

Chapter 2

Negotiation of Wit in *Facebook* Humour

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ABSTRACT

This chapter unpacks the humorous contents of selected Facebook-based Akpos jokes which have received inadequate attention in the scholarship with respect to wit negotiation which mostly indexes the jokes. Six out of fifteen sampled jokes have been analysed with the theoretic aid of Istvan Kecskes' Socio-Cognitive Approach (SCA), aspects of the common ground theory, aspects of conversation analysis and elements of selected humour theories. The analysis shows three forms of wit negotiation: negotiation of mis-oriented twists, negotiation of dis-preference and negotiation of un-designed twists. In the respective cases, the talk initiating speakers have their logic flawed by recipient speakers, usually Akpos, and consequently get outsmarted; earlier sequentially dispreferred social choices are re-negotiated as preferred options in the light of new discursive realities; and the interactive designs or expectations of talk initiating participants receive undersigned or unexpected sequential responses in symmetrical or asymmetrical relationships. The paper argues that the joke characters' situationally adaptive orientation to apriori or emergent common ground and intention demonstrates the Akpos jokes' recontextualisation of particular Nigerian social and cultural experiences through the characters' socio-cognitive designs in the mediated encounters. It concludes that while these designs offer the relaxant effects jokes are naturally meant to yield, their negotiation mechanisms provide resources for the application of Kecskes' SCA in Facebook humour and produce sarcasm with a wing of moral lessons.

INTRODUCTION

The *Facebook* is a veritable Internet host of visual and verbal texts designed to boost rapport among its users. Part of the resources for establishing the rapport is the posting and sharing of humorous discourses which may be short, witty statements or extended, conversation-styled exchanges. Among other foci, the humours exploit pictures and words to generate laughter and consequently keep *Facebook* friends

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bonded. Their value as a social media network resource for emotional therapy and contact maintenance is, therefore, inestimable.

A particular joke type that is popularly shared among most *Facebook* users in Nigeria, and that constitutes the data source for the present study, is the Akpos stories. Created around the funny but highly intelligent character named Akpos, the jokes, often in dialogic form, centre on the characters' social, administrative, cultural, political and emotional experiences. They typically present encounters where Akpos enters into wit battle with others, often with the skills to outwit the other parties. This scenario means that the wits of the parties get negotiated in the mediated context of the jokes, and the punch line often develops at the point where the superior wit emerges. Thus, the characters orient to apriori and emergent common ground and intentions (Kecskes, 2014), which put into operation their pre-encounter and in-encounter goals. Often, what are negotiated in the jokes are emergent cues as apriori common ground and intentions typically work to provide communicative facility between the parties but not to offer negotiable salience which often occurs as a twist undersigned by at least one of the parties.

Apparently, wit negotiation, defined in this study as the strategic interchange of clever propositions between characters in the mediated context of Akpos jokes, constitutes an important factor in processing the interpretation of the *Facebook*-based Akpos humour and by extension several other humours presented in conversation formats in Computer-mediated Communication (CMC). Yet, previous studies on CMC have explored other concerns than the negotiation of wit in the humour, and have utilised other instruments than the Kecskesian (2014) socio-cognitive approach (SCA) which accounts for apriori and emergent common ground and intention, relevant as they are to the discourses.

A number of extant studies have examined the functions or roles of humour in online communication (Marone (2015); Hubler and Bell (2003); Baym (1995); Schnurr and Rowe (2008); Norrick and Kelvin (2008); Taylor (2009); and Stoll (2015)). Others have given attention to humour markers in online communication (Adams (2012) and Holcombs (1997)). Studies in the former group have explored such context-shaped functions of humour in online communication as veiling capability, mitigating negativity and boosting participation to ensure community cohesion. Research in the latter group has identified as markers of humour punctuation marks, formatting, emoticons, laughter, capitalisation and spacing, adapted effectively to CMC interaction to show users' orientations to rapport building, identity creation, power relation, face alignment or disalignment and offensiveness. Of all these studies, only Stoll (2015) focuses on the roles of humour in *Facebook* posts. While it investigates humour in *Facebook* within the frame of credibility and social attraction, its engagement of the issues neither utilises the socio-cognitive approach nor considers the participants' negotiation of wit in the humour.

The fact is that while previous studies have reported on discourse and pragmatic features of Internet-based humour, and have demonstrated how participants use them within their affordances to conduct personal and group communicated socio-emotional activities, their non-consideration of the wit elements in the jokes, a quality which accounts for most punchline-characterised jokes, points to a neglect of a major pragmatic feature of *Facebook* (and to a large extent most online) jokes, leaving several chunks of the jokey interactions unexplained. In addition, the non-use of SCA limits the depth of earlier research to account for the pragmatic dynamism of the interactions, which should reveal more clearly the design of the joke constructor and the goals of the joke characters.

In the light of the foregoing argument, the present study identifies the witty contents of selected *Facebook*-based Akpos jokes and discusses the characters' orientation to apriori and emergent strategies in negotiating wits. These enable a cognitive entry into the discursive space of the texts and provide a context-shaped account of the interactive structure of the encounters. For data, six Akpos humorous con-

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