here, we talk about the constraints grounding interactions and how speech event participants work around such constraints.

Turn-taking and topic control: These are principles of conversational analysis, a theory that emerged from the analysis of social interaction. These principles are important in AT, as the extent to which participants exploit turn-taking norms and negotiate topic control in interaction reveals the activity underway.

Manipulation of pragmatics parameters: Pragmatic parameters such as power, social distance, rights and obligations, size of compositions and formality of the situation impact on the complexion of communicative events. The degree of indirectness and deployment of mitigating devices are higher when interacting with people of higher power or authority. The type of power which can be brought to bear in communicative encounters include reward power (the type of power an individual wields based on their positive influence on others); coercive power (an individual's ability to influence the lives of others negatively); legitimate power (the type of power someone has to prescribe or request certain things by virtue of their identity, role, status); referent power (the type of power an individual has based on the admiration they have earned from others); and expert power (power accrued by one's knowledge or expertise).

Another pragmatic parameter relevant to this study is social distance, which is understood as differing degrees of familiarity between interlocutors (Brown and Levinson, 1987). This theory is found relevant to this study because of its all-encompassing nature. AT takes a number of apparatuses from the pragmatic toolkit that allow for a holistic analysis of data.

Methodology

For data, video recordings of 15 comedy performances were purposively taken from seven comedy shows of 2020 for their rich pragmatic contents. The video recording was transcribed and attention was given to the linguistic, paralinguistic and non-linguistic cues, as they all impact on meaning making and interpretation. The data were subjected to a top-down pragmatic analysis using Levinson's (1979; 1992) Notion of Activity Type as an anchor.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Anchored on Levinson's (1979) Notion of Activity Types, this study holds that meanings are not always predetermined notions that interactants carry on to each communicative event; rather, meanings are co-constituted, such that whatever meanings participants in interactions co-construct are upheld for the interaction underway, or at least until meaning is put up for renegotiation. For short, meanings are made by participants in interactions. The foregoing accounts for why what would count as an invective in some other type of activity is taken as an item of humour in Nigerian stand-up comedy shows. It is a common knowledge that comedians possess license to deviate from social conventions for humorous effects. This enables them to tease, "insult" or "banter" other people without risking being charged for libel. In spite of this, they have to carefully and together with joke

recipient construct meanings such that there is a common ground between them. Five levels of meaning negotiation were identified in Nigerian stand-up comedy performances: negotiating invectives; negotiating professional attack; negotiating censure; negotiating calumnies and negotiating degrading. As meaning negotiation strategies, Nigerian stand-up comedians deployed deresponsibilisation, hedges, emotionalisation, orientation to celestial voice, social intimacy and referent power which were applied either preemptively or reformatory. Each of the levels of meaning negotiation together with the meaning negotiation strategies will be discussed in turn.

Negotiating Professional Attack

Here, we refer to professional attack as rebuke or subtle criticism of a profession or vocation on the basis of real or perceived shortfalls; individually or publicly held negative perceptions; etc. Professional attack in comedy shows is tactically negotiated through deresponsibilisation and hedge which are preventive and reformatory in nature.

Excerpt 1

Comedian 1: I swear in the name of God, everything I will say here to make you laugh, they are all lies... Last week, I dey come from Lagos, Sapele here, na in police stop me. I no wan talk about police before, but as people wey suppose listen dey. I no dey fear them too o, cos my paper complete. Ose, na joke o, before you go say I no get respect.

Why I fear Warri police na when they stop who dey trek. "Park there" the guy says, "I no drive". They say "Park your leg". And una dey understand them. I shock. Who dey trek dey park. And all these police, they no like rubbish answer o and **una dey give rubbish question**. He asks the boy "Who are you?" Na in the boy reply am. I'm a human being". He asks the boy one question "where are you going at this time?" the boy reply am "I want to see my friend". Im ask am "who is this your friend?" He says "he stays with his friend". Na in police say "what do you have in that bag?" the boy says "nothing". "Open am", e open am, true true nothing dey. Police say you are under arrest. The guy says "for what?" He says "for you to carry empty bag, you have the intention to steal something".

Excerpt 1 speaks to the negotiation of professional attack. The profession that is attacked by Comedian 1 in this excerpt is the Nigeria Police Force and this is seen first in Line 4 where Comedian 1 indirectly lampoons the Nigeria Police's general attitude of seizing the opportunity of motorists' incomplete vehicle documents to

exploit them and demand kickbacks. This, the comedian does by saying “I no dey fear them (the police) too o, because my paper complete.” The professional attack in the foregoing quotation is exposed by shared experiential knowledge, as it is a common knowledge among Nigerians, especially those who have had unpleasant experiences with the Nigerian police over incomplete vehicle documents, that the Nigeria Police are notorious for extorting kickbacks from defaulting motorists.

Another instance of professional attack is in Line 6 where Comedian 1 says “why I fear Warri Police na where they stop who dey trek: ‘park there’” ((The reason I am wary of Warri police is because of the way they stop pedestrian: ‘park there’)). This is clearly an attack on the sensibility of the Nigeria Police. The attack on the police sensibility is further shown in Line 6 where the comedian says “They will say ‘park your leg.’ Who dey trek dey park?” ((They will say ‘park your leg’. Does a pedestrian park?)).

Situated in the humour context as we have here, and owing to the participants’ shared knowledge of the communicative goal of such performance, the attacks are less likely to cause offence. However, Comedian 1 deploys a number of strategies to preemptively and reformatorily mitigate such attack. The first instance can be seen in lines 1 and 2 where the comedian says “I swear in the name of God, everything I will say here to make you laugh, they are all lies.” The reiteration of the communicative goal ((‘to make you laugh)) is the comedian’s attempt to deresponsibilise and to show that he is not committed to the truthfulness of the statement; that they should not be taken as true or serious. Also in line 5, the comedian uses a hedge, “na joke o’ ((It’s a joke)) to express his detachment from the jokes.

What is of pragmatic interest here is Comedian 1’s orientation to the pragmatic parameter of social distance in mitigating the attacks in the jokes. Activity Type states that the type of activity going on, as well as the social distance between the participants in conversations, determines the overall degree of respectfulness and indirectness the participants will deploy. Comedian 1’s use of multiple mitigating strategies in Excerpt 1 is explained by the social distance that exists between the comedian and the police officers present at the comedy show.

Negotiating Censure

Censure refers to an expression of severe disapproval of someone or something. Censure could also be a judgment involving condemnation of someone, something or someone’s acts, behaviours, beliefs, etc. In the context of this study, censure refers to the disapproval or condemnation of the behaviours, attitudes, beliefs or

acts of members of the audience. Censure is negotiated through emotionalisation strategy and orientation to celestial voice.

Excerpt 2

Comedian 2: Now, if you notice, na for only Nigeria, na in dem dey invite comedians, una go siddon dey look us like say, we no be am. I mean, It's not fair. If na wizkid dey come now, woman for this audience wey fit born Wizkid go shout "Wizzy! Oh! Wow!" Una wicked. And una hailing don dey enter their head.

In Excerpt 2, the act of giving recognition to musicians more than comedians is censured ((“If na Wizkid dey come now, woman for audience wey fit born Wizkid go shout ‘Wizzy!’ ‘Oh!’ ‘Wow!’)). In negotiating censure here, the comedian deploys emotionalisation strategy by saying “now, if you notice, na for only Nigeria, na im dem dey invite comedians, una go siddon dey look us like say we no be am. I mean, it's not fair”, a strategy that allows him to redirect the audience's attention from the censure to the treatment of non-recognition.

Excerpt 3

Comedian 3: I just saw it now, a revelation. The people in front of me, yeah, I see you. You're educated but you don't know when to use your specs, eh ehn ((audience laughs while comedian keeps chanting “emi o, emi orun))

First, it will be appropriate to situate this Excerpt in its context in order to make explicit the strategy deployed to negotiate censure. The comedian in the Excerpt is a female comedian who wears a white garment (which, in Nigeria, usually symbolizes a person with prophetic gift). She puts up the act of a prophetess who has transcended into the celestial realm and who speaks the ‘voice of the supernatural’. It is in this state that she stands in front of two female participants on spectacles and makes the statement “the people in front of me, yeah, I see you; you ‘re educated but you don't know when to use your specs”. Invariably, what is censured is the participant's use of dark spectacles at night. In order to negotiate this, the comedian orients to celestial voice and presents the censure as if it were something coming from the supernatural.

Negotiating Degrading

To degrade someone is to lower them in rank, dignity, character or quality by passing a demeaning comment at them that may ordinarily evoke anger. However, in the context of comedy, both the comedian and the “joke's” recipient understand

that the sole purpose is for amusement, and that the debasing comments are just banTERS.

Excerpt 4

Comedian 4: This thing na so I talk am for Abuja o. I dey crack joke like this, I dey yab, I no know say AIG siddon. No be Area Commander o ((the comedian weaves down the AIG sitting at the front row)). I talk to AIG. AIG! To show say you be upcoming. AIG. How far? Oga, na joke o.

The comedian in Excerpt 4 jokingly degrades the Area Commander of one of the Area Commands in Warri, a Nigerian Eastern town by belittling his office as an Area Commander. With a wave of hand that shows contempt, the comedian says to the Area Commander “No be Area Commander o ... I talk to AIG (Assistant Inspector General of Police). The comedian accentuates the degrading by saying “to show say you be upcoming”. The comedian, however, reformatorily uses the hedge “Oga, na joke o” in order to eliminate the potential face damaging acts in his statement.

Negotiating Calumnies

Calumnies refer to the use of false and defamatory statements about someone. It is not uncommon for humorists to resort to the use of slander for comic effect. Calumnies in jokes, otherwise called defamatory humour, can either be self-deprecatory (where the comedian directs the defamatory statements at him/herself) or other-deprecatory (where the defamatory statement is targeted at a member of the audience). While calumnies may result to serious legal issues outside of the context of humour, they are often taken in “good faith” within the context of humour, as both the humorist and the audience have a shared knowledge of the goal of communication, namely to provoke laughter and provide amusement. Notwithstanding the common ground of joviality shared by both participants, humorists carefully navigate such character attacks by leveraging on their intimacy with the targets of calumnies.

Excerpt 5

Comedian 5: No be everybody go make am o. One of my friends at 42, he never makes am, na in he tells him friend say how he goes dey 42, when they say a fool at 40. (music) DJ, wait. Na in the... DJ, take time o, Kingsley, take time. No be your fault. He does Yahoo nine years, e no big, see am. Na in family gather: instead of

this data wey you dey waste, why you no use am download music? (music) Spray me the money. The money wey we get no go finish o.

Defamatory humour is exemplified with Comedian 5's statement in lines 3-6. While asking the Disc Jockey (DJ) to halt the music, comedian 5 says "DJ wait ... DJ, take time o, Kingsley, take time. No be your fault. He does Yahoo nine years, e no pick, see an. Na in family gather: instead of this data wey you dey waste, why you no use am download music? (DJ wait, take your time, Kingsley. I don't blame. You perpetrated cybercrime for nine years without recording any success until your family advised you to begin to download music instead of wasting data on cybercrime.)

The foregoing is a false statement; otherwise, the comedian would not have said it, especially in the presence of law enforcement agents who were also participants at the comedy show. The comedian leverages on his familiarity and intimacy with the DJ. This can be deduced from the way the comedian switches to the DJ's name, Kingsley. No recourse is made to mitigating strategies because of the relationship that exists between the comedians and the DJ.

Negotiating Invectives

Some humours take the shape of insulting and belittling a person, usually a member of the audience that is physically present at the comedy show. These are called humorous invectives. Humorous invectives are abusive, reproachful, venomous or rude expressions used on an individual to evoke amusement. Humorous invectives, provided there is the common ground of joviality, are greeted by laughter, even from the target of the invectives. Comedians make use of their referent power over the audience in negotiating invectives.

Excerpt 6

Comedian 6: This life too sweet o. Even to die now, e dey expensive. To die! Normal die before, wey you go just buy rope six yards, you just kill yourself. Everything don cost. One guy go buy poison nah. He says "how much be poison?" Dem say "8, 500" and im carry 6,200.... He con dey beg the man, the pharmacist make im sell the drug for am, say later im go balance.

Someone from the audience: What God cannot do does not exist.

Comedian 6: E dey exist. Idiot! God dey lie!

In Excerpt 6, “idiot” which is an outright invective is directed at a member of the audience. Comedian 6 orients to his referent power. Referent power is the power one has over another because they are admired or greatly liked. Thomas (1995) states that referent power is often enjoyed by celebrities in the society as they can influence their fans in some way.

Conclusion

The study investigated Nigerian comedians’ use of language to mollify “attacks” on joke recipients. Five levels of meaning negotiation associated with six meaning negotiation strategies were identified. Negotiation of professional attack was associated with deresponsibilization and hedges; Negotiation of censure was achieved through emotionalisation and orientation to celestial voice; Negotiation of degrading was done using hedges; Calumnies were negotiated by comedians’ deployment of social intimacy; and invectives were negotiated using referent power. The pragmatic parameter of social distance impacted on the strategies adopted to negotiate potential damaging acts such that multiple mitigating devices deployed preemptively and reformatively were used with participants with whom comedians have less or no intimacy. However, such strategies were minimally employed or altogether jettisoned when potential degrading acts were directed to the participants with whom the humorists have intimacy.

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