

NIGERIAN PIDGIN USE AND STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY STAND-UP COMEDIANS TO ACHIEVE INTERACTION IN COMEDY

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Abstract

This study is aimed at looking at the use of Nigerian Pidgin and strategies employed by stand-up comedians to achieve interaction in comedy. Stand-up comedy, an oral dramatic performance commonly enacted by a solo-performance before a live audience, are known to use Nigerian Pidgin creatively to create comedy and entertain their audience. Their patterns and choices of language can sometimes have hidden meanings that show Nigerian ways of life and their tone of utterance can sometimes be inappropriate. This study therefore examines the strategies deployed by stand-up comedians with the view to determining the role of Nigerian Pidgin as a veritable source in comedy production and consumption. Hence, the purpose of this study is to analyze the strategies employed by Nigerian stand-up comedians to achieve interaction in comedy, their patterns and choices of language as they are used to create comedy to entertain their audience. Qualitative research method of analysis was used in analyzing the data collected. To achieve this, the researcher studied two selected comedians – I go dye and Ali Baba, downloaded from YouTube, videos and the internet. This work reveals how the Nigerian Pidgin reflects social relationship between the comedian and his audience. It also reveals that pidgin is an informal language, and so its informality creates an equal social relationship in an informal setting which aids laughter.

Keywords: Nigerian Pidgin, Stand-up Comedies, Solo-Performer

Introduction

Language can be described as a dynamic, social and interactive phenomenon - whether between the speaker and the listener, or writer and the reader (Crystal 19). Ayoola opine that the “creative nature of language lies in its ability to be used to exaggerate, to create imaginary stories, to tell a lie, to hypothesize and to express the imagination of their heart” (15). Thus, language serves different functions. Language is used with an intention. It could be to inform, to request information or an action, and to command. However, the goal of language use in every situation is not just to communicate but also to make a significant impression on the listener or reader. The linguistic situation in Nigeria is

locally plural but globally dual. By this, it is meant that there are hundreds of Nigerian languages acquired unconsciously and spoken as First Language (L1) in different geographical boundaries, while only two languages – the English language and Nigerian Pidgin (hence forth NP) - are widely spoken, across all boundaries in Nigeria. Similarly, Dan Sperber claims that the English language and NP share a co-existence in Nigeria: “English constitutes the H variety, as it is the language of most public/formal communication, while NP is the L variety, being associated primarily with private/informal domains of language use’ (24). However, while English has to be acquired consciously, essentially in the classroom, NP can be acquired either unconsciously especially in South-Eastern Nigeria or consciously, though informally on the streets, through interactions with the speakers. Although NP is usually considered an English-derived contact language, its identity could be traced to Nigerian languages spoken along the coast before the coming of European traders (in the fifteenth century): linguistic contacts between Nigerians and European traders; European incursion into Nigeria via missionary work (Fara das Nicolas 9). Without doubt, NP is derived from many European languages, (especially English, Portuguese, and Dutch) and various Nigeria languages. Because Nigeria was eventually colonized by the British, the English Language became NP’s main lexifier, prompting the alternative nomenclature, Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE).

Stand-up comedy is a comic style in which a comedian performs in front of a live audience, usually speaking directly to them. The performer is commonly known as a comic, stand-up comedy or simply a stand-up. The comedians recite a grouping of humorous stories, jokes and one-liners typically called a monologue. Some stand-up comedians use props, music or magic tricks to enhance their acts. Stand-up comedy is often performed in corporate events, comedy clubs, bars and pubs, night clubs and theatres. Outside live performance, stand-up comedies are often distributed commercially via television, DVD, CD, YouTube and the internet.

Strategies Employed By Stand-Up Comedians to Achieve Interaction in Comedy

There are three major strategies comedians appropriated in comedy production - Linguistic coding/pausing, stereotyping, call-and-response.

Linguistic Coding/Pausing

Comedians have been discovered to use code-switching, essentially to relate to their audiences (Furukawa 28). In the Nigerian Stand-up Comedy context, four broad languages are spoken: Standard English, Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, and local languages (L1s). While local languages are minimally used considering the multilingual nature of both comedians and audience, English and Nigerian Pidgin are preponderantly deployed. Also,

timing is tactically used by comedians to activate their audiences' responses. The reason for this linguistic choice lies in part with the lack of a lingua franca in a multilingual country, and also in part with the low level of formal education of the citizens. Realizing then that performing in English (Standard British English) would reduce the size of their audience and constrain the comprehension of their messages, Nigerian comedians mostly perform in Nigerian Pidgin. And since most of the comedians are university-degree holders, their choice of Nigerian Pidgin would be (seen additionally as) an index of a desire to speak with, rather than to, their audiences. Sometimes though, NP is switched or mixed with SBE. In the following short scripts from Ali Baba's introductory statements, in one of his performances, the comedian uses NP, first independently, and then as code-alternated (code-switched and code-mixed) with Standard British English.

I bought one drum like that and hung it in my living room. One day like dat wey meat no dey to cook for the dogs, I look the pomo ... look am, look am, look am ... well, dey enjoyed it sha.

One day like that, when there was no meat ... I took a good look at the hide ... looked at it, looked at it, looked at it ... well, they enjoyed it anyway.

Pausing is also significantly linguistically coded in Nigerian Stand-up Comedy. Pausing, an aspect of "timing" a complex of "a composite built up of hesitations, false starts, repetitions and formulaicity in the build-up along with a more rapid, fluid delivery of the punch-line ..." (Norrick, 260-261) has been found useful in comedy performance, to signal the punch line significantly (David 48, Norrick 201) and insignificantly (Attardo and Pickering 194). Research has also shown that timing (especially pausing) is an essential part of the comedian-audience relationship in Stand-up Comedy.

Stereotyping

A stereotype is defined as "a typical feature of a kind", which may be true or false, but which individuals need to get on with the world (Reyes, 181). From the social sciences to linguistics, stereotypes are considered pragmatic phenomena which are employed to position the self and the other in socially meaningful manners. Reyes identifies "typification" and "typicality" as essential to any discussion of stereotypes; the former, attributed to "means relating some aspect of behaviour (predication) to a particular social category of persons (reference)" while the latter, paraphrases particular linguistic or discursive elements (Reyes, 181). Stereotyping is crucially employed in the Nigerian comedic space, to categorize all sorts of people, institutions, and ethnic groups. The comedians, in the main, make use of the stereotypes to identify a shared background with their audiences and to indicate that they (comedian plus audience) have common perspectives of the world.

Any Warri guy dey here? AREA (Audience: "eh") I dey wan beg people make dem hold dia fone o. Na so dem tief one guy fone After two weeks as di guy dey pass for di area, na im dem call di guy "Oga, come here ... your fone no los?" "Yeah, they stole my phone here two weeks ago." E say wait ... di guy enter, carry one Ghana fone na im full inside traveling bag.. Na im dem bring one Sony Erikson ... "Na you get dis fone?" "Yeah, this is my fone" ... Na im di Warri boy say, "EHEHN... SO NA YOU LOCK "eh ehn ...DIS FONE WEY WE NO FIT SELL AM OPEN DI FONE NOW MAKE YOU DEY RUN. (I go dye)

I Go Dye make fun at his people, by inferring that they are not just thieves but daring ones at that. As an ethnic insider, he finds it wholesome to "play the audience" (Double, 107) by appropriating a negative stereotype as a celebratory resource, by cleverly starting with the celebratory chant before moving to the negativity. In the introductory part, the comedian begins by assigning the reference "Warri indigene" with the positively affiliative predication "to be respected" before switching to the negative (implied) predication "steals" (since people should secure their phones from "any Warri indigene"). And the same reference, contextually indexed by both "they" and "he", has a back grounded predication, "don't care to be identified as thieves." In the Nigerian context, the comedian, in this act, is believed to be identifying with his people, and interacting with the audience.

Formulaic expressions

Nigerian comedians also use formulaic expressions as pragmatic strategies to contextualize their performances. When they do, such verbalizations serve either as signature tunes (expressions which identify the opening or closure of a comedian's performance) or boundary markers (expressions which signal the beginning or end of a joke). For example, I Go Dye is identified by many formulas, including the (Christian) religious utterance, "Alle-lu-ya" (as pronounced), "hello ("are you still there"), and "abi I lie" ("am I lying?") so much so that the audience anticipates any of these utterances and replies with whichever one he chooses, when he gets to the end of a joke. It must be noted, however, first, that he sticks to one formula in a given performance, and second that he chooses sometimes to use the formula as in-joke discourse filler. Another form of formulaic utterance, "Area", is used to precede the telling of a joke that has the Warri indigene as its butt. As such almost all Nigerian comedians chant, "Area" to preface an ethnic joke directed at the people of Warri, regardless of the joke's face value (i.e. whether the joke promotes a positive or negative face) because the Warri people can handle of many jokes. This formula serves both to activate the mutual entertainment background of Nigerian and to bond comedian and audience emotionally. In the following excerpt, I Go Dye seems to merely identify the Warri members

of his audience, but really orients towards this (his) ethnic group, and the audience, as a whole.

Call-and-Response

Related to formulas are exchanges between comedian and audience, much in the spirit of the call-and-response type of African oral tradition (Okpewho, 122), with the former initiating the call and the latter obliging the response. These come in the forms of question/answer, puzzle/resolution, and elliptical statements (whose completive components are sought from the audience). In each of the following samples, we find combinations of some of these dialogic verbalizations. I Go Dye make fun at the predisposition of Nigerian women to make-up and artificiality, predicating his argument on a hypothesis, for which he seeks the audience's approval: Nigerian women are greater liars than Nigerian men.

A lot of guys lie, same thing with girls... But na girls lie pass ...Girls and guys who lie pass

Make I break am down for you...Guys own na word of mouth ... na im...Girls own, everything for una body na liea lie...Hair (Audience: "lie")..Finger nail (Audience: "lie")

Eye lash (Audience: "lie")... Eye brow (Audience: "lie")... Lips (Audience: "lie")... Height (Audience: "lie")... (touches both parts of his chest)(Audience: "lie")

Here, the comedian starts with a general statement in line(1) and moves on to make a controversial conclusion in line (2), obviously depending on the audience's reaction (indicated by the significant pause) before introducing the comedy. Line (3) is an alternative question whose answer (whichever way it goes) is supposed to introduce the comedy. The comedian assumes the position of authority in line 4, and to some extent, line (4) and (5). But from line (7) till the end of the excerpt, he transfers part of the responsibility of solving the puzzle and answering the lingering question—who lies more between men and women?—to members of the audience, by gesturing to them with the microphone, to fill in the elliptical information. And in line (13), he para-linguistically invokes call-and-response via gesturing.

Using Clark's (101) terminologies, "communal common ground" to homogenize his audience as a "cultural community" within which he belongs. He thus constructs a script based on a set of "inside information", "particular information that members of the community mutually assume is possessed by members of the community" (Clark, 101) —that they know about (Nelson) Mandela and his prison-to-presidency saga; that they know the unmentioned Nigerian "somebody" whose story is similar to Mandela's; that they know why it might be inappropriate or politically incorrect (even in the discursively free context of comedy) to specify the "somebody". I go dye thus made use of

the pause, audience laughter, and question-answer to invite the audience to a joint action of comedy construction.

Conclusion

This work justifies how Nigerian Pidgin is used to create laughter in stand-up comedies. Certain linguistic strategies such as Linguistic coding/pausing, stereotyping, call-and-response have been examined and discussed in relation to how they are used to create laughter. In terms of linguistic coding, it reveals a preponderant use of NP (either as an independent code or as alternated with SBE) and the deployment of significant and emphatic pauses. The call-and-response patterns, the comedian's use of the microphone, to forge with the audience share rhetorical authority. Nigerian stand-up comedians have been able to achieved uniquely success with the use of NP. Even though it would be assumed that most of (if not all) the members of the audiences are literate and so should understand English, the comedians have felt it necessary to perform in NP since this informal language is the most widely used and understood variety in Nigeria's multilingual society. Yet, the pre-eminence of NP clearly excludes members of the audience who are not very versatile in this language (especially non-Nigerians) from independently processing the meanings intended by the performances.

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