

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

Nneoma Chiebuka Ngige

Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: nneomangige2@gmail.com

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 determine 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. This work reveals how 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.

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).

Almost every Nigerian can speak or understand NP, and so, it has become the unofficial or de facto language of advertisement, entertainment, and any other forms of information intended for mass consumption. Most Nigerian stand-up comedians have tactically appropriated this linguistic resource for their profession. They mostly perform in Nigerian Pidgin because they realized that executing in Standard British English would decrease the liberating effects, the size of their audience and make the jokes mechanical. They believe that Nigerian Pidgin helps in creating the amusing effects they so desire and putting across the message better. This is because in stand-up comedy, the feedback of the audience is instant and crucial for the comedian's act. Audience expects a stand-up comedian to provide a steady stream of laughs and a performer is always under pressure to deliver.

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.

Stand-up comedy in Nigeria has been traced to 1993, when its progenitor, Allelujah Atupota Akpobome (a.k.a. Ali Baba) performed, regularly, at a Lagos nightclub. Ali Baba began professional stand-up comedy in Nigeria and incidentally was the favoured comedian of Nigeria's former president, Olusegun Obasanjo. He has since mentored many comedians, most notably, Ayo Makun (a.k.a. AY). Other successful Nigerian comedians include, but are not restricted to, Basketmouth, I Go Dye, Klint de Drunk, Lepacious Bose, and Gordons (all stage names). The most popular source of Nigerian stand-up comedy is "Night of a Thousand Laughs" (NATL), a national road show, produced since 1996 and staged at unspecified intervals in the country's major cities. In any instance of NATL, a comedian is given 10-15 minutes to make a seated audience laugh, in monologues interspersed with musical performances, mimes, and pantomimes. Apart from the institutionalized NATL, specific national and international events or holidays - National Democracy Day (May 29), Independence Day (October 1), Valentine's Day (February 14), Christmas (December 25) - provide opportunities for stand-up comic shows. Still, a number of nightclubs, especially in the major Nigerian cities of Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt, serve comedy as a part of their menu, on specific, sometimes previously-publicized nights. For example, Osakioduwa, hosted MNET's (a cable network's) weekly comedy show, "Comedy Club Live in Lagos".

Nigerian Pidgin as the Language of Stand - Up Comedians

Wilkinson asserts that “Nigeria Pidgin is the language of realism and relaxation; the vehicle of expressing emotion, disorder and particularly, the language of comedy and satire.” (16) She also observes that the comic effect of Nigerian Pidgin is due to something a little more complex than the normal flattering of the ego that derives from watching the ridiculous antics of a being that is different from the self. Within the past or present experience of at least part of the public is the constant and often oppressive effort to speak correct English and to inhibit the urge to use either the mother tongue or Pidgin. Inuoe (27) also observed that English makes use of euphemism to express some terms which Nigerian pidgin expresses in a raw form, such as ass, butt, death, etc. In the light of this, Nigerian Pidgin can be said to be a dysphemistic language and the rawness in its expression accounts for its ability to express jokes and humour better than the English language which is highly euphemistic.

Comedy according to Riu Xavier, refers to any “discourse or work generally intended to be humorous or amusing by inducing laughter, especially in theatre, television, film, *stand-up comedy*, or any other medium of entertainment” (3). Comedy can be used to easily engage in social interaction by taking away that awkward, uncomfortable or uneasy feeling of social interactions. Others believe that the appropriate use of comedy can facilitate social interactions. Comedy is a ubiquitous, highly ingrained and largely meaningful aspect of human experience and is therefore decidedly relevant in organizational contexts, such as the work place (Wiles 32). The significant role that laughter and fun play in organizational life has been seen as a sociological phenomenon and has increasingly been recognized as also creating a sense of involvement among workers. Sharing comedy at work not only offers a relief from boredom, but can also build relationships, improve camaraderie between colleagues and create positive effect. It may also relieve tension and can be used as a coping strategy. Sharing a laugh with a few colleagues may improve moods and bring out quality of work.

Raskin Victor has it that “Comedy has a medicinal effect of decreasing stress, reducing tensions, killing boredoms and prolonging people’s life span” (25). Rich comedians are making a living off cracking jokes in Nigeria today among which Bovi and Basket Mouth have made names for themselves. Comedy can be made out of the most serious events or situations. For instance, Nigerian stand-up comedians today make jokes out of national situations or ridicule public figures to create jokes. A case in point is the former first lady, Dame Patience Jonathan, whose idiosyncratic language use has provided much reference points for Nigerian comedians at all levels. However, some of the jokes created out of this language situation have not been taken into consideration. This explains the strained relationship between the former first lady and veteran stand-up comedian, Ali Baba.

In literature, comedy is mostly satiric as writers try to lampoon, satirize or use sarcasm to change certain societal excesses. The “driving force of every comedy is language or one of the basic aspects of comedy is language” (Trypanis 33). Language can be manipulated for stylistic and humorous effect. However, a joke made or words spoken as humorous must be context based. Jokes and humorous statements can stir up trouble if not applied to the right context. Therefore, the place of comedy in pragmatics will be the application of humorous languages in their appropriate social context.

Synopsis of Post Colonial view of Nigerian Pidgin Use in Stand-up Comedy

According to Ashcroft Bill, there are three main linguistic groups within post-colonial discourse, Monoglossic the first group, are those single language societies that use English language as a native tongue. They correspond generally to settled colonies though they remain un-uniform and un-standard in speech. The second group is diglossic. They are those societies in which a majority of people speak two or more languages. English is generally adopted as the language of government and commerce and its use demonstrates some of the more pronounced forms of language variance. Polyglossic or polydialectics is the third group. This community occurs principally where a multitude of dialects interweave to form a generally comprehensible linguistic continuum (40).

Nigerian English falls in the diglossic category, while the Pidgin English falls in the polyglossic category. Therefore, the Nigerian Pidgin is a synergetic post-colonial model of distancing from the cultural essentialist view of English language as the only standard language in the colonies. It is a norm to refer to any language developed from English in any British former colonies as non-standard. Creole and Pidgin falls in this non-standard category. Therefore, once the English language has come to be regarded as the tool with which a “world” can be textually constructed, the post-colonial users therefore find a way of abrogating it. By the word abrogation, it means the rejection by post-colonial writers of a normative concept of correct or Standard English used by groups in colonies, correspondence of inferior dialects or marginal variants (Ashcroft, 3). Abrogation leads to the construction, separation and almost an absence from the British metropolitan norm.

Therefore, the formation and popularization of Pidgin is an abrogation of the essentialist assumptions and dismantling of the imperialist centralism norm on English language. Most of the literature works in Nigerian Pidgin produced in Onitsha market are good abrogation works. In fact, Achebe’s choice of English could also be regarded as an abrogation. Abrogation doesn’t stop at language rejection alone, it has also incorporated a great range of rejection in culture, politics, mode of thought, and argument in what is to be known as appropriation. The rejection of gay marriage, lesbianism, and marriage to animals in Nigeria as a former colony is a clear one against the western standard hegemonic norms. The models of abrogation, appropriation and agency in post-colonial setting could now open door for a redefining practice in a different way, but Nigeria’s mode of governance exclusive.

Not only did Opa Williams and the Comedians deviate from stage direction and content, they also changed the language of communication from the high Standard English to the low Nigerian Pidgin. The fusion of the society and the self is achieved here in the wisdom of the comedians to know what the audiences want. Once established that it is language that constitutes human being as society, this idea could also account for how Pidgin has influenced stand-up comedy. Nigerian Pidgin is a unique product of the Nigerian society. Nigerian Pidgin is the only worthy result that British – Nigeria contact has produced. Hence, Pidgin is a post-colonial language of abrogation, appropriation, and which has influenced the revival of theatre arts practices in Nigeria, and popularized stand-up comedy to a point of economic success.

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

There are six major strategies comedians appropriated in comedy production - Linguistic coding/pausing, stereotyping, call-and-response, formulaic expression, self-depreciation and shared experiences.

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 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 paralinguistically 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.

Self - deprecation

Stand-up comedian performs before an audience holding on to the only microphone at the venue and taking centre stage with the light directly focused on him/her. He/she therefore assumes inherent authority and power, and by implication conversational superiority, at least for the duration of his/her performance, in relation to the audience. To de-emphasize this positioning, therefore, comedians employ self-deprecation (making self's abilities, characteristics, or achievements seem less important) to

connect with their audiences. This is used to achieve comedian-audience intimacy, whereby the latter identifies (and probably sympathizes or/and empathizes) with the former (Russell 202). Nigerian comedians use self-deprecation (most often self-devaluation) as a rhetorical strategy to warm up to their audiences. This pragmatically tells the members of the audience that the comedian is just like them. This is perspectivized, here, in two instances of the recurrent themes of physical appearance and socio-economic status: while I Go Dye claims to be of a poor parentage, Ali baba presents himself as poor man. In the following extract, Ali baba inserts the poor-family-background script (illustrating with the fact that his parents do not drive cars) into his routine, and states that he doesn't want to share his parents' lot.

Like me, I no dey fear death...I fear POVERTY pass death...It's better for me to RICH and DIE...with the RICH than poor and DIE...Because my family dem no even hussle...Papa and mama poor...Papa poor mama poor,...My father is poor, my mother is poor...family meeting, dem hold am...na legezen everybody dey drive come...I tell myself say I can never be poor.

The comedian offers himself to the audience not as a superior, standoffish member of society, but as having the same social status as even the person probably occupying the lowest social class within the audience.

Shared experiences

According to Double Oliver “Much of what stand-up comedians do is about sharing shared feelings, shared experiences, creating a sense of community with the audience.”(116) Along this line, comedians often tell comedy which would identify them with their audiences, among other categorizations, according to region, gender, social orientation, and nationality. Nigerian comedians exploit this resource in various ways. I illustrate, below, with extracts from the performances of Basketmouth:

And the girls if you catch your boyfriend,...dey cheat on you...Express your feelings the right way....If una catch una boyfriend una dey...una dey subject una emotions..because of the kind of girl you find with him...It's wrong.If you catch your boyfriend with girls,...express your feelings the same way....If girl catch im boyfriend with ugly girl...her reaction dey different o....You don notice am?...If you dey with girl and your girl waka come...and the girl you dey with, ugly..She go just waka (demonstrates)...“Mark, what is this? No, no, what are you doing with this thing?...NO, NO, WHAT ARE YOU ... IN MY HOUSE...NO, NO, DON'T TALK...CAN YOU LEAVE THIS PLACE?...YOU THIS UGLY, ARE YOU DRUNK...Now if di girl fine ... (Sobbing) hm, hm ...Mark, why are you doing this to me?...Hm, am I not good enough for you? Am I not good enough for you?

Here, Basketmouth instantiates observational comedy comic presentation of “everyday phenomena that are rarely noticed or discussed” (Russel 116) to remind the audience of how ladies depict their self-assessments of self-worth in the emotional reactions they exhibit when they discover whom their cheating boyfriends are dating. By asking the rhetorical question *You don notice am?*, the comedian not only addresses the audience as a collective (“you”) but also compares his experience of an aspect of male-female romance with theirs. The audience's initial response of near silence - a subtle indication that this part of the routine demands serious contemplation - when the joke is being

prefaced (until the rhetorical question), probably confirms the sharedness of his experience.

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, formulaic expression, self-depreciation and shared experiences 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. The Nigerian comedians' use of self-deprecatory scripts serves the purpose of reducing their stage-authority and social or economic aloofness, a performance style which makes the audience warm up to them, as real human beings, with whom it has so much in common. And in their performance of shared experiences, the comedians at once converge and diverge the members of the audience by inviting them to co-produce humour on social relationship and national issues. 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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