

Politics of Humour and Political Humour in Nigerian Stand-Up Comedy

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Abstract

Stand-up comedy performance provides a semiotic space for mediating and critiquing every aspects of the society. An aspect of the society that is critiqued in stand-up performance is politics. The goal of this paper is to examine how politics is deployed in stand-up performance and to characterise political humour in Nigerian stand-up comedy. Data derived from the routines of three Nigerian stand-up comedians were purposively selected. The paper highlights how the performances of Nigerian stand-up comedians amount to political acts. Two kinds of political humour are found in Nigerian stand-up comedy, humour targeted at politicians and humour targeted at government policies. In any case political humour functions as a meta-pragmatic act in the context of stand-up performance in that the stand-up comedians use it to recycle and reinforce the dominant view of politics in the wider society. At the discourse level, it projects how the stand-up participants construe political reality and it borders on their social identities.

Keywords: political humour, Nigerian stand-up comedy, discourse, meta-pragmatic

Introduction

The term political denotes something relating to politics, and politics has been conceptualised in two dimensions. Chilton (2004) identifies the two perspectives through which politics has been defined. In the first perspective, politics is viewed as a “struggle for power between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it” (pg. 3). In the second perspective, it is “viewed as cooperation, as the practices and institutions that a society has for resolving clashes of interest over money, influence, liberty...” (Chilton, 2004:3). Given that politics deals with issues of economic, governmental, social and security interests, it is viewed as a serious preoccupation. This is why Poprawa (2012) opine that politics is the sphere of social life that is least likely associated with humour. It is commonly expected that political language will be made up of sophisticated oratory that demonstrate power, however, as Waisanen (2014) points out, politicians are once in a while required to perform stand-up comedy for their nations. Forms of humour are therefore found in political

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discourses. Likewise, people who are not engaged in the act of politics and who do not possess any conventional form of political power discuss politics by adopting different humorous motifs, such that “politics” pervades the public sphere and public jokelore genres like stand-up comedy, newspaper cartoons, sitcoms and other mediated forms of comedy. In stand-up comedy, comedians adopt as part of their themes issues in politics and make as their targets politicians and the actions of politicians.

The goal of this paper is to examine the deployment of “political issues” in Nigerian stand-up comedy. The paper investigates political humour in the performances of Nigerian stand-up comedians and how Nigerian stand-up comedy is an instance of political acts. Nigerian stand-up comedy is a relatively new genre of jokelore in Nigeria. Before the advent of stand-up comedy in Nigeria, comedy acts such as comic roles in movies, sitcom, traditional court jesters, newspapers cartoons and conversational joking are genres through which Nigerians enjoyed humour in and from the public sphere (Ayakoroma 2013; Filani 2016). Nigerian stand-up comedy is made available in video compact disc format and it is popularised through other media like the television, internet and radio. Few studies have investigated different aspects of Nigerian stand-up comedy: Adetunji (2013) discusses the pragmatic strategies used by the comedians to involve their audience in the interactional context of humour; Ayakoroma (2013) gives a historical overview of Nigerian stand-up comedy as a jokelore genre, while, Filani (2015A) and (2015B) are discourse theoretical approaches to Nigerian stand-up comedy. The first describes stand-up comedy as an activity type which involves the production of humour while the second identifies and analyses the discourse types in Nigerian stand-up comedy and their communicative as well as performance significances. The present study diverges from the previous ones in that it investigates the political dimensions of Nigerian stand-up performances.

For the purpose of illustrations, excerpts were taken from the performances of three Nigerian stand-up comedians, I Go Save, Princewill and Bovi. The performances of these comedians were purposively selected because they include political events, actions and government policy making as themes in their comedy routines. The routines that were targeted were those in which the comedians referred to political activities in Nigeria or used Nigerian politicians as their targets. The samples used in the analysis were transcribed from video recordings of the comedians’ performances. Nigerian stand-up comedians perform in Nigerian Pidgin which could be alternated with English. The extracts were presented in the

language of performance. In instances where it was needed, a translation was provided after each extract. For the ease of illustration, the lines of the excerpts were numbered.

Humour

Humour is a universal phenomenon. Attardo (2011) defines it as the technical term that covers anything that maybe perceived as funny, amusing and laughable. Some scholars have argued against the use of laughter (or amusement) as a defining factor for humour since it does not always lead to laughter and laughter may not necessarily means the presence of humour (Attardo, 1994). Humour scholars have argued that humour results from discovery of incongruity form a stimulus. Incongruity refers to “an unexpected element or event suddenly appearing in a given situation” (Tsakona and Popa 2011: 3). Incongruity is also defined as the existence of two incompatible meanings in a stimulus. One of the meanings is hidden while the other is more prominent. Humourists select the hidden meaning rather than the prominent one such that the stimulus violates the expectation of recipients. Violation of expectation, which arise from the discovery of incongruity, may not necessarily leads to humour. Scholars have argued that incongruity may generate fear, anxiety, suspense or panic (Attardo, 1994; Bardon, 2005). According to Attardo (2009), the users of humour must not feel threatened by the violation of their expectations and norms. Therefore, humour is further conceptualised as the enjoyment of incongruity. It is the enjoyment of incongruity that results in laughter.

Humour as a political phenomenon

To the average user, humour is a light-hearted phenomenon which primarily entertains. However, if the intentions underlying the use of humour are considered and the interactional functions it performs, it will be realised that humour is more than a form of entertainment. Its users adopt it to express their culture and project underlying ideologies. People employ humour to subvert social structures and reject unwanted realities. In joke exchanges, participants embed in their jokes the social reality or structure they do not agree with. Humour is, therefore, a political phenomenon.

In stand-up comedy language is the primary means through which humour is conveyed. Language and its use are politicised by its users (Joseph, 2006). Likewise humour, when it is used to achieve the intentions (apart from creating amusement) of the initiator, it becomes political. Working on stand-up comedy, Waisanen (2014) identifies ways by which humour is political. First, he notes that the contents of comedy are interpreted as harmless,

thus, its generic conventions and textual devices undermine reflective criticism. Humour in comedy performances is therefore “inescapably persuasive and political in focusing and deflecting various phenomena from public attention” (Waisanen 2014:427). Second, in their performances, comedians employ symbols, structures and themes which urge their audience to adopt certain interpretive commitments. Such interpretive frame created by the comics orient their audience towards laughter and taking light-heartedly whatever the comedians present in their performances. For instance, verbal abuse and taboo expressions which are not polite and which could threaten the positive face of the audience members are usually employed in stand-up performances. The stand-up comedians may direct them at the audience, however, audience members will not take offense. Rather, they will view it as part of the performance strategies of the comics. Furthermore, Waisanen(2014) ascertains that that the performances of leading American stand-up comedians project rhetorics of optimism, uncertainty and individualism, which serve political ends in their performances. Leading American stand-ups’ communicative acts are meant to orient the audience towards the materials and the social worlds of the comedians.

Moreover, since humour provides common people with insulated means of challenging dominant views, stand-up comedians engage in subversive and confrontational form of discourse (Greenbaum 1999). Their performances provide spaces for cultural and social mediations (Mintz 1985). Certainly, the mediating spaces they provide also help them to negotiate their political stance.

Stand-up comedy performance should not be taken as only an entertaining performance. It is a powerful political act since stand-up comedians project alternative ways for viewing the world. The comedians’ jokes and language choices tell us about the world view they propose (Waisanen 2014; Greenbaum 1999). Their performances provide awareness about social structures and cultural themes they are attempting to subvert. The humour in stand-up performances has serious social implications.

The political dimensions of stand-up performance are not just achieved through the presentation of jokes. The comedians have to set-up necessary background assumptions needed for interpreting their jokes and for deriving the political stance of the comedians. According to Glick (2007), comedians will have to teach the audience how to use the manifested assumptions to interpret their jokes. From the shared background knowledge with the audience, comedians focus on what they know the audience know, deconstruct it and then reconstruct it in their performances in a way that it will initiate humour in the audience. For

instance, mimicry, a strategy commonly adopted by stand-up comedians, shows that who- or whatever is being mimicked moved from a plane of being accepted (when such an act was initially produced) to a plane of being unaccepted (when the act is caricatured in the context of comedy performance). Stand-up comedians pick situation, actions, actors, beliefs and events and orient their audience to interpret them with their comic world view by presenting different and unexpected “language structure and ways of knowing, being and action” through their jokes (Waisanen 2011: 140).

The communicative frame under which stand-up performance exists also sets-up the performance as a political one. Stand-up comedy exists in the communicative frame which has been termed non-bona-fide (Raskin, 1985). In this frame of interaction, the basic presuppositions, expectations and procedures of social reality are not maintained. Communicators are not expected to be sincere to the truth of their propositions. In non-bona-fide frame, “the standards of feasibility, consistency and coherence are much less restrictive; incongruity and contradictions rule” (Tsakona and Popa 2011: 15). Given this, stand-up comedians become political whenever they exempt themselves from the social meanings that could be derived from their jokes by making explicit reference to the non-bona-fide mode, which licenses them to say a joke without facing social criticism. Joke tellers become political whenever they deny the semantics and social imports of their jokes by noting that they are only joking and being unserious. Technically, stand-up comedians maintain the non-bona-fide mode whenever they are performing by informing their audience that they are joking and by warning the audience that they should not take seriously what they have said. Manipulating the communicative frame of stand-up performance is a common practice in Nigerian stand-up comedy. In several instances when stand-up comedians target politicians, they usually make reference to the communicative frame of their performance by noting that they do not mean what they say in their jokes.

Political humour

Political humour refers to the kind of humour targeted at politicians, political office holders and their actions. Political humour can be broadly categorised into two: humour by politicians and humour about politicians. In the first instance, political humour refers to the humorous utterances found in the political discourse. It includes humour forms and motifs in parliamentary debates, political campaigns and speeches. The first kind of political humour occurs in settings where “serious talk” is expected to prevail; however, politicians do resort to

humour to ridicule their opponents. The second instance refers to jokes, parody and satire which the citizens use to talk about their political office holders. According to Poprawa (2012), political humour is more common in areas of social interaction other than political discourse. In any case, political humour is made popular through media platforms like television, internet and newspapers where they are easily accessible to the citizenry. Tsakona and Popa (2011) opine that because it exhibits explicit links to political discourse, it is impossible to process political humour without contextual knowledge on political issues.

The primary function of political humour is influenced by the existing types. The political humour found in political discourse functions “as a tool for political power struggle among political groups and intellectual elites” while the second type is to “point at the misdemeanours of citizens and governing politicians in order to educate through laughter” (Poprawa 2012: 119). Specifically, political humour indicates that political affairs are not in the state they ought to be. It mirrors political reality by accentuating the “inconsistencies and inadequacies of political decisions and acts, and the incompetence, recklessness, and corruption of politicians and political leaders” (Tsakona and Popa 2011:6).

Poprawa (2012) presents a different categorisation of political humour:

- a. Politicians talking about other politicians: Politicians could adopt humorous forms and motifs to ridicule their critics and opponents. In this sense, humour becomes a tool to discredit political opponents while fighting for political power and dominance. It is indirectly used to win the approval or sympathy of the citizenry. The domain of political discourse like parliamentary debate permits only serious talk, thus, anecdotes, jokes and witty remarks that are deemed informal and light-hearted should not be adopted by parliamentarians. However, studies like Saftoiu and Popescu (2014) have argued that parliamentarians do adopt humour to consolidate their political brands. Also, Archakis and Tsakona (2011) have observed that politicians to express criticism and aggression in a mitigated manner through their use of humour. Saftoiu and Popescu (2014) further state that parliamentary humour is a means of constructing identity, enhancing positive face of the politician and distracting the attention of the citizenry from more important issues. Political humour in this sense, falls within Chilton’s (2004) first perspective of politics. Politicians use ridicule to discredit each other while they fight for political power.
- b. Media commentary on political actors, actions and events; for instance, cartoons in the newspaper: Popa (2011) notes that the media has undertaken the role of

transmitting political humour. In modern democratic societies, political humour in the media serves as an active process and means of questioning and critiquing the public life, especially the choices made by the ruling class.

- c. The citizenry talking about politicians and politics: This third perspective of political humour is common in several societies. In repressive societies like those controlled by dictatorial leaders, people resort to humour to talk about the political actors and their actions. Humour does become a means by which the citizenry express their opinions and reject the excesses of their leaders. Humour in this sense is used as a resistance and escapism mechanism (Popa, 2011).

Politics of humour in Nigerian stand-up comedy

In order to properly contextualise political humour in Nigerian stand-up comedy, there is need to explore the ways by which Nigerian stand-up comedy performances amount to an instance of political acts. Thus, in this section, an attempt is made to explain the ways by which stand-up acts in Nigeria are political acts. Put differently, this section answers the question: what are the politics of the performance of jokes in Nigerian stand-up comedy?

The politics of joke performance in Nigerian stand-up comedy takes its root in the conversational structure of the stand-up interaction. In Nigeria, a typical performance involves a comedian amusing the audience by performing jokes, one-liners, bits and/or funny stories. Thus, as an interaction, stand-up comedy consists of two participants roles: the comedians are the initiators of the interaction (speakers) while the audience take the reciprocity role (hearers). Unlike the conversational joking genre where a current speaker might later become hearer and vice versa, in stand-up performance, the conversational roles of the participants remain the same, with the comedian endowed with superior conversational role. This is why Adetunji (2013) opines that in stand-up interactions, stand-up comedians assume inherent authority and power over the audience because of the role they play. Besides, the positioning of the comedians in the layout of the interaction is always foregrounded and the only speaking turn available in the interaction is reserved for the comedians, whom the audience cannot interrupt and who determines the point at which the audience can make their contribution. The conversational positioning of the comedians thus makes them the “powerful” participant whose contribution is politically motivated to amuse the audience. Any form of verbal or nonverbal contribution from the comedians is an instance

of manipulating the performance space; such manipulation is meant to achieve the goal of comedians- winning the approval of the audience.

Closely linked to the conversational authority to hold on to the floor during the period of the performance is the comedians' authority to determine the point at which the audience can give their contribution, which is usually in the form of affiliative responses. Apart from this, the comedians determine their jokes' structures, themes and targets. Most especially, the audience are aware that they are at the receiving end of whatever the comedians present and that they cannot question the logic in any of the jokes performed by the stand-up comedians. Put differently, the audience have submitted themselves to the comedians to be led in a garden-path; therefore, they cannot question the comedians' styles or sense in the jokes.

Another politics of performance which make stand-up comedy political is the manipulation of the meta-communicative frame of stand-up performance. Stand-up performance exists in the playful or unserious frame of communication (non-bona-fide). The propositions and the implicature derived from the comedians' routines are not meant to be given any serious consideration since they are derived from the humorous mode of communication. In this view, performances are political in that through the subtle means of comedy, Nigerian stand-up comedians challenge social order and political order. Specifically, they make political issues and actions in Nigeria the themes of their jokes, and, politicians and political office holders in Nigeria the targets of their jokes. By so doing, Nigerian stand-up comedians sensitize their audiences about the state of the country's political affairs. However, the comedians are well aware that their routines carry serious social implications and that their routines deconstruct social reality. Therefore, they reinforce the assumption that their jokes are uttered within the frame of non bona-fide mode of communication. They warn that the audience should not take any serious implicature from their routines.

The choice of the linguistic code that is used as the medium for the performance of jokes in Nigerian stand-up comedy also constitutes a political act. Nigeria is a multilingual country with several indigenous languages. These languages have been classified into major and minor languages. Rather than selecting one of its indigenous languages, Nigeria adopts English as its official language. There is also Nigerian Pidgin (NP). The indigenous languages are assigned unofficial status, thus, they perform low functions. The English language is used as the language of government communication, judiciary, education and media; it is the lingua franca. Nigerian Pidgin also functions like a lingua franca, however, compared with English, its sociolinguistic status can be described as low. Given this

background, it would be expected that Nigerian stand-up comedians will perform in a language through which they will reach audiences across Nigeria multi-ethnic nationalities. Given that English is the language of wider communication in Nigeria and that it performs high and official functions, it would be expected that the comedians would pick English as the language of performance. However, Nigerian stand-up comedians use NP as the language through which they perform their jokes. The choice of NP is political for a number of reasons. First is that using NP will enable them to reach a wide audience across social and ethnic barriers. Should they choose to perform in English, the comedians would be viewed as bookish and too serious since English is the language of instruction in educational institutions in the country. Also, their performance will be incomprehensible to people who are not educated and cannot speak English¹. Thus, their performances will be exclusive to educated Nigerians. Second, should they choose to perform in any indigenous language (for instance, their first language(s)), then their performances will be limited to only members of the comedians' ethnic groups as other Nigerians may not comprehend the language. Any of this choice will reduce the number of prospective audience that could attend a stand-up comedy show. Therefore, the choice of NP amounts to what Joseph (2006:5) describes as the "personal politics of talking to others" (p. 5) and "the politics of which language to speak" (Joseph 2006:10-11). Besides, Adetunji (2013:6) describes Nigerian stand-up comedians' choice of NP as "an affiliative resource, an index of a desire to speak with, rather than to, their audiences" since the stand-up comedians are university degree holders who can converse very well in the English language.

Political humour in Nigerian stand-up comedy

Political humour has been described above as any form of humour targeted at politicians and their actions or attitudes. In stand-up comedy, political humour includes any form of joke, anecdote or one-liner which is targeted at politicians and other government officials. Such form humour in Nigerian stand-up comedy could be grouped into two: jokes about politicians and/or government officials like members of the executive, legislature and executive, and jokes about government policies. The first has to do with the behaviour, attitude, actions or inactions of the politician who is the target of the stand-up comedian. The other has to do with the laws and policies enacted by the government and it may not necessarily involve a politician. The second examines how incompatible political issues and policies of the

¹ English language is primarily acquired in educational institutions in the country.

government are and how the comedians view political actions inappropriate. For the two types of political humour in Nigerian stand-up comedy, the comedians have to depend on shared knowledge of political events and actors in Nigeria in order to instantiate them. The excerpts below exemplify the two types of political humour in Nigerian stand-up performances.

Excerpt 1 [I Go Save]

Thank God I'm a Nigerian

And I'm proud to be a Nigerian

But the kind tins weydemdey try bring this country{...},

He fit work o but I'm not sure say he go work

Re!-branding!! Nigerian!

5

Where we dey start that one from!?

Dey don go pass Lagos Road!? (P)

We just dey talk things with mouth mouth all the time

We just dey talk am with mouth re-branding! Nigeria!

The other time, they say this kind time,

10

two years ago, this time, we go don get stand-by light

Till now! Na stand-by generator we dey get! (P)(AL)

Our leaders, most time, their talk! dey make me vex!!

No be! This country! Need rebranding! Na the leaders! Need! Rebranding! (AC) (AL)

[Translation: Line 3- I am not sure their policies will work/ It may work but I am not sure it will work/Line 6- Where are we going to start rebranding/ Have they passed through Lagos Road/ We have just be paying lip-service all the time/ We are just paying lip-service to rebranding Nigeria/ The other time, we were told that by this time/ two years ago, by this time we would have constant electricity supply/ but up till now, we still make use of our power generators for electricity/ most of the time, our leaders annoy me with their speeches/ It is not the country that needs rebranding; it is the leaders that should be rebranded]

Excerpt 1 presents an instance of political humour which is targeted at government policies. In this instance, the stand-up comedian, I Go Save, targets the Federal Ministry of Information and Communication's policy to locally and internationally rebrand the country's image. The rebranding programme was launched by the Minister who was in charge of the

ministry in 2009, Professor Dora Akunyili. Prof. Dora had previously served as the head of Nigeria's regulatory agency for drugs and food and she recorded so much success. In March 2009, she launched her rebranding campaign which formed the core the policy of the ministry while she served as a minister. The campaign was launched with the slogan "Good People, Great Nation". However, her rebranding programme was greeted with lots of reservations. In Excerpt 1 I Go Save expresses the populist opinion about the rebranding policy.

Excerpt 2 [Princewill]

Now, good, look at America, check their past presidents,

Their names too fine for country to fail! (AL) (AC)

The name is just too fine, they cannot fail

Listen to names like Bill Clinton, George Bush, Barack Obama,

How they wan take fail?

5

But when you come to Nigeria here, the name be like failure,

The name wowo pass the state of the country,

You go hear like General Sani! Abacha! (P) (AL)

You don hear that one, you go hear Buhari! (AL)

Olusegun! Obasanjo!! (P) (AL)

10

It is frustrating (AL)

[Translation: Line 2- Their names are too fine for the country to fail/ Line 5- How will they fail/ But in Nigeria, the names are similar to failure/the names are more terrible than the state of the nation/ You will hear names like General Sani Abacha/ You will also hear Buhari/ Olusegun Obasanjo]

[Excerpt 3, Bovi]

I like women, but, una too, una too dey wicked person

and anything wey involve women people go just dey shout

dem say one senator marry 13 years

Una dey fear? Na true na

But dem dey lie for the man's head

5

and I no dey like when den dey lie for person's head

I can feel his pain say he married 13 years

The girl is not 13. She is 14. (AL)

[Translation: I like women but women are callous/ And anything that involve women draws a lot of arguments/ they say a senator married a 13 year old/ Are you surprised? It is true/ but they lied against the man/ and I don't like it when people lie against a person/ I can imagine the criticism he had attracted to himself because of his marriage to a 13 year old]

Unlike Excerpt 1, Excerpts 2 and 3 present instances where political humour is targeted at political office holders. In 2, the stand-up comedian targets Nigeria political class, specifically, people who have held the county's topmost political position- President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. What the comedian did in Excerpt 2 was that he compared Nigerian former presidents with American past presidents. To achieve this comparison, he used different stylizations in articulating the names of the people who had been presidents in the two countries. For the American presidents, he used a slower speech rate and he approximated his speech to Standard English. Conversely, for the Nigerian presidents, using his normal speech rate, he forcefully articulated the names of the presidents by placing strong emphasis on each name.

Like Excerpt 2, Excerpt 3 also targets a politician. However, its focus is not on the political acts of the politician, but on his "anti-social" act- the senator's marriage to an underage girl. Here, the goal of the comedian was to lampoon the politician for marrying someone who is not matured for marriage. We must note that the senator had argued that, in his religion, his marriage to an underage girl is permissible.

Discourse functions of political humour

This section answers the question: what is/are the discourse function(s) of political humour in interactions and performances like stand-up comedy. To answer this question, there is a need to make recourse to a theory of discourse. In this sense, Halliday's theory of language as socio-semiotics, which views language as having a functional part, comes handy. The theory is concerned with the social functions that language performs when it is put into actual speech situations. Using the three meta-functions of language identified by Halliday, the functions of political humour in stand-up performances are identified below:

Ideational level

In the Hallidayan sense, ideational function of language has to do with how human experience is construed using language and how language is used to construct social reality. Applied to stand-up comedy performances, specifically political humour in stand-up comedy, the ideational perspective accentuates how the stand-up comedians construe their political acts and how they use humour to construe and construct the political acts in their communities. The stand-up acts are constructed as “unserious” while the political reality of their communities is constructed as “serious”. However, because the political acts are ridiculed in the stand-up performances, the serious imports of the political jokes are taken light-heartedly. It is in this vein that the audience also interpret the political aspects of stand-up performance. The jokes, together with the incongruity in them, are thus, the stand-up comedians’ representations of their political reality. In this sense, stand-up political jokes “reflect discursive symbols and numerous colloquial conceptualisations of political reality that display images, attitudes and evaluations... of political events at the level of colloquial narrations” (Poprawa 2012: 121).

Textual level

In stand-up comedy, political humour is presented in verbal jokes which may be supported by gestures and other nonverbal elements. These verbal jokes are prudently constructed to include political actors and political actions (see Excerpts 1-3 above). The text is designed in way to contain a context, which differs from the context of situation (the stand-up performance). In the stand-up performance, political jokes point to their own contexts which are defined by their contents- political situations, political actors and political action. Any political joke in stand-up performance is thus an instance of intertextuality or mixing of genres. Given the intertextual links to politics, two social functions can be identified. The first has to do with the primary reason why the participants of stand-up performance gather. Here, the intertextual link to politics forms the basis of humour for the participants. The second has to do with what the participants use political matters to achieve. In this sense, political humour surfaces in satirical manner. The participants use jokes on and about politicians and political actions to correct the social vices of the political actors in their society. The laughter that results from the political jokes is meant to align political actors into well-adapted behaviour through the humiliation it presents.

Also, there is an aspect of the textuality of verbal jokes which provides resources for construing the ideational meaning of humour. Every joke must contain an element of contradiction and/or violation of expectation. Humour literatures have described this as incongruity. In every stand-up political joke, the comedians weave in some sorts of incongruities. For instance, in extract 1, the comedian proposed that the leaders who suggested rebranding for the country are the ones that needed to be rebranded and not the country.

Interpersonal level

The interpersonal function of political humour in stand-up comedy is intertwined with the roles of the participants of stand-up performance. Whether stand-up comedians present political humour or not, it is expected that they will always initiate humour in their audience. It is also assumed that the role of the audience is to laugh at the monologues of the comedians. Regardless of this, political humour accentuates an assumption from the macro discourse level of stand-up performance. When the stand-ups political humour elicits laughter from the audience, it shows that both the comedian and the audience construe the target political actor and action in a similar manner. They share ideational experience about the targeted political class and they have a similar sense of humour. The success of political jokes indicates that the participants view political word the same way. It thus borders on the social identities of the joke teller and joke recipient.

Political humour as meta-pragmatic

Political humour within stand-up comedy performance space can be viewed as a meta-pragmatic act. There are two senses in which it is possible to speak of political humour in stand-up performance as a meta-pragmatic act. In the first sense, it refers to the ability to “do politics” within the performance space. This sense refers to the comedians’ license to torch serious issues without creating a fire, that is, comedians’ license to dwell on serious matter in a manner that is viewed light-heartedly. In the second sense, it highlights the conditions that make political humour felicitous within the stand-up performance space. This sense refers to what is constitutive of political humour. These two perspectives are interwoven with the first dependent on the second.

In doing politics, the comedians’ political humour amounts to a speech act with a meaning dependent on dependent on the comedians’ delivery of the joke and the conditions

that make the political humour felicitous. The conditions that make political humour felicitous are drawn from the common ground between the comedians and their audience. For any political humour, there should be a common knowledge of who the target is, and the action of the target that makes up the activity in the joke. A comedian can only use a target that is well-known to the audience within a performance. Political humour is felicitous when a comedian employs shared background knowledge in constructing the humour, thus, such humour “recycles and reinforces the dominant values and views on politics” (Tsakona and Popa 2011: 2). In the excerpts presented above, the comedians’ targets are individuals well known to the participants of the stand-up show as political actors in Nigerian political space. Furthermore, the excerpts present the popular perspectives about the political actors and their action, for instance, Excerpt 2 is a joke constructed on the assumption that Nigeria is a poor country and has not developed because of poor leadership. The second aspect of doing politics is that political humour foregrounds the creative and critical potential of the initiator of humour. In this sense, the comedian becomes another social actor who operates within the political space of his community. His/her political humour represents his/her perspectives on the political situation of the community. It is in this view that the comedian challenges “the status quo and allow for creative conceptualisations of political affairs” (Tsakona and Popa 2013: 6).

Conclusion

Stand-up comedy is a semiotic domain for articulating meanings and creating new signs. Its practice offers the public a tool and social space for reflecting on their contemporary conditions. One of the things offered by the comedian in the stand-up space is political humour. The stand-up political humour is a form of discourse which is used by comedians to offer creative conceptualisations of the political situations of their societies. In this paper, an attempt has been made to describe political humour in Nigerian stand-up comedy. Political humour in Nigerian stand-up comedy has been grouped into two: jokes about politicians/political office holders and jokes about government policies. In any case, political humour in stand-up performance amounts to the performer “doing politics”.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions

- / Indicates line boundaries in the translations
- ⊒ falling intonation
- , A pause less than a second
- ! Accents, it indicates emphasis. When it is more than one, it indicates a stronger degree of emphasis
- ? Raising intonation
- (P) Significant pause, a pause more than a second
- AC Audience claps
- AL Audience laughs
- {...} Unable to transcribe
- Word** Yellow highlight indicates that the utterance is slower than surrounding ones
- Word** Green highlight indicates that the utterance is faster than the surrounding ones