

Humour as Veritable Instrument for Sustainable Development in a Chaotic Society: Nigeria Example

Dr. Nzeakor, N.C.

Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri
Department of English Language and Literature
E-mail: zika_4real@yahoo.com

&

Mrs. Duru, Lilian O.

Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri
Department of English Language and Literature
E-mail: duruoluchi1234@gmail.com

&

Dr. Nwulu, Felicia Nina

Use on English Unit
Directorate of General Studies,
Federal University of Technology, Owerri
E-mail: ninanwulu@gmail.com

Abstract

Language is a tool in the hands of human beings. It can be used to create and re-create different contexts and situations. Language can serve as a tool for making a bad situation becomes a good one and a good situation to become bad. In the past few years in Nigeria, a lot of conspiracies abound concerning the happenings around, from killings, maiming, kidnapping, raping to other social vices. All these have represented using language. From these happenings some concepts such as Herdsmen, Boko Haram, IPOB, Unkwown Gunmen and so on have come into existence. Also, humans have been living in much fear and tension. Most people have lost their lives because of fear of the unknown. Language being a two edged sword can be used to put smile on people's faces and help to reduce tensions and conflicts created by these ugly situations in Nigeria. To do a proper analysis of this work, Whatsapp humorous messages were selected and analysed and recorded. A psychological theory known as Relief or Tension Release Theory propounded by Lord Shaftesbury (1709) is used for this work. At the end of the analysis it was observed by the researchers that humour, laughter and smile are instruments for the release of tension built up by fear or false expectations. The researchers therefore recommend that humans should learn to be humorous so that they will not fall prey to conspiracy theories that can lead to untimely death and therefore hamper sustainability.

Keywords: Language, Humour, Communication, Sustainability, Relief Theory or Tension Release Theory

Introduction

Language is of paramount importance to humans, without which communication is impossible. Every living being uses language to communicate ideas, events and messages. As a human phenomenon language functions in a variety of ways, it is not a one way traffic. Its function is multifarious. It can be used to build relationships and also used to mar it. Language can be used to recreate ideas, concepts and events that were not originally in the language. Here lies the creative nature of language. It can form, destroy or damage one's life. Its use can make one happy or sad, and also maintain one's life. Humours plays pivotal role is these areas.

Humour is created using language to play on the emotions of people. It is used to soften a serious situation and cause people to laugh. Humour as a concept is an attribute of humans and as such should be utilized by all. As a human attribute it is defined as the tendency of experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement. People are meant to experience humour and also make others to do so. But this is not the case.

In Nigeria today, a lot of ugly situations have made so many people lose their senses of making people laugh, smile and joke. People are no longer humorous. They have lost that attribute as humans as a result of paying much attention to the happenings in the society such as unemployment, killings, kidnapping, herdsmen, IPOB, child trafficking, rape, prostitution, cultism, drug addiction, robbery, indecent dressing, examination malpractice and so on. They have conditioned their minds to listening and hearing of such reports that humorous communicators took advantage of such situations to once in a while bring in humorous conversation to bring them to the realities of life. Once this is done, the listener or reader smile or laughs to reduce tension caused by all the social vices trying to steal their joys away from them this is the cushioning effect of humour, and this is done through language use. The situations in Nigeria require humorous humans to survive as only those capable of making others laugh and who also can laugh, will develop mentally and sustain development. Based on this, five humorous whatsapp messages were selected by the researchers and analysed using tension theory or Release theory by Shaftesbury (1709). With the use of this theory, the researchers observed that humour, causes laughter and makes people to smile and both humour, smiling and laughing are instrument for the release of tension, built up by fear or false exceptions. Therefore, the researchers recommend that language users should learn to be humorous as this will help them to be happy and live a sustainable life. Everyone in Nigeria needs humour to survive the precarious situations befalling us.

Conceptual Framework

This has to do with all the necessary concepts used in the work that helped in the acceptance of humour as a product of language.

The Concept of Language

Language as a concept has attracted a lot of definitions. According to Dada (2010) language is a rule governed system of symbols that enables users to generate meaning and in the process define reality. From this definition language is seen as a tool in the hands of humans for the coordination of activities and realities of life.

Language is a very vital means of human communication. Through it, ideologies, identities, feelings, etc. are shared. According to Ahumaraeze and Nwachukwu (2016) quoting the encyclopedia Britannica online posit that language is “a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by which humans as members of a social group and participants in each culture communicate”. Through language the co-operative existence of people is issued. Language is a means by which members of a speech community exchange their views, take decisions, convey these decisions, agree or disagree on sensitive issues, make resolutions, persuade to actions etc.

In the words of Akwanya (1999), language is proper to man; hence, only what is properly determined as human language is strictly language. All other beings that perform one or another of the known linguistic functions do so by means of a system which falls outside what is defined as language. According to Emenanjo (2017) quoted in Okpara (2012) language is a particular way or style of speaking or writing. It is that complete whole of communication which includes, signs, symbols, knowledge, belief customs and cultures and any other abilities of speech acquired by humans kind for the sole purpose of communication and identity.

Language, according to Anagbogu, Mba and Ame (2001) is a means devised by humans for communicating ideas, feelings, desires etc. through complex vocal or written symbols. Language here is seen as the total configuration of a person or group of persons that people in the society share common information and ideas through communication.

All the definitions of language point towards communication. It means that language is a means through which humans communicate and interact with one another. This is the primary function of language.

Communication as a Concept

Generally, communication is a process of passing information from one person to another through any means which could either be verbal (both written and spoken) or through non-verbal (paralinguistic)

means. Communication is not a one way affair. It involves two or more persons who are expected to behave in one way or the other during the communication exercise. According to Ngonbu (2008) communication is any transmission of information from one person to another in order to elicit a response. It is this response that makes the reader of the message laugh, smile and relaxes with the communicator. Ijeoma (1998) defines Communication as an interaction by means of signs and symbols. The symbols maybe gestures, plastics or verbal or any other which would serve as stimuli to behaviour. Communication according to Ndimele (1999) is a social transaction which involves getting one's ideas across; it means making oneself to be understood by the person or persons to whom the piece of information is addressed. Nwarikwuegu and Nwodi (2012) capture communication as the process of sharing information, ideas, feelings, emotions etc. They went ahead to posit that communication is a vital part of human life; indispensable in business, relationship, education, religious, in short in all situations where people encounter each other. This implies that success in life is largely dependent on successful or effective communication.

Nwankwuegu and Nwode (2012) suggest that it is not just enough to communicate but communicating effectively is what determines the acceptability of anything to be called communication or to say that one has communicated. Thus, communication is much greater than just speech and writing. For an effective communication to be carried out many different ways such speech, writing, gestures, glances, slight changes in tone and other communicative devices used show our agreement or disagreement of ongoing discussion or message which is agreeable with our body language. The social media (WhatsApp) is one aspect of communication that permits the use of writing and some non-verbal cues. Obuasi (2014) posits that in every communication situation, there must be some shared situational knowledge which gives the communication situation a background, the extent to which the intended message is extended is dependent on the situational knowledge which different philosophers refer to in different names. In effect, this situational knowledge which different philosophers refer to in different names and its entailments can be regarded as communication dependent variables or conditions. Grice (1975) calls it the cooperative principle while Wardhaugh (2006) calls it "felicity conditions". In essence for any message to be regarded or seen as humorous both sender and receiver must have some shared knowledge of what may cause laughter or what it is that is funny, because what may be funny by one person, may not be when one party has no shared knowledge. Anyone in Nigeria is affected in one way or the other by the happenings and therefore have shared knowledge that definitely elicit either anger, regrets, hopelessness, that when jokes and other humorous languages are used, one is made to smile and laugh.

Summarily, communication is a process by which information is exchanged between humans. It is a two way traffic that involves the sender (encoder) and the receiver (decoder) and the message to be sent. This message must be communicated through a code which is language. Communication can be said to have taken place, when the message sent is received and interpreted appropriately. This is what happens in the use of language to create humours. The interpretation is what brings laughter or smile from the reader thereby helping in the release of tension and pent up emotions by the reader.

Humour as a Concept

Humour as a concept has attracted a lot of definitions. Some of the definitions are dependent on the field of study. These definitions will be based on language and communication. Humour is a valuable and effective tool for just about anything because it breaks down barriers. Humour has been carefully disguised as fun. It can smuggle new ideas into people's hearts.

Humour is defined as a skill to understand, express and applaud something absurdly inconsistent. It is a skill of putting forth a difficult thing in an easy way and also understanding it. Humour mostly strikes people as the ability to crack a joke. However, from a more comprehensive point of view, it is also the ability to take jokes. Humour from the Cambridge Dictionary, is the ability to be amused by something seen, heard or thought about, sometimes causing one to smile or laugh, or the quality in something that causes such amusement. Words and phrases related to humour are amusingly, jocular, hilarious, non-servile, playful, uproarious, jokers, jokesters, facetious and so on.

Another definition of humour is the quantity of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech. Though, what constitutes humour may be relative. There are individual differences as what amuses one individual may not amuse the other. In this paper, humour is seen as any language used in speech or writing that causes the readers to smile, or laugh and which helps to release tensions caused by some social vices in one's environment.

Types of Humour

Researchers have found out that there are different types of humour. These are:

1. Affiliative humour or humour designed to strengthen social bounds;
2. Self enhancing humour, which is akin to having a humorous view of life in general.
3. Aggressive humour, such as mocking others;
4. Self-defeating humour, in which an individual encourages jokes that have self-defeating.

Among these humours the affiliative humour and self enhancing humour are the best types of humours as they are the ones that will help people come out of depression.

Significance of Humour to Human Development

The significance of humour cannot be over emphasized. It is of great importance to human beings and this can be seen in the following:

Humour guides against depression. According to Mark Twain "Humour is the great thing, the saving thing after all. The minute it crops up, all our hardness yield, all our irritations and resentments flit away, and a sunny spirit takes their place.

Humour acts as emotional filter to those who are depressed. It prevents the negativity that triggers depression. It also improves people's overall quality of life. Researchers have found that people who score highly in certain types of humour have better self-esteem, more positive effect, greater self competence, more control over anxiety and better performance in social interactions.

In addition to working as a mental immune system, research has also shown that humour can actually improve one's physical immune system. Laughter can also improve cardiovascular health and lowers heart rates, blood pressure and muscular tension.

Aside from improving one's health, laughter can be a productivity tool as well. A study from Northeastern University found that volunteers who watched a comedy were measurably better at solving a word association puzzle that relied on creative thinking as compared to control groups that watched horror films or quantum physics lectures. This is because laughter lights up the anterior cingulate cortex, an area of the brain associated with attention and decision-making. (abstracted from the internet, why a sense of humour... weforum.org. 23/11/2022)

Humour also boosts one's attractiveness and improves one's leadership skills. Humour can be used to get through the difficult times. Humour energizes us when a task has become tedious. Humour makes even the worst of situation tolerable. It is humorous situations that makes us laugh. Humour as well yields money to humorous people and can also serve as a means of income to many people in this present dispensation.

Finally, humour can function mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually on humans.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that formed the theoretical framework for this story is Relief or Tension Release theory propounded by Lord Shaftesbury (1706), and the Relief or Tension Release theory maintains that laughter is a homeostatic mechanism by which psychological tension is relieved. The relief theory argues that Humour is the tendency to look at things from the mirthful or incongruous side. It is the quality that makes something laughable or amusing. Humour is the ability to perceive, enjoy or express what is amusing or comical. It is the source of laughter and the catalyst of smiles. Humour is the spark of that lights our eyes as well as the cause of tears that never grows old. Humour is a state of mind (Internet source: The Importance of Humour.)

Humour according to this theory serves to facilitate relief of tension caused by one's fears. Laughter and mirth, according to relief theory result from the release of nervous energy. Humour according to relief theory, is used mainly to overcome socio-cultural inhibitions and reveal suppressed desires. It is believed that this is the reason we laugh whilst being tickled, due to a built-up of tension as the tickler "strikes".

Herbert Spencer supports, the Relief humour theory and used laughter to describe release tension. According to him, laughter is an "economical phenomenon" whose function is to release "psychic energy" that had been wrongly mobilized by incorrect or false expectations.

To Feud Immanuel Kant supporting the Relief theory of humour emphasized the physiological release in our response to humour. Tofaya, explained "... that each human being is caught in a tug-of-war: part of us strains to live free as individual, guided bodily appetites and aggressive urges, while the other side yearns for conformity and acceptance." This result in every normal person's being continually steeped in psychic tension, mostly due to guilt and lack of fulfillment. This tension can be relived, albeit temporarily through joking.

This theory is very relevant to this study considering the fact that Nigeria and the people of Nigeria are living in a very precarious situation where almost everybody has lost hope, from the educational sector to the health sector, security, religious etc. Rumours of death everywhere. Tensions and worries have deprived people of their joy. People find it difficult to think straight because of the problems surrounding their lives. Aggression has become the order of the day. This theory becomes relevant if language users apply humour once in a while to release all these built up tensions which affect them psychologically. Though, it may give a temporary relief but at least, that short period can save a serious situation and make it less. No human can think properly under tension and fear and can never develop the habit of right thinking.

Objectives of the Study

This study sets out to:

- Observe reasons for using humour in human communication.
- Examine if the theory used for the study is relevant.
- Assess the relevance of humour to sustainable development

Samples of Data

Goat accused of robbery

Data 1:

Police in Nigeria are holding a goat on suspicion of attempted armed robbery. Varieties seized the black and white goat, saying it was an armed robber who had used black magic to transform himself into an animal after trying to steal a Mazda 323.

A spokesman for police in the eastern state of Kwara said: "The goat is in our custody".

'Vigilantees saw some hoodlums attempting to rob a car. One escaped while the other turned into a goat.'

From this message, an important message about armed robbery and voodooism practices in Nigeria is delivered but in a funny way to reduce tension already caused by armed robberies and Fetish practices by these armed robbers.

Data 2:

ANNOUNCEMENT

ANNOUNCEMENT

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If you are unemployed but with a Bachelor's degree, B.Sc, HND, Masters, Ph.D, or any certificate at all in any of the following fields:

(1) Medicine (2) Laboratory science (3) Health Information Management (4) Nursing (5) Environmental science (6) Public Administration (7) Mass communication (8) Education (9) Pharmacy (10) Accounting (11) Electrical Engineering (12) Mechanical Engineering (13) Agricultural Engineering (14) Architecture (15) Biochemistry (16) Fine/Applied Art (17) Urban and Regional Planning (18) Mathematics etc.

Please, kindly extend my greetings to them and let them know that Education is still the KEY but our LEADERS have changed the Padlock.

You better vote wisely those leaderless individuals to sweep them out with their own broom and remove that useless umbrella so that rain will use flood to carry them and the sun will blind them and burn them to ashes.

Vote wisely.

Goodnight everyone.

The user or writer of this message has humourously sent a message of unemployment and bad government. In Nigeria, employment and bad government are major issues that give people serious heart ache but the writer of this message on a lighter mood wants the receiver not to be too serious about these issues but should take them lightly.

Data 3:

HOW I TOLD HUBBY I WAS PREGNANT

Few months after our wedding, I noticed some signs but I didn't tell hubby. I missed period and went to run a test to be certain and it was positive.

Hubby has left for work that morning. I called him and the following conversations took place.

Me: hi (angrily)

Him: hi dear what's wrong? U don't sound happy.

Me: I just found out what u did, how could u do this ah? And I ended d call. *(He tried calling me but I didn't pick up he calls. He texted but I didn't reply. After about an hour, I heard d sound of a car. Guess what? It was hubby so I started crying immediately, though fake).*

Him: *(met me crying and was surprised)* Baby what's wrong?

Me: How could u? U promised not to hurt me, u said you won't make me cry

Him: *(surprised)*... What did I do nah?

Me: I got the results of our actions today. Guess what? It was Kenny who drew my attention to it *(Kenny is a nurse and a friend)*. Soonest, both of our parents will be aware too *(crying really hard this time)*.

Him: *(already shivering this time and was about crying too, then I handed him an envelope)*.

Me: This is the result of what u did.

Him: *(really scare this time and read it hurriedly)* Wow, we are pregnant, congratulations baby *(and kissed me only for me to wake up and see that I'm still single)*

From these messages, one thing is common, the messages are suspense fill... the humourous aspect of the messages com towards the end. These are indications of already tensed situations in the society which our psychic had already established. Through humour, there is a release of tension which is accompanied by a smile or laughter.

Conclusion

Language as an integral part of human existence is used to perform various activities. Language is not a way traffic and as such different interpretations are attributed to its use in communication depending on the subject matter, contexts and those involved in the communication exercise. Interpretations may be healthy especially when both parties share same linguistic knowledge that help interlocutors to smile, laugh or get angry over even communication that maybe tagged humorous by one party. Whatever the case may be, there are language use that are funny and which make some people laugh over serious situations to release tension and free themselves from suffocating situations especially in Nigeria.

Nigeria today is fraught with all forms of social vices ranging from kidnapping, rape, armed robbery, IPOB, trafficking etc. which can lead to untimely death. Language users saw the need to alleviate these problems and hence the use of humour. In order to study the usefulness of humour, the theory of Relief

or Tension Release was used to understudy three messages and after analyzing those messages, it was observed that no matter how serious a situation seem to be, the use of humour makes the persons involved smile or laugh. Smiling and laughing are therapeutic. It helps in reducing the seriousness of the issue and make it light. By handling issues lightly, human sustains their lives and development.

Recommendations

Having studied humour and how it can be used to make serious situation look unserious, the researchers recommend that language users should learn to use humour in their communication activities as it helps their communication partners release pent-up-emotions even though temporarily but heals whichever wound they carry at that point in time.

Humour as a concept should be included in our school curriculum as it can be taught to enable students learn how to be humourous early in life. This will help reduce some mortality rate in families. There are some families that take everything in life so serious that when they are at the verge of committing suicide, a humourous person around them can help save the situation.

Humour being therapeutic can solve many endangered situations and therefore should be taken or used in solving some major societal issues such as we said in the messages about stealing, pregnancy and unemployment situations in Nigeria.

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