

Chapter 8

Language and Humour in Cameroon Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores language use that incites laughter in Cameroon e-mail, Facebook, Yahoo Messenger and mobile telephone SMS. The incongruity and the incongruity-resolution theory (Ritchie, 1999; Mulder & Nijholt, 2002) and Gricean maxims were useful in the analysis of 270 electronic chats and messages. Results indicate patterns of language that create humour like flouting of Gricean maxims, special repetition of punctuation marks, sound devices, emoticons and hyperbole. Cameroonians employ these humorous linguistic forms for pleasure, intimacy and to maintain cultural values. It was established that the Facebook platform was more hospitable to humour than the others because all the linguistic markers that were detected to generate humour were found in it with high rates of occurrences.

INTRODUCTION

Language that creates humour is significant in the linguistic field nowadays (Attardo, 1997; Attardo & Raskin 1991, 1994; Ruch, Attardo & Raskin 1993). This type of language use does not simply convey information, but produces a laughing effect. Some linguists (Attardo, 1993; Attardo & Raskin 1994) argue that such language most often defy the conventions of normal language but are socially unobjectionable. In order to communicate appropriately, online language users bring in linguistic resources such as spelling deviances, sound devices, special repetition of punctuation marks, emoticons and violation of Gricean maxims. Most of these involve the use of language in an absurd manner thus incongruity. In the process of producing these illogical linguistic forms, internet users are creating humour aimed at making their addressees to relax, enjoy the communication and “bond” with them. Humour is considered as pleasure in incongruity. And incongruity is based on the view of using language in an irreconcilable way (see Bai, 2011; Morreal, 2012; Raskin, 1985; Ritchie, 1999). It is therefore believed that when some CMC users write, they go against the cooperative principle and the rules of the language. They do this not only for friendliness with their addressee, but also to generate humour.

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Communication technologies like the Internet and mobile telephone are changing and engrossing more users steadily. Recent statistics from the Internet World Stats Newsletter (2015) puts the number of confirmed users for December 2014 at 3,075,047,787 with a 42.3% penetrate rate world-wide. There were 6.5 billion mobile subscribers in the world as of 2014. The number of mobile-only Internet has increased from about 14 million in 2010 to 788 million users in 2015. Cameroon is a component of this global Internet and mobile telephone community. 1.486.815 Cameroonians were on the Internet with 6.4% penetration in June 2014. Internet penetration in Cameroon saw an increase of 480.321 (1.4%) in two years from 1.006.494 (5.0%) in 2012 to 6.4% in 2014. This Information from the Internet World Stats Newsletter places Facebook (henceforth FBK) as the world leader social web with an increase in daily active users world-wide from 665 million in 2013 to 936 in 2015. This represents a 40.1% expansion rate. Cameroon had 562.480 (2.8%) FBK users as of December 2012. This remarkable increase in the use of communication technologies in Cameroon and the world is probably due to low Internet access cost, smartphones with better batteries and other mobile devices.

The fast development of these communication tools has eased contact between individuals in diverse parts of the world. This technological progress has led to the expansion of the social media with many friendly web designs such as FBK, Yahoo Messenger (here-in-after YM), electronic mail (hereafter e-mail), Whatsapp and Tweeter. These platforms and their users have brought in some alterations in the way language is used. Some linguists (Baron, 2003, 2008; Crystal, 2006, 2008; Herring, 2001, 2012) have described the English used in these platforms as fractured, less complex and less standard. However, the Internet linguists think that it is a variety which is specific to the technological context, and it reflects the potency of creativeness in the language. As the linguistic media continues to grow, users bring in other forms of language and this gives linguists the opportunity to investigate them. This is the case of humour in Computer-mediated communication (CMC) contexts which is fascinating, yet has not been sufficiently explored.

The aim of this chapter is to carry out an analysis of language that creates humour in the context of Cameroon FBK chats, informal e-mails, YM chats and mobile telephone Short Message Service (SMS). It examines how the markers create additional meaning and help participants to “bond”. The researcher probes into forms of humour that comprise new components in English and those that are unique to Cameroon. Participants’ responses to humour are equally examined.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

The relation between language and humour in social media contexts has not been given attention by researchers in Cameroon. However, some studies out of Cameroon have investigated linguistic humour in CMC. Explorations into linguistic markers of humour in some online contexts are seen in works such as Adams (2012); Audrey (2012); Baym (1995) and Skovholt, Grønning and Kankaanranta (2014). Features like punctuation, ellipsis, emoticons, formatting and laughter were established to be humour patterns in CMC. Skovholt, Grønning and Kankaanranta (ibid) consider emoticons in workplace e-mails, among other things, as humorous irony markers. Bai (2011) examines humour from the dimension of relevance theory. Her discussion centres on garden-path, cognitive contrast and deduction of the implicature. Georgakopoulou (2011) affirms that some informal e-mail interactants in Greek and English bring in incongruous elements in their texts and this brings about various types of code-alterations.

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