Chapter 15
Contextual Beliefs and Pragmatic Strategies in Online Humour: An Example of Akpos Jokes

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ABSTRACT

The social media in Nigeria provides an avenue where cultural practices are produced and consumed. One of such practices is joking. Specifically, a genre of jokes found in Nigeria social media space is Akpos jokes. The goal of this chapter is to explore the contextual beliefs in Akpos jokes and the pragmatic strategies employed by the writers of Akpos jokes. Akpos jokes are narratives about an imaginary character named Akpos. The study benefited from contextual belief theory (Odebunmi, 2006) while the data comprised jokes randomly picked from a blog and Facebook pages where Akpos jokes are published. The study revealed that the writer(s) of the Akpos jokes manipulate contextual beliefs like shared knowledge of language and shared knowledge of situations and events in Nigeria in order to generate humour. The writers also employ Implicature and stereotyping of the character of Akpos for humorous effects.

INTRODUCTION

Humour is part of cultural universals produced in interactions. Its prototypical form, jokes, is constantly employed in interactions among participants for various purposes. When participants employ jokes in their interactions, they adopt different strategies for their jokes. Specifically, these strategies involve the use and manipulation of existing background information between the joke teller and recipient. This paper is a pragmatic investigation of a genre of Nigerian jokes- Akpos Jokes, which was introduced into Nigerian cultural space through the social media. Akpos jokes are products of the influence of the

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social media platforms like Facebook, blogs and Nigerian virtual communities. This study is interested in how, in the construction of the jokes (an instance of language in use), contextual beliefs are employed and pragmatic strategies are manipulated for the creation of mirth in the recipients.

Akpos jokes are instances of verbal humour. The term verbal humour refers to humorous forms that are produced by the means of language (Dynel, 2009). Verbal humour may come in terms of jokes, which are further divided into referential and verbal jokes. Ritchie (2004, p. 14) posits that “verbal humour is wholly dependent on the language used, and is regarded as not translatable into another language, whereas in referential humour, the amusing substance is in what the jokes say- the events described, the characters, the situations- rather than the details of the language used”. Akpos jokes are instances of referential jokes because the humour in the genre is based on what the jokes say, and this draws from background information. This is why a pragmatic approach is adopted in investigating Akpos jokes in this study.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Jokes are cultural and linguistic innovations. It can consequently be assumed that they are traditionally found in all ethnolinguistic groups of Nigeria. Each culture in Nigeria has its own repertoire of jokes and also certain rules which guide the use of jokes in interactions. With the advent of internet in Nigeria and the social networking sites it offers, new trends were introduced in cultural interactions in the country. One of the areas where innovative trends were articulated is the production and consumption of humour. With the internet, the art and act of joking develop new dimensions, one of which is Akpos jokes.

Akpos jokes are humorous creative narrations which are very popular in the social media space in Nigeria. The social media are cultural spaces that have been used by Nigerians to construct dialogues where their socio-cultural and ideological inclinations are articulated and negotiated. This social space accommodates the mode for joking, what Dynel (2009, p. 1286) calls “humorous mode/frame/key”. In this interactional frame, speakers are not held responsible for the sincerity or truth of their propositions. It is this humorous mode in the social media that licenses the creation of Akpos jokes. These jokes are called Akpos jokes because they are created around an imaginary character- Akpos, who is always the major character in the jokes and sometimes the butt of the jokes. Ayakoroma (2013) describes Akpos Jokes as a brand on the social media and as a series of jokes centred on the life of a teenager- Akpos. Akpos is a very predictable character as he is always portrayed as a narrow-minded and one-way thinker who seeks the easiest means to solve a problem. In the jokes, Akpos’ utterances and actions hold the punchlines.

The word Akpos is clipped from some common names in the Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria. Some of these names are Akporido, Akpofure, Onoakporobo, Akpororo, etc. Nigeria’s Niger-Delta Region is known for youthful restiveness. The social unrest of the region is not unconnected to exploration of crude oil in the area. The Niger-Delta region of Nigeria is rich in large deposit of crude oil which has been explored and has been the mainstay of the Nigerian economy. The exploration of oil has had adverse effects on the environment, with the inhabitants no longer having their normal means of livelihood, as the oil spillage continues to ravage the waters, killing whatever life that exists in it, and making fishing next to impossible. Rather than providing basic amenities in the region, the government, as well as the oil companies working in the area, has chosen over the years, to neglect the region. The neglect of the