

# A Night of a Thousand Laughs: A Pragmatic Study of Humour in Nigeria

Oyebola Folajimi Kehinde

Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

**Abstract-** Humour is a multi-disciplinary field of research. People have been working on humour in many fields like philosophy, psychology, sociology, literature, and linguistics. Within the linguistic field, humour can be evaluated from syntactic, pragmatic and semantic points of view. This paper work represents an attempt to show that research in pragmatic theory can contribute to our understanding of humour. The speech act theory has been selected, an exposition of which is followed by an account of how the theory can be applied to humour. Some research into humour has already been carried out using the speech act model. This is briefly described and evaluated. However, both the application of the theory to humour and its evaluation in this paper are mine.

Speech act accounts of humour are based on the notion that humorous utterances are both unconventional and unpredictable. One way of exploiting our expectations, and thereby creating a comic effect, it is argued, is to violate the norms of conversational principles (Ferrari, 1992). This paper therefore explores how violation of the Gricean maxims is used to create humour in Stand-up comedies in Nigeria. The paper is based on the transcription of five episodes of the popular comedy series, *A Night of a Thousand Laughs* (hence, *ANTL*). The selected texts were transcribed and studied as the unit of analysis. From the research, it is found that the Gricean maxims were applied and violated. Most of the time, during performance, the comedians would have fulfilled the maxims before consciously or unconsciously defying those maxims in their conversation.

As at the point of writing this paper, the researcher held that he had not come across any major scholarly work devoted solely to the study of humour in Nigeria. The research, and its result is therefore expected to provide an additional view and information in the study of humour for the students, lecturers, and other researchers who are or would be interested in the study of humour in Nigeria.

**Index Terms-** A Night of a Thousand Laughs, conversational maxims, violation of maxims, H.P. Grice, humour, pragmatics

## I. INTRODUCTION

This section offers a background to the research on the subject of humour as it is found most relevant to the current study. It has a three-fold aim: to review the literature in order to contextualize the present study of Stand-up comedies in Nigeria in relation to relevant linguistic research, to build the theoretical foundations on which the study is developed, and to establish the methodology utilized in the analysis. The section also offers the

review of literature from three key fields that inform this study: the humour theory; linguistic studies of humour; and pragmatics. Since humour is such a wide-ranging subject area for research across academic disciplines, and in order to set the parameters for this work, it is useful to briefly review the prominent linguistic studies that have been carried out to engage the role of humour. The review is narrowed to the studies of conversational humour most pertinent to the current study.

## Humour, Linguistics and Pragmatics

Following Attardo's (1994:16) argument that "it is important to position the linguistic theories of humour in the broader context of the general theories of humour", this section reviews prominent linguistic studies that exhibit and exemplify the three major forms of humour theory. The study of humour has traditionally been seen as a subpart of the study of aesthetics, and therefore has been of interest primarily to philosophers (Edwards, 1967). It has been studied from as far back as Plato and Aristotle (Attardo 1994). The first of these two Greek philosophers to have considered the nature of humour and laughter was Plato (Ferrari, 1992). He believed that the absurd was based on an unfortunate lack of self-knowledge, claiming in *Philebus* that when we laugh at what is ridiculous in others, we are experiencing a combination of both delight and envy, that is, we mix together both pain and pleasure (Plato, 1861). Aristotle also considered the nature of Ludicrous in the second part of *Poetics*. It is held that he also believed the ridiculous a something rather ugly and distorted (Ferrari, 1992; Attardo, 1994).

The studies of humour range across academic disciplines from psychology, sociology, anthropology, literature, medicine, mathematics and linguistics. There are three main traditions in the study of humour across disciplines that form a background for all studies of humour: the relief theory, the incongruity theory, and the superiority theory (Attardo 1994). The relief theory focuses on the psychological or physiological release of tension or energy in humour, particularly through laughter. The incongruity theory describes the cognitive mechanism between different frames of thought in a humorous text. The superiority theory focuses on the aggressive social functions of humour based on the notion that laughter is an evolved cry of victory over an enemy. These approaches to humour are by no means mutually exclusive, but to help us understand something of the essential differences between them, let us consider the following exchange.

(1) Lecturer: What are you doing in my office?

Female student: Looks like I lost my way, sir.

For the proponents of the incongruity theory, the student's reply is humorous because it is unexpected and inappropriate. But according to a modified version of this theory- incongruity

resolution theory- to be comic, the incongruity has to be rendered congruous, but meaningful in some way (Schultz, 1972). Following this, in (1) the student's reply is incongruous because it is an unexpected response to the lecturer's question. However, if we identify the ambiguity, we can reanalyze the lecturer's utterance and this will make the student's reply more appropriate and meaningful. For proponents of the superiority theory, we laugh because we feel 'superior' (or better) to the student, who seems stupid enough to think that the lecturer wants to know why she (the student) has visited him, or to the lecturer who perhaps has failed to make himself understood. Some superiority theorists believe that laughter is a healthy, relatively harmless outlet for human aggression, since it replaces physical attacks on one's opponents, while others believe that on the contrary, any form of victimization or ridicule is wrong (Ferrar, 1992). The relief theorists however may argue that we laugh at (1) when we are no longer bound by the linguistic constraint of univocality, that is, by the requirement that one utterance has only one meaning. In addition to this, we laugh because we are liberated from our inhibitions, which derive from the socially instilled requirement that suppress our feelings of mirth at the student's misunderstanding. These theories are still very much relevant today, in one form or the other, although it is the incongruity theorists who have arguably attracted the most disciples (See Ferrar, 1992; Nerhardt, 1976; Suls, 1983; Morreall, 1983, 1989). Finally, the study of humour which initially was restricted to the fields of philosophy and psychology has now extended its tentacles to become a multidisciplinary field of enquiry. It is now of interest to "sociolinguists (e.g. Fine, 1983; Mulkay, 1988; Davies, 1990); anthropologists (e.g. Douglas, 1968; Johnson, 1978; Apte, 1985); literary theorists (e.g. Chard- Hutchinson, 1991); health professionals (e.g. Robinson, 1991); linguists (e.g. Pepicello and Weisberg, 1983; Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1994); and pragmatics (e.g. Wilson and Sperber, 1988)". I have however decided to place this study within the framework of pragmatics. The reason for this will become clear when we consider the nature of these two disciplines, linguistics and the nature of humour itself.

#### Linguistics and Humour

Raskin is arguably the first, and perhaps the most influential linguist to have developed a comprehensive theory of humour. This was based on his own semantic theory (See Raskin, 1985). Although ostensibly working with a Chomskyan framework, Raskin's approach is in fact at odds with one of the base tenets of Chomskyan linguistics. For Chomsky (1986), the central goal of linguistics is the study language as a system of an internalized set of rules or principles. This system is an abstract construct, which can be studied independently of the use to which it is put. Although knowledge of the system is important in verbal communication, it is obviously inadequate when it comes to explaining how language is used and understood in concrete situations. There thus emerges the relevance of the branch of linguistics called *Pragmatics*, which deals with our ability to convey and interpret verbal messages. In other words, pragmatics has to do with speaker meaning, i.e. the interpretation of utterances in context. We don't have to think long about the nature of humour before we come to the conclusion that it is best approached and appreciated within the framework of pragmatics.

The reason for this is not far-fetched. As noted by (Ferrar 1992:16), humour is not a property of sentences but of utterances, and as such it depends on a context for its existence. Based on these facts, it therefore seems to me that there is a lot to gain from approaching humour from this perspective. This work is designed to employ Grice's Cooperative Principle and accompanying maxims as basic theory to investigate the relation between the creation of humour in Nigerian Stand-up comedy and violation of the cooperative principle.

Grice (1989) discusses five ways of failing to observe a maxim. First is flouting of a maxim, in which a speaker fails to observe a maxim in order to lead a hearer to look for a hidden or implied meaning. Second is violating of a maxim, which is quite the opposite of the flouting of maxims, in which a speaker does not want a hearer to understand. Third is infringing of a maxim, which is when a speaker fails to observe a maxim when he or she is helpless to control anything about the conversation. Fourth is opting out of a maxim, which is when a speaker fails to observe a maxim by saying nothing. Fifth is suspending of maxim, in which it is understood that what is said is not completely true or that there are things a speaker ought not to say, such as taboo. However, in this paper, the researcher has decided to use "violation" of maxim as a means of encompassing the five classifications of Grice's. The researcher holds that in whatever form the conversational maxims are not obeyed or duly observed, it can be generalized as a "violation" of the conversational principle. Whether it is flouting of a maxim or infringing of a maxim, opting out of a maxim or completely suspending a maxim, all these are variants of maxim violation. This paper therefore focuses on the violation of maxims in the Nigerian Stand-up comedies. This is with the aim to examine how each of the comedians has refused to conform to the recommendations of the conversational principle.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### 1.1. Data

The main thrust of this study is to see how maxims are violated for comic effect and also in what situations these violations occur. The aim is to investigate and identify how the utterances of the Stand-up comedians violate the maxims while cracking jokes. To this effect, the researcher has chosen to study five (5) different episodes of the Opa William's A Night of a Thousand Laughs (2014 edition). The research deploys the violation of maxims as observed in the conversations of the selected Stand-up comedians, TY Funny, Kolo, Ajebor, Pencil, and Funny bone.

### 1.2. Analytic Framework

Because pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that focuses on the structure of a language as a communication tool, I have decided to use pragmatic approaches in the analysis of the texts, with emphasis on the cooperative principle and its component; maxims of quality, quantity, relevance and manner, as the framework theory. A critical contribution of Grice's to the pragmatic approach of linguistic analysis is essentially the cooperative activity. Grice (1975:66) argues that communication can only be possible only if the speakers conform to some global standards of communication. According to him:

'Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically to some extent, a common purpose, or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction.'

It was on the basis of this observation that Grice postulated the existence of a cooperative principle (CP):

'Make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged' (Grice 1975:67)

Grice afterwards goes on to identify nine rules or maxims classified into categories which together with the CP, govern all human communication. (See Ferrar 1992; Grice, 1975) The first direct application of Grice's CP to humour research is found in the works of those of Hancher (1980); Martinich (1981); Morreall (1983); and Leech (1983). Nevertheless, Grice did not of course believe that speakers adhere strictly to the maxims all the time they communicate. The claim that jokes could be viewed in terms of violations of maxims dates back to Grice himself, where he considers irony as an example of implicature (Attardo 1994:27). In fact, Grice was interested in the effects that can be obtained when they are violated in some way. He saw violation of the maxims as a means by which speakers are able to "mean more than they say" (Ferrar 1992:45). A basic assumption which underlines this paper work is that a large number of humorous utterances (jokes) involve violations of one or more of Grice's maxims.

### III. ANALYSIS

H.P. Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) is a significant theory that is used to analyze and control people's conversation. Every of our conscious conversations is guided by these maxims. However, irrespective of our consciousness, Grice's maxims are not always observed in our daily conversation. "It seems when the maxims are violated, the speakers apparently wish to end the conversation, or wish to avoid the conversation" (Weiwei, 2012:3). Yet under some circumstances, the violation of cooperative principle and the accompanied four maxims is not only intent to terminate the conversation, but also trigger comedy effects. This means that it is sometimes needed that the maxims be violated for humour to happen in conversations. It can therefore be said that the deliberate violation of conversational cooperative principle is the linguistic basis of humour (Weiwei, 2012: 3). Let us now study some of the selected episodes from *ANTL*, as we attempt to reveal the basic relationship between violation of Grice's CP and creation of humour in the texts.

#### ***The Maxim of Quantity and Humour***

It means that people do not make contribution more informative than required. When speakers break the quantity maxim consciously, and do not provide what is required or give much more than needed, humour breaks consequently. Let us consider some example.

##### A. The lack of required information makes humour

(2) Pencil: I dey vex

Audience: Laugh

Pencil: I dey vex for all this... (sighs)

Audience: Laugh

In the above text, the information supplied by the first speaker is inadequate to let his listeners get a thorough understanding of the message. *I dey vex* (I am angry). Why he is angry, nobody knows. The listeners actually do not know why or to whom he is vexing. This essentially triggers laughter in them, because they do not just understand why a person should unnecessarily get angry.

(3) Pencil: One girl, she draw tattoo, she never marry.  
She draw butterfly... When she kom marry,  
husband do... Pikin\* do... So stretch mark come...

Audience: Laugh

The speaker narrates the story of a girl that draws tattoo on some part of her body. But the tattoo turns to something weird after she gets married. The information is not adequately expressed. That actually prompts the audience into laughter, having imagined what the husband and pikin (children) have in common.

##### B. Provided information more than required makes humour

(4) Ajebor: The Ibadan girl no fit dey talk to you dey chop chewing gum

Lagos girl dey talk to you, "Yeah, how far?" (Chewing gum)

Ibadan girl, if she wan talk to you, she go commot the chewing gum

Only say she go hang am for back of her ear.

Audience: Laugh

This humor occurs when one of the speakers supplies information more than necessary. The speaker supplies the information that Ibadan ladies do not like talking to people with chewing gum in their mouths. Meanwhile, the additional information of how they prefer to hang the chewing gum at the back of their ear is somehow unnecessary to the main point. It therefore induces some laughter in the audience.

#### ***The Maxim of Quality and Humour***

Conversations demand that the maxim of quality be observed. Every participant in a conversation is expected to be truthful and he is expected to avoid giving false or unconfirmed information, especially one that is not supported by evidence.

##### A. Exaggerated information makes humour

(5) Pencil: You know say e get some stretch mark wey de some lady body

Dey fit use am wire this Jago hall!

Audience: Laugh

Pencil: Some girl stretch mark, dey fit use am wire this hall.

Audience: Laugh

(6) Pencil: In fact, this D.J. no need too much wire.

Some girls' stretch mark, dey fit use am wire all the equipment wey de here.

Audience: Laugh

How true is the idea that body stretch marks can be used to wire a hall? This is mere exaggeration, and it is meant to create some humour. It is also hyperbolic to imagine that stretch marks can be used to connect electrical equipment. This breaks the conversational maxim of quality that demands one to be truthful,

and not give information that is false or that is not supported by evidence.

**B. Understated information makes humour**

(7) Funny bone: You know say all these Boko Haram\* (pauses), eh God.

Una know dem now, all these boys wey dey do things; BH, yo! You know what I mean, BH baby.

Audience: Laugh.

It is also possible for the conversational principle of quality to be broken when a piece of information becomes understated. This happens in a situation where a speaker decides not to supply the information that is adequate enough to carry the listener along. In the above text, the speaker (Funny bone) initially gives the full name “Boko Haram”, but later decides to use “BH baby”, perhaps because of the fright attached to the sect. The audience somehow realizes that there is something he is trying to hide. This causes them to laugh.

***The Maxim of Relation and Humour***

The speakers try as much as possible to make whatever they say relevant to the subject of discuss. They are expected to say things that are pertinent to the discussion. Once the contravention of the relation maxim emerges in conversation, the conversation will be directed towards creating humour (Weiwei, 2012:4).

**A. Incoherent information makes humour**

(8) TY Funny: If you go event you see girl sit down, cross leg...

Somebody dey drop her leg now

Audience: Laugh

TY Funny: Camera video that girl for me

Aud: Laugh

One way a speaker may break the conversational maxim of relation is by combining incoherent pieces of information together in his speech. The speaker in the above text is trying to teach the listeners how to “mess” (fart) in public. He starts his speech by telling the people that anytime they see a lady seated with crossed legs; it may be a means of positioning herself in case she wants to fart. But while doing this the speaker utters two statements that are somehow disjointed, “Somebody dey drop her leg now” (Somebody is dropping her legs now) and “Camera video that girl for me”.

**B. Opposing ideas make humour**

(9) Kolo: *Na so one mad man carry cutlass, as he carry the cutlass, he no know where to go, na so he enter police station-WHOAH!*

Audience: Laugh

(10) Kolo: As he enter police station, the first door wey he see, if you see the way he take break the door, GBOAH! “Is this a police station or what?”

See where people dey fly commot for police station

Police people wey carry gun, thruway gun, everybody dey take off

Audience: Laugh

(11) Kolo: He see the next door, burst the next door, “Is this a police station or what?”

People, opportunity, the people wey den lock for inside cell, naso den dey take off, everybody.

Audience: Laugh

(12) Kolo: And you know say he get one of their DPO wey dey get big belle, wey dey sit down for inside.

Audience: Laugh

Kolo: As the mad man carry cutlass GBOSA! “Is this a police station or what?”

DPO start to dey shake.

DPO no know when he say, “No o, it is not a police station o. We sell recharge cards, we make phone calls ”

Audience: Laugh

The simple explanation for the texts is the juxtaposition of opposing ideas. In the first place why will a mad man decide to go to the police station, instead of the market? Why will the policemen that are supposed to ensure security in the society drop guns, and run away because of a mad man? The most humorous part of the event is the DPO, who is supposed to order his men to arrest the situation, overwhelmed with fear. Not just that, he, out of trepidation declares the police station a business center where they sell recharge cards and make phone calls. All these contradicting ideas are what induce laughter in the audience.

***The Maxim of Manner and Humour***

The maxim of manner generally governs the way the participants choose to construct their contributions in the conversation. The basic point is clarity and simplicity. The participants are expected to speak as clearly as possible, using language that is appropriate to the context of conversation. Let’s use this maxim to see how speakers can make listeners draw quite extensive implications by the way they flagrantly go against the maxim of manner.

(13) Kolo: Naso one teacher enter class

We no know say this teacher no well

The teacher gan self no know say we the students, we no well

Audience: Laugh

Kolo: But the way the teacher take enter we suppose don know but we no quick know

Na in the teacher enter, the first thing wey come outside of the teacher mouth na the way in take greet us, na in we take know say e be like say this teacher no well.

The teacher kom say “Now, Janet, tell the class where Christians worship”

Nain the girl kom stand up, “Christians worship in the church”

Because of say na only the girl raise up hand, the aunty kom say “take this cane, flog everybody.”

Audience: Laugh

Kolo: The teacher kom say “now second question”

She kom pose again.

Audience: Laugh

Kolo: She say, “Listen to this”

We say, yes we are listening

Audience: Laugh

Kolo: E say “Who can tell me where Muslims worship?”

Audience: Laugh

Kolo: Nobody gree\* answer.

The idiot stammerer guy wey sit down near my side, the guy kom raise up hand...

Na in the guy start... "Ha... ha... uhk" (he stammers)

Audience: Laugh

A speaker is expected to follow the conversational maxim of manner while communicating with others. The general idea is that you should speak as clearly as possible, using language appropriate to your listener and the context. This is somehow found wanting in the speech of both the teacher and the stammerer (Robinson). From the conversation above, it's apparent that both the teacher and the stammerer persist in violating the maxim of manner. At first, the teacher makes a startling introduction to the class. Then the stammerer displays in return a more amazing drama to the other members of the class. The utterance of the stammerer is filled with illegible and unorganized sentences. Through this, readers can tell the humour easily.

#### IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to analysis of the texts, we can conclude that humor often results from perceived violations of cooperative maxims. It has been established that Grice's cooperative principle is a precondition to context successful conversation, but in some given situation people try to achieve purpose or carry out special effects. Due to such occasional effects, they have to deviate from the principle consciously or unconsciously. Whereas when the cooperative principle and maxims are violated, we would not simply think speakers disobey the conversational rules or non-cooperate, on contrary, they do implement principles from the other side of coin, herein humor births in the special conversation. What this suggests is that there are some limitations to Grice's cooperative principle. The major weakness in Grice's theory is probably that it paints a rather ideal picture of the social conditions of communication. Although he admits that there are many situations in which speakers do not cooperate, nevertheless, the theory still sees cooperation as the universal disciplines in social interactions. The essay has therefore been able to work out the bond between the violation of Grice's cooperative principle and the creation of humor.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Apte, M. (1985). *Humour and Laughter: an anthropological approach*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- [2] Aristotle. (1934). 'Poetics' in *Aristotle's Poetics and Rhetoric*. Ed. T.A. Moxon. London: Dent.
- [3] Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic theories of humor*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- [4] Chard-Hutchinson, M. (1991). 'The function of humor in Bernard Malamud's fiction'. In *Humor*, 1-2, 177-87.

- [5] Chomsky, N. (1986). *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin and Use*. New York: Praeger.
- [6] Davies, C. (1990). *Ethnic humour around the world: a comparative analysis*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- [7] Douglas, M. (1968). 'The social control of cognition: some factors in joke perception'. *Man*, 361-76
- [8] Edwards, P. (ed.) (1967). *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan.
- [9] Ferrar, M. (1992). *The Logic of the Ludicrous: a pragmatic study of humor*. Phd. Thesis, University College London.
- [10] Fine, G. (1983). 'Sociological approaches to the study of humour'. In *Handbook of Humour Research*, 1. Ed. McGhee & Goldstein. New York: Springer-Verlag
- [11] Grice, H. (1975). 'The logic of conversation'. In *The Logic of Grammar*. California: Davidson, D. & Harman, G. Dickenson Publishing Co, INC.
- [12] Grice, H. (1989). *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [13] Hancher, M. (1980). 'How to play games with words: speech act jokes'. In *Journal of Literary Semantics*.
- [14] Johnson, R. (1978). 'Jokes, theories, anthropology'. In *Semiotics*. 22.3, 309-334
- [15] Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. New York: Longman.
- [16] Martinich, A. (1981). 'A theory of communication and the depth of humour'. In *Journal of Literary Semantics* 10.1, 20-31.
- [17] Morreall, J. (1983). *Talking Laughter Seriously*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- [18] Morreall, J. (1989). 'Enjoying Incongruity'. In *Humor* 2, 1-18.
- [19] Mulkay, M. (1988). *On Humour*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [20] Nerhardt, G. (1976). 'Incongruity and Funniness: toward a new description model' in *Humour and Laughter: theory, research and applications*. Ed. Chapman & Fort. London: John Wiley
- [21] *Night of a Thousand Laughs*. Vol 26, produced by Opa Williams, 67minutes, Obaino Musical Entertainment, 2014. DVD.
- [22] Pepicello, W. & Weisberg, R. (1983). 'Linguistics and humour'. In *Handbook of humor research*. Ed. McGhee & Goldstein. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- [23] Plato. (1861). 'Philebus'. In *The Works of Plato* 4. London: Henry Bohn.
- [24] Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- [25] Robinson, V. (1991). *Humor and the health professions*. New Jersey: Slack Thorofare.
- [26] Schultz, T. 'The role of incongruity and resolution in children's appreciation of cartoon humor'. In *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 13. 356-477.
- [27] Suls, J. (1983). 'Cognitive processes in humor appreciation'. In *Handbook of Humor Research*.
- [28] Ed. McGhee & Goldstein. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- [29] Weiwei, P. (2012). 'Linguistic Basis of Humor: In Uses of Grice's Cooperative Principle.' In *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 1.6.

#### AUTHORS

**First Author** – Oyebola Folajimi Kehinde, Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria  
Oyebolafolajimikehinde@gmail.com; 08037809310