

# Chapter 10

## Discursive Power Relations in *Naijabookofjokes.com*

**Rotimi Taiwo**

*Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria*

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter is premised on the fact that a close reading of humour can provide an insight into what is lurking in the social mind of the humorist. A critical discourse analysis of twenty-five jokes sourced from Naijabookofjoke.com, a website dedicated to jokes, mainly within the Nigerian socio-cultural setting observes the selected jokes are used to context social and symbolic order among the people, especially through the expression of power, Otherness and stereotyping. The study also reveals that jokes can either be offensive (sword) or defensive (shield) in nature. They employ literary conventions such as exaggeration, allusions, metaphors, wit, and satire to discursively express socio-cultural issues.*

### INTRODUCTION

One major pastime in modern society is making and listening to jokes. Jokes are part of the linguistic and interactional processes in every human society that help to break the routines of mundane life and allow listeners to relax. Jokes are generally believed to be expressions made with the intention to elicit laughter and amusement from the listener. They could vary in form: a short expression, a single word, a picture, a performance, a drama, a gesture, a story, and so forth. The space for sharing jokes also varies. They include, but are not limited to any social gathering (such as weddings, birthdays), workplace, classroom, church, newspaper, television, radio, and of recent the cyberspace. Before the advent of digital technology, making jokes was limited to face-to-face interactions. In the age of digital and multimodal discourse, we can talk about jokes in the newspaper, for instance, pictorial jokes in cartoons and caricatures. Pictorial jokes are believed to possess the same force of verbal jokes (Wekesa, 2012). Another kind of joke is a written joke, as we have in satirical writings (Simpson, 2003; Taiwo, 2007). However, there is advancement in technology and expansion in discourse patterning, the social space for jokes keeps expanding. The Internet was created as a space for serious communication, but became popular mostly due to its social and entertaining nature. Due to its social nature and exponential growth, the

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Internet became a space for experimenting and exhibiting playfulness and entertainment, particularly in chatrooms, blogs and discussion forums.

In recent times, making jokes has become a regular feature in live shows, especially in the electronic media. A popular kind of humour in the electronic media is situational comedy, also known as "sitcom comedy". Sitcom comedies are episode-based performances delivered through electronic media. They are very popular in America and Europe and gradually becoming popular in Nigeria.

Feigelson (1995) identifies the major types of humour as puns, goofing off, jokes (self ridicule, sexual, racial/ethnic), and teasing. Collison (1988) identifies three major functions of humour as to resist boredom, to conform and to control others. Pogrebin and Poole (1988) also identify a function they describe as 'coping strategy'. This is also supported by Obadare (2009). Humour sometimes helps to normalize crises and deal with circumstances beyond one's control. Ervin-Tripp and Lambert (1992) also identify four functions of humour, namely: equalizing, defending, sharing and coping. Listening to humour has become a favourite pastime in many urbanized areas. It is common for performers to entertain the audience in live performances. Their humorous performances are typically based on mutually shared background knowledge and value in the society. Brown and Levinson (1987: 124) confirmed this - that jokes may be used to stress the shared background or those shared values of the people in a society.

In Nigeria and many parts of the world being humorous has become a great asset and humour merchants have made a very lucrative business out of the art. For instance, some people gifted in making jokes like Julius Agwu, Basketmouth, Bovi, Gbenga Adeyinka, Teju Babyface, Ali Baba, Holy Mallam, to mention a few, have become very popular comedians in the entertainment industry. They have featured in difference performances across the country and outside. Such shows include: "A Night of a Thousand Laughs", "Crack ya ribs", "Holy Laughter", and so forth. Their kind of humour is popularly referred to as stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedy involves the use of verbal expressions as well as gestures, miming and movement to augment the humour of certain verbal expressions. Stand-up comedians are socio-cultural mediators and articulators who reveal the truth about a society. Their source books include newspapers, television reports and the information they generally gather from the society. Their themes are usually current, and their topical allusions have satirical understatement, (Tsang & Wong, 2004). The contents of the performances can vary greatly from one comedian to another. It could be satirical, vulgar indecent or just a mild joke.

Prior to the digital age, the print media and literary writing have become veritable platforms for media satirists. The emergence and popularisation of humour in the cyberspace among Nigerians is not unconnected with the post-military era when democratization began afresh in Nigeria. The cyberspace from the early 2000 has given freedom to people to freely express their minds about the leaders and the state of the nation. Humour is one major way people do this. Humorous postings have become very popular on the Internet and mobile phones in recent time, thus bringing out the social value of humour in these media (Taiwo, 2011). As Obadare (2009) observes, jokes serve as a tool for subordinate classes to deride the state (including its agents) and themselves. A number of Nigerian websites are dedicated to humour and jokes. *Naijabookofjokes* is one of such websites being studied in the work, is a classical example. Other websites that have humour sections include *Nairaland*, *Nigerian Village Square*.

For many Nigerians, humour is a means of dousing the harsh effects of the socio-economic realities of the nation caused for instance by unemployment/underemployment and poverty, among other. People who make jokes offline, especially in live shows, do so to make money. One major advantage of online jokes sharing is that it provides limitless access to jokes with very minimal cost. The subjects of jokes

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