

# Chapter 11

## Pragmatics of Humour in a Nigerian University's Departmental Chat Rooms

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter develops an elaborated Pragmatic Act Model (ePAM) and applies it to humorous interactions in students' text chats in a Nigerian university. The model draws insights from Giora's Graded Salience Hypothesis (GSH), Mey's Pragmatic Act theory and incorporates current issues in pragmatic theorising such as the dialectics between a priori and co-constructed, emergent intention. The data for the study is got from three departmental chat room interactions in Federal University of Technology, Akure. Four humour types are analysed: canned jokes, punning/wordplay, question and answer jokes, and hyperbole/overstatement. Similarly, five pragmatic acts are performed in the identified humour types, namely, satirising, eliciting laughter, electioneering, teasing and overstating. In each of the humour types, the pragmatic mechanism drawn upon to comprehend the joke and to perform the pragmatic acts is indicated. Overall, the chapter argues that the effective appreciation of any humour act would require a pragmatically and culturally enriched context.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter is on the pragmatics of humour in students' interaction in a Nigerian University to the extent that it seeks to 'describe chosen types, functions and mechanisms of humour as a communicative phenomenon' (Dyrel, 2011, p. 2). The basic pragmatics of humour is the claim that it is a violation of Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle (Attardo, 1993, 1994). Attardo (2001) argues that humour is an actual violation of the CP and not a mere flout, as the CP is violated 'without an intention to let H [hearer] arrive at an implicature' (Attardo, 2001, p. 168). In other words, CP violation in humour is unlike other violations, for instance in lying, because the goal of humour is a socially accepted phenomenon (Attardo, 2001). However, Gricean pragmatics has been critiqued for being too individualistic and its

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0338-5.ch011

focus on intention as the *a priori* mental state of the speaker and on communication as recipient design and intention recognition by the hearer has come under fire (see Kecskes, 2014 for details). The critique against this approach could have implications for its application to humour analysis. An alternative perspective is the context-based, socio-cultural-interactional line, which construes intention as 'a *post factum* construct that is jointly achieved through the dynamic emergence of meaning in conversation' (Kecskes, 2014, p. 6). Since intention is co-constructed, this perspective underscores the importance of societal factors in the communication process, albeit to an almost hyperbolic degree. As Kecskes (2014) notes in his Socio-cognitive approach (SCA), a balanced perspective is that which brings the individual and the social in a dialectical relationship. This is because 'the ideal individual lives in a social world with opportunities and limitations that have bearings on their intention' (Inya, 2012, p. 2017). Therefore, the pragmatic model for analysing humour, as pursued in this chapter, toes the middle ground between the strictly cognitive and the strictly social perspectives to pragmatics.

Secondly, pragmatic considerations of humour have largely focused on the manifestation of the phenomenon in native English-speaking context (e.g. Attardo, 2001, 2003; Norrick, 2003; Dynel, 2009; 2011 etc). The only known works that have examined humour in the Nigerian context are Orhiunu (2007) and Adetunji (2013), the former a sociolinguistic study and the latter an endeavour in pragmatics, and this makes the latter of particular interest to the current study. Adetunji (2013) explores the pragmatic strategies that Nigerian Stand-up comedians and their audience employ to co-produce and co-consume humour. He itemises six pragmatic strategies namely: linguistic coding; stereotyping; formulas; call-and-response; self-depreciation and shared experience that are germane to the performance of humour in Nigerian Stand-up comedy. The current study differs from Adetunji's (2013) in two ways: 1) theoretically, the current study is based on a different pragmatic orientation: the socio-cultural perspective represented by Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Act, which we expanded by integrating into it, Giora's (2003) Graded Saliency Hypothesis and pertinent issues in current pragmatic theorising. 2) While Adetunji's (2013) data is sourced from Nigerian Stand-up comedy, the current effort focuses on the doing of humour in students' interactions in departmental chat rooms, which is an aspect of computer-mediated communication. Chat rooms are electronically-mediated, synchronous environments where interlocutors converse in real-time through the aid of a computer, or a smart phone and the Internet. Jepson (2005) indicates that because of its real-time characteristics, text chat has been acclaimed as akin to face-to-face interaction as such it 'may carry many of the same language development benefits such as negotiation for meaning and repair moves' (Jepson, 2005, p. 81; cf. Herrinng 1999). The particular chat rooms investigated here were created by students of three departments in the Federal University of Technology, Akure for quick dissemination of information. The chat rooms are hosted on WhatsApp, which is a cross-platform instant messaging app for smart phones. Although these chat rooms are primarily used to convey information, they are platforms for doing humour either in terms of canned jokes posted about politics, society, expression of emotions, etc or conversational humour that arise in the interaction of the interlocutors.

Overall, the goal of this chapter is to examine the types of humour recurrent in students' text chats, the pragmatic mechanism for comprehending these humour types and the pragmatic acts performed therein. To account for this overall goal, we have proposed an elaborated Pragmatic Act Model (ePAM), which is a coalition of Giora's (2003) Graded Saliency Hypothesis (henceforth, GSH), with respect to the initial activation phase of her interpretation heuristics and pragmatic act theory reinforced with ideas from Kecskes (2014). To indicate the internal workings of the humour types identified, insights from humour theories are incorporated into the analytic framework.

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