

Language, Vulgarity and Social Critique: The Case of Nigerian Pidgin in Stand-up Comedy

Akinmade Akande

Department of English
Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria
akinmakande@yahoo.com,

Kofo Adedeji

Department of English
University of Lagos, Nigeria
kofo47@yahoo.com

&

Anjola Robbin

Department of English & Literary Studies
Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria
anjolaelyon@yahoo.com

Abstract

The status which Nigerian Pidgin (NP hereafter) has come to have in Nigerian stand-up comedy is different from the position it has in other spheres of interactional communication where it is restricted to non-prestigious genres. This paper examines how stand-up comedy has changed the linguistic order in Nigeria by giving prominence and prestige to NP and elevating it to serve a good purpose. Data for the study were drawn from recorded performances of seven popular stand-up comedians in Nigeria. The analysis shows that NP is dominant in Nigerian stand-up comedy. It also demonstrates that apart from their use of vulgar words, stand-up comedians in Nigeria mirror the society by discussing various types of immorality in their performances. Finally, the paper submits that Nigerian stand-up comedians are social critics and commentators who through humour and satire often tacitly criticize nefarious policies of the government and condemn immoral acts of politicians and their agents with the aim of changing the society for the better.

Keywords: Humour, stand-up comedy, language, vulgarity, social criticism, Nigerian Pidgin

Introduction

Comedy has generally been very popular in Nigeria both in performances on stage, radio and television, and in literary writing. There are traditional comedians such as Baba Sala and Baba Suwe, in Yoruba movies, as well as Zebrudaya and Sam Loco-Efe in Igbo movies and shows. These comedians possess the ability to make the audience laugh their hearts out through creative distortion realised mainly by exaggeration and stylisation (Mintz, 1985). An offshoot of this traditional comedy is stand-up comedy which became popular with stand-up comedians such as Alibaba, Basketmouth, AY, Gordons, I Go Dye and I Go Save. The profiles of most of these comedians show that they are university graduates in different disciplines (<https://www.nigeriagalleria.com/Nigeria/Personality-Profiles/Comedians/>). Stand-up comedy's audience in Nigeria consists mainly of working class educated elites from diverse social, linguistic, religious, educational, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

The essence of any comic performance is humour (Sturges, 2010) and comic characters often dress or behave 'abnormally' or deviate from the linguistic norm of the society in which they operate to make their performances humorous. Many scholars in Nigeria have investigated stand-up comedy from different perspectives. Obadare (2009) argues that jokes and humour, in any form of comedy, can be used by the masses as a veritable means of criticising the excesses of the government; while Azeez and Doghudje (2015) examine the pattern of some condemned social behaviours such as police harassment, corruption and election rigging as mirrored in the comedy series of Papa Ajasco. Their study interrogates how selected audience of the series interprets "the discursive exchange of jokes in the comedy" (p. 257).

Similar to this work is Imo's (2016) study which carries out a psychoanalysis of the "abnormal" social misdemeanours of Nigerians as reflected in the stand-up performances of Gandoki. Such awkward behaviours include drug abuse, street fight, and indecent dressing. While Adetunji (2013) focuses on the pragmatic strategies often employed by stand-up comedians to engage their audience; the contexts of the jokes are the concerns of Filani (2015). In another study, Filani (2017) highlights the political dimensions of humour in stand-up comedy performances. For him, stand-up comedy is a

political act which affords the masses the opportunity to critique the government as well as the society.

Some scholars have documented what the audience approves or disapproves of in stand-up comedy (see Billig, 2005) while some focus on performative strategies and how such strategies can make language function humorously (e.g., Glick, 2007). Scarpetta and Spagnoli (2009) report on the use of swear words which outside the context of the joke may be considered offensive, racist and sexist but which are “received with affiliative responses” by the audiences (p. 228). Seizer (2011) also argues that swear words are often used to create “a mutually enjoyable experience for the audience” (p.211). She notes that the majority of these dirty words often come from the discourse of sex talk which often provokes informality and intimacy. Donkor (2013) examines stand-up comedy as an agency of political maneuvering by focusing on how Bishop Bob Okala, a Ghanaian comedian, has used his performance to launder the image and restore the credibility of Jerry Rawlings during the 1996 Presidential election campaign. During his first term in office, Rawlings’ government introduced value-added tax (VAT) which a collation of opposition leaders in Ghana protested against as it was considered anti-masses. During the protest, some people were killed and several were injured. The killing affected the reputation of Rawlings’ party so much that the party had to hire the comedian to endorse Rawlings before his speech at every political rally.

The present study deviates from the studies above in that its primary aim is to show how stand-up comedy has changed the linguistic order in Nigeria by giving prominence and prestige to Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) and elevating it to serve a good purpose. To achieve this primary aim, the study attempts to, first, authenticate the claim of scholars that NPE is the default language of stand-up comedy in Nigeria (see Adetunji, 2013). Secondly, the paper also seeks to demonstrate that in the course of creating humour, Nigerian stand-up comedians do make extensive use of obscene language.

Nigerian Pidgin

Nigerian Pidgin (NP) is an English-lexifier contact variety which derives the bulk of its vocabulary from English (Akande, 2008). NP is an indo-exogenous language in that it serves as a link between English

and the several indigenous languages in Nigeria (Adegbija, 2004). While its vocabulary is mainly that of English, it has a close affinity with the phonology (or pronunciation) of local languages. Also, the syntax of NP is almost the same as that of indigenous languages in Nigeria (Akande, 2010). For instance, just as the majority of indigenous languages in Nigeria have no inflectional markers to indicate tense and aspect, so also NP does not (Akande, 2008). The linguistic makeup of NP can be considered as that of a combination of English which supplies its vocabulary and Nigeria's indigenous languages which control its syntax.

When compared to other languages, NPE has the highest number of speakers in Nigeria as it is spoken as a second language by over 70 million people across the country and as a native language by about five million others in places such as Sapele, Warri and Port Harcourt (Faraclas, 2004; Adegbija, 2004). NP, a language of inter-ethnic communication in Nigeria, started as a highly socially-stigmatized language commonly spoken by the uneducated and the less-privileged people (Elugbe and Omamor, 1991; Kattanek, 2011). According to Mafeni (1971:99), most Nigerians “consider it a debased form of English and not a language in its own right.”

This negative attitude towards NP is however gradually changing as it is spoken by both the educated and the uneducated in informal contexts (Akande, 2008; Babalola, 2018), and by the uneducated characters in literary writings (Wilkinson, 1986; Bamiro, 1991). It has also started gaining popularity in the print and electronic media in Nigeria as it is now used to cast news, for political jingles and media adverts (see Mann, 1990, 1997; Osoba, 2014). NP has also been successfully deployed as a means of expressing pan-Nigerian identity in Nigerian hip-hop and other brands of popular music in the country (Omoniyi, 2006; Akande, 2014).

NP, which is considered a “bad language” in certain quarters (Mafeni, 1971), functions as the main instrument for social criticism against immoralities in the society. Thus, it is often used in stand-up comedy for portrayals involving morally objectionable behaviour. Though a language with no overt prestige, NP has, through the media, gained prestige in both media and traditional public spaces (Mann, 1997; Osoba, 2014). The prevalence of NP in stand-up comedy whose audience cuts across all strata and classes in the society certainly adds to its social prestige.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The data for the present study were drawn from the performances of eight selected Nigerian comedians: *Ali Baba, Basket Mouth, AY, Bovi, I Go Dye, Seyi Law, I Go Save and Gordons*. The artistes were purposively selected because of their popularity in Nigeria. The performances recorded in the CDs were listened to and transcribed. Attention was paid to language use especially the use of NP and obscene words in the data. Both Standard English (StdE) and NPE verb phrases were tagged in order to make the analysis easier and to enable us to have an accurate number of occurrences of verb phrases in the two codes. Throughout this paper, excerpts in NPE expressions are translated, the indigenous languages appear in italics and also in bold fonts while translation in Standard English follows in parentheses.

The data for this study were analysed by drawing insights mainly from Myers-Scotton (2006)'s work on code-switching and Giles, Coupland and Coupland (1991) on the revised Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). In any speech event where language users engage actively in code-switching, there is usually a Matrix language which dominates the text while the embedded language is the less dominant or the subordinate code. One of the major thrusts of CAT as noted by Gassiorck and Giles (2012:310) is that it "proposes that individuals make adjustments to their communicative behavior as a function of their assessment of their conversational partners' communicative characteristics as well as their desire to establish and maintain a positive personal and social category." Another thrust of CAT is appropriateness in relation to topics, participants and registers. In this study, vulgar expressions which can be hitherto considered as inappropriate in other domains of language use are appropriate within the context of stand-up comedy. CAT as a theory accounts for different variables that can influence interaction and it enables participants in language use, especially in stand-up comedy, to converge towards a particular use of certain codes and expressions and, thus, constitutes a community of practice. Finally, insights were drawn from the work of Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck (2005) which emphasises that bottom-up language planning activities need to complement "the role of top-down language-planning agents, such as governments and educational systems, as principal agents of language change" (Moriarty 2011:547). In this paper, the principal language actors

which have contributed immensely to language spread and change are Nigerian stand-up comedians.

Data Analysis and Discussions

This section is divided into three subsections. The first sub-section deals with the use of NP and other languages in the data while the second discusses the use of vulgar words in stand-up comedy. The last sub-section is concerned mainly with the social themes found in the data.

The Dominance of Nigerian Pidgin in Stand-up Comedy

NP dominates the performances of stand-up comedians in Nigeria as almost all of them use the language freely on stage. Out of 1,426 complex verb phrases in the data, 1,151 (80.72%) are NP while 275 (19.28%) are Standard English (StdE) verb phrases. Though there are many one-word verbs in our data, these verbs were ignored because there is no objective means of deciding whether verbs that are uninflected are either NP or StdE since both varieties do make use of uninflected verbs (see Akande, 2008). A complex verb phrase is either StdE or NP depending on the nature of the auxiliary marker in it: the two codes do not make use of the same set of auxiliaries.

Stand-up comedians also used other criterial features (see Gupta 1994 on criteria features) of NP such as NP relative pronouns (*wetin* and *wey*), NP pronouns (e.g., *am*, *una* and *hin*), NP particle (e.g., *na*) and certain lexical items which are typically NP in origin. Out of 1531 instances of the syntactic features identified, the particle *na*, the complementizer *say* and the relative pronoun *wey* accounted for 28.48%, 18.22% and 10.65% respectively.

There were six pronouns which are uniquely NP in the data. The first of these pronouns which accounted for 259 instances (16.92%) is *dem* used in the subject position as in *Dem go start* (They will start ...) giving the baby names like Denzel Washington, Tom Cruise, Basket Mouth." Although very rare, *dem* can also occur as a premodifier by signaling possession as in *Dem girl friends dey there* (Their girlfriends are there) and *Dem pikin no go talk* (Their children will not say anything) which are the only two instances found in the data. The use of *them* as a subject or as a possessive determiner is a feature which NP shares with other creole languages (see Patrick, 2007; Wolfram, 2004). The NP pronouns *am*, *hin* and *una* altogether accounted for 19.79% of the total number of occurrences of syntactic features while

(*h*)e, which also sometimes functions as a dummy *there* in NP, appeared 22 (1.44%) times. Apart from the syntactic features discussed above, there are lexical items which are uniquely NP in the data. These include *pikin*, *commot*, *waka*, *wowo* and *abeg*. Below are two extracts in which many of these syntactic features are present.

Excerpt 1 (from Gordon's performance)

No be everything oo. You know **say** some pastors **dem** dey preach, when they preach, **dem** go use laptop. Other pastors see **am**, **dem** come think **say na** better thing In the evening, the pastor **pikin** carry laptop go Yahoo, come download weapons of mass destruction, workers of iniquity and anything that will not move the church to the permanent site. Pastor no check, he carry laptop go church. **Hin** say, 'today', 'the sermon is going to be very graphic'. The sermon will be graphic. 'Come with me'...**na** im he put....**Na** im we hear eewo, eewo. Pastor say yeah, 'we need to talk about this sex issue. It's not a joke'. And that kind thing to delete **am na** problem. You dey control delete, delete, **he** go dey show eh, eh. Pastor no know when he talk, "in my father's house, there are many things. Halleluyah."

[It is not everything. You know that when some pastors are preaching, when they preach, they will be using laptops. Other pastors saw it, they thought that it was a good idea. . . . In the evening, the pastor's child took the laptop to Yahoo boys, and downloaded blue films, workers of iniquity and anything that will not move the church to the permanent site. Pastor did not check, he carried the laptop to the church. He said, 'the sermon is going to be very graphic'. The sermon will be graphic. 'Come with me'... That is how he put....That was when we heard somebody screaming. The Pastor said yeah, 'we need to talk about this sex issue. It's not a joke'. And such a thing is not easily deleted. If you press control and delete, it will still show. The Pastor did not know when he said, "in my father's house, there are many things. Halleluyah."]

Excerpt 1 above shows the dominance of NP. Evident in the excerpt are syntactic features typical of NP. The first one is the use of

complementizer *say* which is equivalent to the English *that* as in “*You know say some pastors...*” and “*...come think say na better thing.*” The NP pronoun *am* occurs twice in the excerpt (as in “*Other pastors see am*”) while *them* also appears as a subject twice (e.g., “*... dem come think say na better thing*”) and it is used as a resumptive pronoun once in “*You know say some pastors dem dey preach.*” Other pronouns which are used in the excerpt are *hin* as in “**Hin** say today ...”, (**h**)e which can stand for any of the English third person singular pronouns as in “*You dey control delete, delete, e go dey show eh, eh*” and “*Pastor no know when he talk*”). Prominent in the excerpt is also the occurrence of the particle **na**. Worthy of note is the occurrence of the word *pikin* which is very common in NP.

Excerpt 2 (from *I Go Save*’s performance)

I beg the **wowo** girls, put your hands together for yourselves. The one **wey wowo** make **una** clap, abi **e** easy to **wowo**? If e easy to wowo make we see. You think **say** for girl to maintain her **wowo**...since when she small kom big; you think **say na** easy thing? **E** no easy. But **wowo** get advantage. If your wife **wowo**, feel free. True or False? If your wife **wowo**, you **fit** leave house from here go National Theatre go buy drink. As you take leave **am**, **na** so you **go** take meet **am**. Nobody **go** talk to **am**. And once you **wan** leave **am**, the kind permission **wey** you **go** take **na** aggressive permission. You **fit** see the man **go** stroll **kom** meet **hin** wowo babe. He **go** just say Julie, sit down here, you **dey** hear me. I **wan** take bike go National Theatre go buy drink, I **dey** kom. You will see the wowo girl, ‘okay now. **Go** kom, I dey here’. Till you **go** kom, nobody **go** talk to am.

[I beg the ugly girls, put your hands together for yourselves. The ones who are ugly, you can clap, or do you think it is easy to be ugly? If it is easy to be ugly, let us see. You think that for a girl to maintain her ugliness ... from when she was young till now that she is of age, you think that it is an easy thing. It is not easy but ugliness has an advantage. If your wife is ugly, you should feel free, true or false? If your wife is ugly, you can leave your house from here and go to National Theatre to go and buy drinks. As you leave her, so you

will meet her. Nobody will talk to her. And once you want to leave her, the kind of permission which you will take will be an aggressive one. You can see the man stroll, he will still come and meet his ugly wife. He will just say, 'Julie, sit down here, do you hear me? I want to take a bike to National Theatre and buy drinks, I will come back'. The ugly girl will say, 'Okay now. Go and come back, I am here'. Till you go and come back, nobody will talk to her.]

The NPE syntactic features identified in Gordon's extract above cut across the performances of all stand-up comedians in Nigeria. Most of the identified syntactic features in Excerpt 1 are also present in Excerpt 2. For instance, just as the pronouns *am* and *he* occur in Excerpt 1, so do they in Excerpt 2. The particle *na* and the complementizer *say* are also present in the two excerpts. However, the pronoun *una* which does not occur in Excerpt 1 is present in Excerpt 2: *The one wey wowo make una clap...* Similarly, Excerpt 2 is replete with pre-verbal markers such as *dey*, *wan*, *fit*, *go* and *kom* (see Deuber, 2005; Faraclas, 1996) while the relativiser *wey* appears twice as in *The one wey wowo...* and *...the kind permission wey you go...*

3.2.2. Vulgarity in Stand-up Comedy

Although a wanton display of vulgarity is not encouraged by stand-up comics in Nigeria, we do observe some evidence of obscene use of language. In this paper, vulgar or swear words are not restricted to words having to do with sex jokes, body parts and sexual acts or functions (Seizer 2011), they equally cover derogatory words that are capable of causing discomfort and anger when used. As shown below, swear words as well as abusive words that can ignite anger were sometimes used by comedians. However, the use of such dirty words, rather than eliciting negative reactions from the audience, often provoked laughter given the fact that the main business of the audience is to relax, enjoy and probably drink some liquor.

Words like *wowo* which translates to *very ugly* in English occurred 45 times in the data. While *ugly* is gender neutral, *wowo* is often used to refer to ladies who are either not beautiful or physically deformed in one way or the other. The use of *wowo* is therefore sexist in Nigerian stand-up comedy, specifically, and popular culture, generally. The words *fuck*, *nigger* and *shit* are words that can generate

conflict outside the context of comedy. However, when these words were used by stand-up comedians, the informal interactions between these comics and their audience in Nigeria as well as the *high* mood of the audience were such that their use created humour and made them laugh (see Scarpetta and Spagnolli 2009; Seizer 2011). While *crazy*, *foolish*, *stupid* and *mad* are not swear words in the sense of having to do with sex talk, they are equally derogatory terms which are often avoided in formal settings. Even when it is clear that somebody is poor, to address a person as *a pauper* is to infer that he or she is worthless and indigent.

Culturally, it is abusive in Nigeria (and in Africa generally) to say *Your Father* or *Your Mother* when one is not actually referring to a father or mother figure. Using such an abusive expression is capable of causing a serious quarrel. However, when the expression like this is used in a joking context, it cannot lead to any confrontation. For instance, among the Yoruba in Southwestern Nigeria, a woman may say it freely to either her husband or her brothers-in-law or sisters-in-law. It is this aspect of our culture that I believe has found its way into stand-up comedy as indicated by the three occurrences of *Your Father* in the data. Below are two excerpts to illustrate the use of dirty words by the comics.

Excerpt 3 (from Basketmouth's performance)

And for my guys wey dey here, if you dey with babe, you know, some guys them dey come out for Lagos, you go just jam their car gba! Them go just come down, them girlfriend dey there. Them wan form. What the *fuck* is wrong with you men? What the *fuck*! Are you *fuck insane*? *Nigger*. *Shit* men. See what you have done to my car, men. I'm going to deal with you, men. Them go form, the girl go dey come dey beg. Honey please, it is enough. Not that bad. The guy know say hin no wan fight. You understand? Hin just wan form. I don see how he dey happen. So as I dey go Warri a while ago, I go try myself. I go carry one girl, as we dey drive, na im somebody just hit my car, na im I just come down. say eh, you dey craze? You no dey see?. Just come down. I go come slap you for there. You dey craze? The girl just come outside. Oh boy! See damage. Hi po po. Bright,

pull your cloth give me, pull your cloth give me. If you no beat me, this guy go beat you.

[And for my friends who are here, if you are with a lady, you know, some guys are from Lagos, you will just hit the car. They will just come down, and their girlfriend is there inside the car. They want to show off. What the *fuck* is wrong with you men? What the *fuck*! Are you *fuck insane*? *Nigger. Shit* men. See what you have done to my car, men. I'm going to deal with you, men. They would brag, the girl would come down and be begging. Honey please, it is enough. Not that bad. The guy knew he did not want to fight. You understand? He just wanted to show off. I have seen it happening. As I was going to Warri sometimes ago, I tried it myself. I carried a girl and as we were driving somebody just hit my car, I came down and said eh, are you crazy? Are you blind?. Just come down. I will come and slap you there. Are you crazy? The girl just came outside. Oh boy! See damage. Hi po po. Bright, pull your cloth give me, pull your cloth give me. If you do not beat me, this guy will beat you.]

The first thing that one quickly notices in Excerpt 3 is the use of three vulgar words: *fuck*, *nigger* and *shit* as well as the occurrence of the abusive words *insane* and *craze*. In the performance, the way Basketmouth imitated the African American street talk was quite obvious and the imitation is supported above by the use of the word *men* which, in the context, does not connote male adults but was rather used as a gender-neutral slang term. The picture in the first few lines of the excerpt is that of a man who was trying to show off and impress his girlfriend; this is reinforced by the use of NP verb phrase *wan form*, which means showing off or pretending to be what one is not. Although the term *nigger* can be positive in connotation when used among friends, it is offensive in the context in which it is used above (see Akande, 2012 for more on the use of *nigger*). Words such as *fuck* and *nigger* which are capable of igniting quarrel and chaos are therefore usually avoided in everyday conversations but are used freely in comedy.

Excerpt 4 (from Seyi Law's performance)

And you know say we people wey we be Yoruba, we get our own good thing. You know Yoruba them dey know book but... who say na lie? **Your father**. You be Yoruba? How you go know? Me wey I don call Hausa man for Lagos. All these Hausa wey dey fetch water, all these Meruwa. Abi? I don call Meruwa say make he come fetch water for me. The guy say im go collect 70 naira. Na im I kom tell am say okay, go bring another one, I go pay 80, 80 naira. Na im he say kei walahi wetin? Walahi, my money na 70 naira. If you no give me my 70 naira, I no dey commot here pha. If he now reach, you go say Hausa na **mumu**. Walahi me I no be **mumu**. My own na Aboki na soldier Aboki. I say see big fool. 70 to 80 naira. For the first time for Lagos, na im I see Aboki wey dey drive Okada dey stammer. I call Okada say I beg, abeg. Orile to Ajegunle. The guy say eh, eh, your money na tw... and to make matter worse, as the guy dey call, in hand dey to dey raise motor. I just say na 2 unh, unh. I say 250. He say kai Oga, why you dey cut me now. I say your money na 2.2,2 Before the guy fit talk, I don take another Okada. **Idiot**, dey there now. Na 2, unh, unh. **Father**.

[And you know that those of us who are Yoruba have our own good things. You know Yoruba are well educated but ... who said it is a lie. God punish you. Are you Yoruba? How do you know? I called an Hausa man in Lagos, these Hausa people who fetch water for a living, all these water vendors. I called a water vendor to fetch water for me. The guy said he would collect 70 naira per round. I told him it was okay by me and that he should go and fetch more and I would give him 80 naira for each round. The man said, 'kei walahi what? Walahi, my money is 70 naira. If you do not give me 70 naira, I will not leave this place. Soon, you will say Hausa are idiots. Walahi, I am not an idiot. I am Hausa, an Hausa soldier'. I said, see a big fool. 70 to 80 naira. For the first time in Lagos, I met an Hausa stammerer riding a commercial motorcycle. I called the cyclist and told him I was going to Ajegunle from Orile. The man said, 'your

money is tw...’ and to make the matter worse, as the man was struggling to pronounce the fare, his hand was on the motorcycle revving the engine. He repeated, ‘I said is tw unh, unh’. I said, ‘two hundred and fifty naira’. He said, ‘kai boss, why are you interrupting me? I said your money is tw, tw, tw....’ Before the guy could talk, I had taken another motorcycle. I thought to myself: ‘idiot, stay there’. It is tw, unh, unh. Father].

In order to understand the humour as well as the use of the indecent words in Excerpt 4 above, one has to understand the cultural context first. In Nigeria where infrastructural facilities are very poor, pipe borne water is sometimes not available for months in cities and towns while in rural areas, pipe borne water is almost non-existent. People who can afford it usually dig boreholes in their homes and then people would pay to fetch water from them. There are other people who engage the services of Hausa men, called Meruwa, to fetch water for them and be paid. Probably because of their low level of education (or no formal education at all), the Hausa in Nigeria are well-known for this business. The second business referred to in the excerpt is not peculiar to the Hausa: different ethnic groups do it in different parts of the country especially in cities. This is okada business. Instead of taking a taxi or a bus, it is faster to take a motorcycle to one’s destination. Motorcyclists know how to maneuver through busy roads when there is heavy traffic and they can get to the interior roads that taxis and buses cannot.

In the excerpt, Meruwa was insulted by being referred to as a *fool*. However, the Hausa man was claiming that he was not a *Mumu*, a slang term synonymous to a fool. To describe somebody as a *mumu* is to say that the person is senseless, worthless and incapable of thinking straight. Although Meruwa did not want to be regarded as *mumu*, he presented himself as an ignoramus by insisting on getting N70 when the man whom he fetched water for wanted to pay him a higher amount. This is because the Meruwa did not seem to know the difference between 70 naira and 80 naira and thought that the man was trying to cheat him.

The first dirty expression used, *Your Father*, was directed to a member of the audience for daring to say that Seyi Law was telling lies. Similarly, the okada man, aboki, was also described as an idiot probably because of his speech impairment – stammering. Aboki is an

Hausa word which means friend and most Hausa traders and artisans are often referred to as ‘aboki’. So, it could be inferred that the okada man is an Hausa man. There are other linguistic signposts such as the discourse markers *pha* and *kei* and the use of *walahi*, a word associated with Islamic religion. All of these show that both the water fetchers and okada men are typically Hausa. In the excerpt, there is an implicit reference to ethnic superiority as the comedian who is a Yoruba man presents the Yoruba as being more educated than the Hausa. This confirms the belief in the country that the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria are different in certain respects: the Yoruba are the most educated among the groups, the Igbo are the most business-oriented while the Hausa often lead in terms of politics and governance in the country.

Stand-up Comedians as Social Critics

One of the most important sociological functions of comedians in Nigeria, as it is in other places, is that they are concerned with mirroring the reality in the society by exposing and condemning certain social behavior as inappropriate in funny but aptly strong terms (see Azeez and Doghudge 2015). Our data show that Nigerian stand-up comedians, being social critics and commentators, do depict police harassment and incompetence, bribery, the use of fake currency, poverty, gender discrimination, sexual harassment, domestic violence and a host of others in their performances. Beyond representing these vices which abound in the country, members of the audience are tacitly invited to condemn, mediate and change these social evils so that the country can become a better place to live in. By ridiculing the immoralities in the society, the audience is called upon not just to laugh off the jokes and humour but to think deeply about the roles they can play in positively transforming the country by radically mobilizing the populace to get rid of the depicted problems. Provided below are two excerpts to illustrate this.

Excerpt 5 (from Bovi’s performance)

Yesterday, because we wan be fifty years. I no know whether una notice, all our police dey wash their uniform. Dem clean. I come go drive one way, na im police stop me. As I see them, I say eh. I don enter. Police come just meet me and say, ‘sir, please, this is one way. Please, go back’. Because hin dey say go back, I don dey

process am, I don already dey beg. *Sorry!* He say, 'sir, go back'. I say, 'sorry na'. He say, 'you don't understand. Go back and take the right way'. I say, 'ah this na trap'. So I come put hand for pocket come bring fifty card, you know, say, 'officer, come. Just hold it. He say, 'stop that. It's not accepted'. I say, 'you no know how we dey do am'. 'Please don't let me arrest you for trying to bribe an officer of the Nigeria Police'. As I put my motor for reverse, dey reverse, I come just see myself dey struggle, I come wake up. I say ehn, ehn. Too good to be true. But we go reach there sha, na small small. This country is so hard.

[Yesterday, because Nigeria turned 50, I don't know if you noticed, all our police washed their uniform. They were clean. I was driving against the direction of traffic or wrong-way driving and a police man stopped me. As I saw them, I said, I am in trouble. The police came to meet me and said, 'sir, please, this is one way. Please, go back'. Because he said that I should go back, I started processing it, I started begging. *Sorry!* He said, sir, go back and I said I was sorry. He said, 'you don't understand. Go back and take the right way'. I said this is a trap. So I put my hand in my pocket and brought out fifty naira, Officer, come. Just hold it. He said I should stop it. It's not accepted'. I said you don't know how we do it. 'Please don't let me arrest you for trying to bribe an officer of the Nigeria Police'. As I was trying to reverse, I noticed that I was struggling and I woke up. Too good to be true. But we shall reach there gradually. This country is so hard.]

There are two important issues raised in Excerpt 5 and these two issues are concerned with the Nigerian Police. The first issue is that most members of the Nigerian Police dress well and professionally only when there is an important occasion. Bovi got them here: in Nigeria, it is possible to see a policeman in a dirty uniform and sandals while on duty. However, whenever they have to go on a parade, they dress as if they are the best police force in the world. The second issue depicted deals with the normal tradition among the Police corps in Nigeria – taking bribes. Given his knowledge of the Nigerian Police, the driver

who was asked to go back and take the right way did not believe the policeman as it was unusual for him to be addressed nicely by a policeman. He thought it was a trap and offered the policeman a bribe of fifty naira. Although the two issues were presented as inappropriate by Bovi, it was not without humour. The driver was dreaming and the inference one can draw from this is that in real life, a police officer would not only dress shabbily but would also speak rudely to people and take bribe at will.

Excerpt 6 (from *I Go Die's* performance)

Well, one thing wey I don notice, all these our Nigerian ladies them too dey do one thing wey dey make me dey laugh. Recently, our President's wife go Ghana, go there go dey educate ladies: 'Many of us standing, this is the time we have to stand for our right. You don't have to allow your husband control your house. This is the time you have to stand as a woman'. Hin tell them say as from today say make all the women make them control their husband, make them dey cook for them; make them dey go market with baby. After one week, everybody come do testimony. Ghanaian woman come out, 'when I got home, I told my husband that he will be responsible for cooking in the house. Do everything. The first day, nothing happened. Second day, nothing happened. The third day, thank God. My husband went to the market, he cook. Oh! them hail am. South Africa woman come out, the same thing. When Nigeria woman come out, them don bandage her hand. Her hand them take bandage cover wall?. na im he say na wa oo. When I reach house, I tell my husband ooo. The first day nothing happened oo. The second day nothing happened. The third day, as I say make I open my eye, na gbua I hear. When I open my eye, when I answer na im the doctor say sorry he don reach a week wey them don admit me here'.

[Well, one thing I have noticed - all these our Nigerian ladies often do something which always makes me laugh. Recently, our President's wife went to Ghana to educate ladies: 'Many of us standing, this is the time we have to stand for our right. You don't have to allow your husband control your house. This is the time you have to stand as

a woman'. She told them that as from that day all the women should be controlling their husbands. Let them (the husbands) be cooking for them, let them be going to the market with the baby. After one week, everybody came to give testimonies and a Ghanaian woman gave a testimony, 'when I got home, I told my husband that he will be responsible for cooking in the house. Do everything. The first day, nothing happened. Second day, nothing happened. The third day, thank God. My husband went to the market, he cook. Oh, they hailed her. A South African woman came out, the same thing. When a Nigerian woman came out, her hand had been bandaged. And she said, 'this is serious. When I got home, I told my husband. The first day nothing happened oo. The second day nothing happened. The third day, as I said let me open my eyes, I heard a heavy slap. When I opened my eyes and answered, the doctor said sorry, you've been on admission for about a week now.]

Here we saw the President's wife clamouring for women's emancipation and encouraging them to stand up and fight for their rights. However, what she was preaching in the real sense is subversion and not emancipation as instead of highlighting the need for both the husband and wife to help each other, she wanted husbands to be controlled by their wives. Though this arrangement of men cooking and running errands for their wives went down well with Ghanaian and South African men, it failed with Nigerian men as it led to a case of domestic violence. The violence is evident in the fact that the Nigerian woman landed in the hospital as her hand was broken. She was beaten into a coma as she did not come back to life for a whole week. This excerpt thus presented Nigerian men as violent and chauvinistic. *I Go Die* was not just trying to make people laugh here but he was also condemning domestic violence which is rampant in many Nigerian homes. By condemning this act of violence, he was indirectly calling for a peaceful atmosphere in Nigerian homes since when homes are peaceful, the society at large is likely to be peaceful.

Excerpt 7 (from Basketmouth's performance)

Nigeria! I was talking about how old we are. The country is messed up. Corruption is killing us. Seriously. To show you how bad it is, I was watching AIT. One man

was complaining. Can you imagine? Somebody came to my shop to buy 50,000 goods with fake currency. Fake currency! The guy wey dey interview am ask am say where is the money? (The guy who was interviewing him asked him where the money was). I have spent it. To show you how bad it is. Corruption is killing us.

The last excerpt (Excerpt 7) depicts another social evil in Nigeria: fake currency. Fake currency exchanges hands in Nigeria because people are not honest. The irony in the above excerpt is that the man who was complaining that somebody paid him fifty thousand naira in fake currency also spent it. What this suggests is wickedness and hypocrisy as some people do deliberately deceitfully spend it. All the social evils shown in Excerpts 5 to 7 and many others in our data are meant to get the audience to reflect critically on them and probably develop a positive attitude towards eradicating them. It can be argued that if these social evils are gotten rid of in our society, there will be a positive social change in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine language use, vulgarity and social criticism in the performances of Nigerian stand-up comedians. The analysis of data showed that Nigerian Pidgin is dominant in their performances; being the default language of stand-up comedy. By using a language seen as less prestigious than English, stand-up comedians have contributed to the survival and maintenance of NP. There was also the occasional use of indigenous languages such as Yoruba and words borrowed from other indigenous languages. The general picture that the study has painted is that NP, which used to have no prestige in public space, has now gained tremendous reputation by virtue of finding its way into stand-up comedy which is watched by the elites (e.g., civil servants, bankers, teachers, lawyers, doctors) in the society. It can then be arguably concluded that popular culture, stand-up comedy and the media are rapidly changing the linguistic order in Nigeria.

The artistes engaged in code-switching mainly between English and NP with NP used as the matrix language (Myers-Scotton 2006). While it is true that the comedians used profanity and dirty words to create laughter and humour, within the humour are messages that can transform our society through constructive criticism. By raising and

discussing social issues such as promiscuity, corruption and domestic violence in their performances, it can be concluded that stand-up comedians in Nigeria are social critics and commentators who mirror social evils in Nigeria and tacitly call for their eradication in the country. Finally, the study concludes that bottom-up language spread is as important as a top-down approach. Through the use of English and NP in the performative genre of stand-up comedy, this paper has shown that the two approaches (i.e., the top-down and the bottom-up) need to complement each other and work in harmony.

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