Chapter 4
Speaking in the Free Marketplace of Ideas: The Stylistics of Humour in “Blogversations”

Bimbola Idowu-Faith
Bowen University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This chapter applies the mechanisms of conversational humour to interactional processes in blogs. With blogs giving room for uninhibited personal and interactional publishing which create virtual communities through written contributions that can best be regarded as conversations or “blogversations,” blogs are veritable sites for the investigation of conversational humour. Drawing its data from Linda Ikeji’s Blog, the chapter investigates how the blog author creates humorous keys to induce humorous turns from her readers and how the readers respond to and sustain the humour. The chapter also examines how readers undermine the seriousness of posts lacking keyed humour by generating humour against author’s expectation. As humour occurs from both author’s and readers’ ends, it is established that conversational humour is a collaborative effort that strengthens social bonds and acts as a tool for sustaining entertainment and for motivating blog users to visit, to speak, to hear, and to be heard again.

INTRODUCTION

The weblog, that is “blog”, is a participatory media genre within the broader field of computer-mediated communication (CMC) which emerged in 1997 and has ever since been growing as a virtual medium for the production of diary-like texts on diverse topics of interest. The growth of the blog is especially “driven by the twin motors of free, user-friendly blogging applications such as Bloggers and LiveJournal and the global media exposure of A-list bloggers” (Hookway, 2008, p. 94). Generally speaking, “blogs are web pages in which dated entries appear in reverse chronological order so that the reader views the most recently written entries first” (Page, 2014, p. 42). In terms of texture, blogs may be multimodal
 Speaking in the Free Marketplace of Ideas

because different semiotic resources like writing, image, photograph, video, animation, and sound may be employed for textual composition. By this, blogs break down genre and media boundaries.

Though blogs are circulated in written forms, they are inherently speech as they are sometimes interpersonal, dialogues, loosely structured, concerned with the present, informal, narrative, event-oriented, contextualised, and concrete (Durant & Lambrou, 2009, p. 11). This thus explains why researchers continue to employ the tools of conversation and discourse analyses to the blogosphere and to other text-based virtual communities. The blog is not just a hybrid of both writing and speech; it exists within the democratic space in cyberspace. Wilson (2001) has significantly argued that cyberspace is a “liberatory” space which is both “equalising and non-discriminatory” in nature (par. 1). Thus, in cyberspace, “it does not matter whether you are a dog or a god in real life” (Oke, 2004, p. 16) because “the voice of the Other is not only accommodated, but it is also always aired and heard. [Such that]...the depressed, distressed, oppressed, repressed, and suppressed citizens of nations have no fear in ‘walking’ into the ‘emancipatory’ ambit of cyberspace for varied self-expressions … [which] give both Self and Other limitless and untrammelled opportunities for different forms of social experimentations” (Idowu-Faith, 2012, p. 4).

As a matter of fact, the democratic nature of cyberspace is greatly embedded in the invisibility of the persona in cyberspace. That users are invisible in cyberspace gives them the opportunity to express themselves without limits and to be creative in their use of language. Reasoning along this line of thought, Hookway (2008) says that “the anonymity of the online context … means bloggers may be relatively unselﬁshabout what they write since they remain hidden from view” (p. 93). Following Carter’s suggestion, North (2007) submits that “creativity is more likely to occur in familiar and informal contexts where there is less interpersonal risk, and for this reason, we might expect to find it in the informal written conversations that occur in online environments” (p. 538). Because the readers of Linda Ikeji’s blog, the blog under investigation, are dispersed across different geographical locations within and outside Nigeria and rarely have course to meet face-to-face, it is not surprising that they exploit the blog as both a medium for publishing uninhibited personal and interpersonal texts and for producing conversational humour which are sometimes ingrained in conversational incivilities. Both readers’ comments and readers’ humour serve as the lifelines that sustain the existence of a blog. All these justify the blog medium as a veritable site for the investigation of spontaneous and naturally-occurring speech events.

BLOG AS CONVERSATION

Ever since the emergence of the Internet, scholars have been busy interpreting its implication from various theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. Silver (2000) however notes that most of such research has focused on the “‘twin pillars of cybercultural studies’: virtual communities and identities” (cited in Hookway, 2008, p. 91). As one significant cybercultural community, the blog has received remarkable attention from linguists who investigate the nature of language in computer-mediated discourses. For example, Jacobson (1996) investigated the pragmatics of naming in computer-mediated discourse; Herring (1994) examined intercultural aspects of politeness; Baym (1996) studied the management of disagreement; Herring (1999) considered interactional coherence; and O’Neill and Martin (2003) examined turn-taking.

One of the pertinent issues in the linguistic study of the blog medium is the extent to which discourse procedures in blogs as text-based interactions align with discourse procedures in speech or face-to-face interactions. Linguists are of the opinion that text-based interactions in blogs can best be described as