

Original Article

'MY OGA AT THE TOP': PRAGMATIC FAILURES IN THE NIGERIAN INTER-LINGUAL COMMUNICATION CONTEXT AND THE LINGUISTIC MECHANISM OF ACCIDENTAL HUMOUR

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ABSTRACT

The study reported in this paper examines accidental humour, which derives from Nigerian English (NE) speakers' production of wrong communicative effects through the faulty use of speech acts or one of the rules of speaking. Such humour construction is unintentional because it reflects the ESL speakers' inability to understand what is meant by what is said. The study shows that pragmatic failure results not only from errors in syntax, inaccurate pronunciation, L1 interference, overgeneralization, but also in part from the lack of pragmatic awareness and cross-cultural interactional communicative competence, and misunderstanding or miscommunication of the implied meaning. The accidental humour, which results therefrom, essentially stems from script opposition and script overlap, but lacks intentionality that plays a key role in intentional humour. Results of the analysis reveal, inter alia, that unintentional humour in interlingual communication derives from the NE speakers' lack of communicative competence in the target language, i.e. Standard English. The paper concludes that although cross-cultural pragmatic failure is a product of interlingual communicative mishap, its humorous effect tends to mollify anger and soothe frayed nerves in Nigeria's frustration and stress-ridden contemporary society. Nonetheless, the demonstrable blissful ignorance of the basic rules of the English Language by an appreciable number of NE users questions the atavistic cling to it as the nation's official language in the midst of over three hundred indigenous languages begging for attention from the government.

Keywords: pragmatic failures, Nigerian English, humour, interlingual, communicative competence

INTRODUCTION

'My Oga at the top' is a popular joke in Nigeria, which derived from interlingual error committed by Mr. Shema Obafaiye, a typical Nigeria English user during a television morning programme sometime in March 2013. According to a news report by *Thisday* newspaper (www.thisdaylive.com 03 April, 2013), Mr. Obafaiye, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) Lagos Commandant, became an object of nationwide snide remarks after he committed a gaffe when he featured as a guest on a breakfast show on a Lagos-based private television, Channels Television. During the programme, one of the presenters of Sunrise Daily had asked the commandant for the domain name of the NSCDC's website. But to the presenters' surprise, Obafaiye, appearing confident and exultant, said he could not give the domain name of the website now, and it would turn out, in his words, "My Oga at the top" (his boss) would give a different domain name later.

The presenters prodded the officer further, explaining that they merely wanted the organisation's functional website, so that the public could be wary of falling into the hands of fraudsters, who had set up a fake website. Obafaiye, behaving as though he understood the question clearly, shocked his interviewers, and viewers alike, even further when he gave the NSCDC's domain name as "ww.nscdc." He paused a few seconds and added, "that's all" without including the '.com' or '.org' or '.ng' url-ending that should have completed the website address. Mr. Obafaiye's grammatical howler was a celebrated show of crass ignorance of ICT-related discourses that went viral on social media, making him an object of several rude jokes and snide remarks, including graphic illustrations on Blackberry Messenger, Facebook, Twitter, T-shirts, and musical mixes by DJs. It was one gaffe that Nigerian youths, especially feasted on. In no time, special branded 'T' shirts had been produced, just as musical mixes had been waxed with mischievous finishing and imputations in celebration of Obafaiye's gaffe, concludes the news report.



Mr. Shema Obafaiye

Apart from the unintentional humour generated by Mr. Obafaiye's pratfall, such pragmatic failures get such language users into trouble. For instance, Mr. Obafaiye was reportedly redeployed to another State for embarrassing his organisation. Also, the Ebonyi State Governor, Mr. Martin Elechi had, on separate occasions, willy-nilly courted embarrassment and trouble for himself in 2013 when he committed some interlingual errors. During a state-wide radio broadcast to announce the decision of the state government to reopen the Ebonyi State University after several months of closure, the governor, Mr. Elechi dropped the ball when he assured workers who were ready to resume duty of adequate police protection and warned *trouble-shooters* to keep off the University campuses. Apparently, the governor had *trouble-makers* in mind but not persons who were interested in bringing about conciliation and peace in the University. Again, the governor got himself into trouble when he reportedly dismissed the planned national conference as 'a big joke, waste of time and a distraction to President Jonathan'. He made the statement while receiving some political elders of the state that came to pay him Christmas homage at his Ikwo country home on 26 December 2013.



Governor Elechi

The statement elicited instant vitriolic attacks from the Presidency and the PDP. According to Okocha (2014), the Presidency slammed the Ebonyi State governor, describing his comments as undemocratic, dictatorial, and against the rights of citizens to freely participate in popular discussions. Consequently, the embattled governor got his media aide to discountenance the statement credited to him. Accordingly, his media aide said the governor was misquoted adding that it was the handiwork of "partisan opposition elements, who are bent on capitalising on any issue to heat up the polity in their avowed and discredited mission of making the country ungovernable." As if that was not enough to mitigate the incalculable harm done by his 'misquoted statement,' the governor himself flew to Abuja to consult with the President. Thereafter, he addressed Aso Villa press corps and recanted his infamous statement. He attributed the statement partly to the handiwork of the opposition working hard to pitch him against the federal government and partly to pragmatic failures. His words: "Sometimes because of our inability to express ourselves properly, people don't really capture what we say and go about misquoting or are actually mischievous."

A similar instance of interlingual error derived from another newspaper story, entitled 'Osun PDP cries fowl'. In Osun State, according to Azuakola (2013), the PDP and ACN have been involved in a war of words. The state governor, Rauf Aregbesola, accused the PDP of unnecessarily "crying foul in public over some of his government's policies." The PDP immediately responded saying, "We would like to call the attention of the world to the governor's language. How can he say that the PDP is crying like fowl in public? Is he trying to arrest and victimise us? Only last week, his government arrested some poor goats that strayed into public view. One of the goats died in custody. Now he's calling PDP members fowl so that he can arrest us too for publicly crying against his oppressive policies. We refuse to be called fowls or goats or any other animal for that matter." Meanwhile, the governor dismissed the PDP's remarks, describing it as a classic case of "crying wolf."

Going by the language of the news story, it appears there was a deliberate effort of the reporter to play on the words – foul and fowl – to achieve some comic effect. Ironically, the spokesperson of the Osun PDP chapter had no intention to create humour of any sort. He must have been engaged in a serious business of discharging the duties of an opposition party in Osun State, i.e. sensitising the citizenry to the 'subterranean' move of the ACN-led government to harangue members of the PDP. Unfortunately, the Osun Governor, Rauf Aregbesola further complicated the pragmatic failure of the PDP spokesperson by dismissing such remarks as a case of 'crying wolf'. First, they were accused of crying like a fowl, and second, like a wolf, both of which were everything but salutary and complimentary. If the accusation of 'crying foul' could elicit such reaction from the opposition, one then would only imagine the lethal reaction, which 'crying wolf' would have provoked in the opposition ranks.

Perhaps, what could easily pass as 'the mother of all pragmatic failures' came from the First Lady of Nigeria, Dame Patience Jonathan. She contributed her own generous quota of unintentional humour when she broke down in tears while expressing displeasure at the absence of Hajiya Nana Shettima, wife of the Borno State Governor at a second enlarged stakeholders' meeting on the abducted Chibok school girls.



Courtesy: Screenshots from Channels TV video

According to a news item of the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) reported by *Punch* online, (www.punchng.com 5 May, 2014), the First Lady had among other things said:

The first lady is calling you make I help you find your missing child. Will you keep quiet? Chaaa! Chaaa!! There is God o! There is God in everything we are doing o! Those broods [blood] we are sharing [shedding] in Borno will answer...

The foregoing speaks volumes of pragmatic failures deriving from interlingual errors, which normally characterize intercultural communication contexts. Pragmatic failure (also referred to as pragmatic error) (cf. Richards, Platt, and Platt, 1992: 127) refers to the speaker's production of wrong communicative effects through the faulty use of speech acts or one of the rules of speaking. According to Keshavarz's (1994: 102) taxonomy of the sources of errors, interlingual errors result from the transfer of phonological, morphological, grammatical, lexico-semantic, and stylistic elements of the learner's mother tongue to the learning of the target language. The main interest of this paper is essentially to determine the extent to which such interlingual errors, which manifest in the speech behaviour of Nigerian English users, create accidental (unintentional) humour. The data is drawn mainly from the online edition of Nigerian print media.

Conceptual framework

Thomas (1983) draws on the study of sociolinguistic miscommunication. She uses the term 'pragmatic failure' to refer to the inability of the individual to understand what is meant by what is said. Particularly interesting about Thomas's description of pragmatic failure is the dichotomy between two types of pragmatic failure. She makes this distinction on the basis of the difficulty of analysis and possible remedies in terms of both the responsibility of language teachers and the responses of language learners. She calls the two types of failure 'pragmalinguistic' and 'sociopragmatic' failure.

The first type of 'pragmatic failures,' which Thomas (1983) proposed is 'pragmalinguistic failure'. The author avoided the term 'pragmalinguistic error' because, in her understanding, pragmatics is not strictly formalisable, which therefore rules out the application of the term, error. The implication is that even though, grammar can be judged according to prescriptive rules, the nature of pragmatic or sociopragmatic patterns is such that it is not possible to say that "the pragmatic force of an utterance is wrong. At best, one can surmise that it failed to achieve the speaker's goal". In this case, the learners of a language translate an utterance from their first language into the target language. The learners, however, fail to get their meaning across because the communicative conventions behind the utterances used are different. This, as Thomas points out, is more a

linguistic, hence pragmalinguistic, problem than a pragmatic one because - (i) it has little to do with speaker's perception of what constitutes appropriate behavior; and (ii) it has a great deal to do with knowing how to phrase a request, for instance, so that it will be interpreted as a request rather than as an information question.

Thomas' second type of 'pragmatic failure' is what she terms 'sociopragmatic failure'. It has to do with knowing 'what to say' and 'whom to say it to'. Many of the misunderstandings that occur stem from what Thomas identifies as differences in evaluation regarding what she calls 'size of imposition', 'tabus', 'cross-culturally different assessments of relative power or social distance,' and 'value judgments'. She provides a useful way of looking at the type of diversity which exists across cultures and which often leads to cross-cultural problems. In doing so, she separates out what she sees as major areas in which there exist differences in cultural rules regarding speech behavior. This lack of communicative competence (a notion variously espoused by Canale (1983); Canale and Swain (1980); Hymes (1971); Savignon (1983) including its extension to 'interactional competence' by Hall (1995); Kramsch (1986), and pragmatic knowledge in a second language learning context, elicits unintentional humour.

Humour, as an aspect of human communication phenomenon, has received generous attentions from scholars who propound theories that provide an evolutionary characterization to the diverse cognitive, social, psychological and aesthetic facets. According to Al-Kharabsheh (2006), humour is a multifaceted communication phenomenon that can be approached from a variety of perspectives in existing research studies (e.g. Koestler 1964; Minsky 1980; Nash 1985; Chiaro, 1992; Berger 1993; Ruch 1998; Lopez & Maria 2002; Buijzen & Valkenburg 2004). In specific terms, humour has been discussed by sociolinguists (Martineau 1970; Tannen 1984; Benton 1988); discourse analysts (Sherzer 1985; Al-Khatib 1997); computational linguists (Shelley *et al.* 1996; Di Maio 2000); psychologists (Ruch 1991; Lefcourt 2001; Chiaro 2004); linguists (Alam 1989; De Bruyn 1988; Farghal 2006); ethnographers (Sacks 1974; Apte 1985; Davies 2004); screen translation scholars (Vandaele 1996; Asimakoulas 2001; Buijzen & Valkenburg 2004); theatre semioticians (Delabastita 1994, 1996 & 1997; Bassnett 1990 & 1998; Heylen 1993; Aaltonen 2000; Marinetti 2005). Despite the complex notion of humour as evident in scholars' heterogeneity of views, humour can be characterized by the two most general concepts: *incongruity* and *superiority*. The former, notes Vandaele (2002), is concerned with the humorous effect resulting from the departure from normal cognitive schemes, i.e. flouting of basic formal language rules, while the latter relates to the effect of humour.

Also, there have been two approaches to the study of humor: the functional and the descriptive. The functional approach has emphasized the socio-psychological aspects of joke-telling (e.g. Benton 1988). The descriptive approach foregrounds semantic and structural properties of jokes (e.g. Goldstein, 1970; Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1994, 2001; Attardo and Raskin, 1991). Regardless of the approach, there is a consensus among humor researchers that joking, which typically results in laughter, is essentially an intentional act that evolves from both the joker and the joke itself, and is expected to be of interest to the listener, who usually turns into a key player once the joke has been cracked. Meaning is never made explicit in jokes. Instead, it is typically worked out co-operatively between the joke teller and the listener by way of conversational implicature in a non-bona fide manner of communication (Grice 1975; Raskin, 1985). In essence, the humourist violates a number of the conversational maxims, intentionally to create humour.

According to Farghal (2006), accidental humor in interlingual communication is the output of the producer's language incompetence in the target language, whereas it is the result of the producer's landing in unintended ambiguity in intralingual communication. In such humour, therefore, the initiator infringes on Grice's (1975) one or more maxims of conversation, unlike intentional humor, where the joke teller exploits conversational maxims for communicative purposes, in order to generate

conversational implicature and subsequently, laughter. In the case of accidental humour, there is no intention on the part of the speaker to create humour. Instead, the speaker inadvertently flouts the conversational maxims and in the process creates humour. From the theoretical perspective of Grice (1975), an infringement of a maxim contrasts with the flouting of a maxim in terms of speaker's intentions: the former involves the speaker's awareness that he is exploiting a maxim of conversation for a communicative purpose, whereas the latter lacks this awareness on the part of the speaker, i.e. the exploitation of the maxim is accidental and never intended by the speaker due to lack of communicative competence and pragmatic knowledge of the target language in a typical intercultural communication context.

In spite of this functional difference between intentional and unintentional humour, Farghal contends that script opposition lies at the heart of both; humour evolves and, subsequently, derives from an enterprise of incongruity. The overt script at the beginning of the (un)intended joke must be overridden by a covert script that unfolds when the punch line is reached. However, whereas intentional humor is usually the output of fictional thinking, accidental humor is the output of mishaps in actual communication, which derives from a real rather than fictional setting. This paper focuses mainly on the latter category where there is an obvious communicator having no possible intention but unintentionally has aroused a humorous effect. We look at how the communication strategies adopted by Nigerian users of the English language generate unintentional humour. Tarone (1981: 419) defines communication strategies as involving 'a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared'. Tarone's (1981) taxonomy of communication strategies provides a useful description of these strategies which include avoidance, message abandonment, paraphrase, approximation, word coinage, circumlocution, literal translation.

Data

This study aims at analysing accidental humour as evident in a number of expressions by some users of the English Language in the Nigerian intercultural communication environment. Such expressions were selected from Internet material posted on some websites and other sources. Of course, the following list (sourced from www.thenigerianvoice.com, www.naijapals.com and www.dailypostnigeria.com) is by no means exhaustive; it is essentially representative of an aspect of English usage in Nigeria. It is equally important to note here that some of these expressions may not be easily verifiable as existential presuppositions inferable from interlocutors' references to typical NE users.

- Osun PDP cries 'fowl'.
- Same sexing is an abomination.
- Two sexing is not African.
- It is not in Africans for man to be climbing man and woman climbing fellow woman.
- God created man to romance the woman.
- My Fellow Widows
- It is not easy to carry second in an international competition like this one
- We should have love for our fellow Nigerians irrespective of their nationality.
- I would rather kill myself than commit suicide bombing.
- Ojukwu is a great man; he died but his manhood lives on.
- All of us have AIDS only that some people are positive while others are negative.
- So, sister Ngozi lost the *erection* (election)? No Nigerian should put money in that stupid World Bank again. Let me see how they will get customers.
- Nigeria is a great continent.
- I donate my family on behalf of 20 million.
- A good mother takes care of his children.
- Vote umblerra and pless your finger for umblerra.
- Children, children, children; how old is independence today?
- The United States of America during the tenure of Bill Clinton granted state pardon to his brother who was involved in drug trafficking.

- Those broods we are sharing in Borno, there is God o! The broods we are sharing in Borno will answer

It is pertinent to put the data in proper and intelligible perspective by providing the background of the selected script. (1) a statement credited to the spokesperson of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in Osun State. (2) – (5) remarks made by a typical NE user on the Same Sex Marriage Bill proposed by a member of the National Assembly intended to condemn the Bill and commend the Assembly members for throwing it away. (6) statement credited to a female addressing a gathering of widows. Incidentally, the woman's husband is very much alive and could not have been addressing her 'fellow widows'. (7) statement made while addressing journalists on the achievements of Nigeria's falconets who were beaten finalists in the FIFA under 19 female world cup competition. (8) piece of advice to Nigerians urging them to love one another irrespective of their ethnic differences. (9) condemnation of Boko Haram's suicide bombings in Nigeria. (10) statement credited to an NE user eulogizing the late Ikemba Nnewi, Dim Odumegwu Ojukwu while on a condolence visit to commiserate with the Ojukwu family on the death of the former Biafran leader. (11) comment by a Nigerian V.I.P at a public function to mark the 2012 World AIDS Day. (12) statement credited to a very important Nigerian bemoaning the failure of Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala to clinch the topmost position in the World Bank as the President. (13) comment on the greatness of Nigeria as a country. (14) statement by a typical NE user at a fund-raising ceremony announcing a N20 million donation of behalf of the family. (15) extols the virtues of Nigerian mothers. (16) campaign rhetoric urging Nigerians to press their thumb against the umbrella, PDP's logo. (17) A very important person in government organized a party for children to mark the nation's independence anniversary during which the children were asked questions about the year Nigeria was granted independence. (18) statement of Tony Uranta (Executive Secretary, National Summit Group) justifying state pardon for Dieprie Alamieyeseigha. (19) It is Dame Patience Jonathan's impassioned condemnation of the rising insurgency in northeast Nigeria.

Data analysis and discussions

In this section, we examine the above selected sentences that are typical of Nigerian English (NE) usage and determine the possible linguistic resources, which provided the basis for constructing accidental humour in the Nigerian interlingual communication context. Perhaps, it is pertinent to state from the onset that humour can be characterized by the two most general concepts: *incongruity* and *superiority*. Incongruity, notes Vandaele (2002), refers to the humorous effect resulting from the departure from normal cognitive schemes, i.e. flouting of basic formal language rules, while superiority relates to the effect of humour. This is what Attardo & Raskin (1991) refer to as *script opposition*, according to which the mechanism of humour production involves conflicting knowledge representations.

Thus, incongruity as a humorous technique can be used to automatically elicit the dissonant element that is the source of humorous interpretation. Most jokes employ a justification of the incongruity, a 'sense in nonsense' (Freud 1960), a faulty or 'local logic' (Ziv 1984) in their plot, functioning only on account of a "willing suspension of disbelief" (Attardo and Raskin 1991). In essence, the key component in the structure of a humorous stretch is incongruity. In the discussions that follow presently, we examine the polymorphous character of unintentional humour and explore the possible linguistic (lexical and grammatical) resources, which constitute incongruity as an accidental humour technique in a typical interlingual and intercultural communication context such as Nigeria.

Lexical resources

The lexical resources, which provide the undercurrent of incongruity that fuels accidental humour range from morpho-phonological similarity, lingua-cultural localisms, mispronunciation/mis-spelling, ambiguity, semantic overlap, to lexical gaps.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity is a feature of language, which suggests that a word or an expression is subject to double or multiple interpretations. Such multiple senses can derive from polysemy, homonymy, or homophony. A polysemous word is one that has two or more related meanings in any given language. In other words, polysemy represents variations of the basic sense of a word. Homonymous words are those ambiguous words whose multiple senses are completely unrelated to each other; for example, the word 'bank' can mean 'a financial institution' and 'side of a river'. Homophones are words whose pronunciations are the same but their spelling and meaning are different, as is the case with 'fowl' and 'foul'. In (1), accidental humour is triggered by the homophones – *fowl* and *foul* which shield two different meanings. The erroneous use of the lexeme – foul – due to the interlingual speaker's lack of communicative competence in the Target Language (TL) generates unintentional humour by introducing incongruent script into the context thereby giving rise to two competing scripts in a given context.

The polysemous property of *manhood* in (10) and the attendant inherent ambiguity betrays the speaker's lack of communicative competence in English. The lexical meanings of manhood include (i) 'state of being a man,' (ii) 'manly qualities - courage, sexual virility,' (iii) 'all the men'. The statement acknowledges the demise of the physical Ojukwu on the one hand but restates the permanence of his manly state including his manly qualities such as courage and sexual virility on the other! Perhaps, what the speaker meant was that Ojukwu's legacy would outlive him. Unfortunately, the speaker had inadvertently activated in the mind of his/her listeners the erotic frame of sexual virility amid a large number of sub-frames covering endless aspects of general stereotypic knowledge of manhood, thus yielding unintentional humour.

Mispronunciation

Mispronunciation represents another aspect of interlingual communication that gives rise to unintentional humour. Typical of this interlingual mishap are (12) (16), and (19). In the former, the interlingual communicator inadvertently fall into the deep pit of spoonerism by transposing the initial consonantal sound – the voiced alveolar lateral /l/ with the voiced alveolar rhotic /r/ in the word *election*. The act of lamdersism constitutes a veritable source of humour given that the mispronounced word took place with a lexical item that is very well-known and common to almost everyone who possesses even a smattering of English. Definitely, mispronunciation is surely bound to produce funny forms that enable the emergence of scripts that are drastically different from the intended ones, which is likely to trigger humour. The sense of humour is not only further heightened by the sexual reading of the word, *erection*, but also the script opposition triggered by the communicator's unintentional infringement of Grice's conversational maxim of relation. The speaker's next comment, which advocates outright boycott of the World Bank by Nigerians as a way of taming its overbearing profiteering propensity ably demonstrates his/her blissful ignorance of the institutional status of the Bank.

As a non-commercial financial institution, the 'stupid' World Bank does not depend on the individual or group patronages of its Nigerian 'customers' to survive and break even. This incongruent sense instantiates the irrelevance of the speaker's inadvertent conflicting knowledge representations glibly driven by unintentional infringement of conversational maxim of relation. The same Freudian 'sense in nonsense' enabled the speaker to personify an institutional entity such as World Bank (with –HUMAN inherent semantic feature) that can be gleefully forced into a marital collocation with 'stupid' as a post-nominal modifier. Also, example (16) is self-explanatory in demonstrating how humour can derive from mispronounced words (umblerra, pless) that are quite familiar to anyone with basic command of English. It is really this familiarity, which causes a risible feeling of entertainment. This example clearly instantiates a natural affinity between the speaker and pathological phonetic infelicities, given the feline fluidity and seamless ease with

which the speaker had taken lewd liberty in mispronouncing words the way he/she pleases.

The clear difference between the English words 'umbrella' 'press' and their mispronounced counterparts 'umlerra' 'pless' as observed in the speaker's rendition constitute a veritable source of humour. Quite expectedly, mispronunciation is a sure bet for stimulating a tickling sensation that generate the template for the emergence of incongruous and opposing scripts. The same applies to *broods* (blood) and *sharing* (shedding) in (19). In essence, the uncanny dexterity that characterises the art of mispronunciation remains one of the undisputed sources of unintentional humour in Nigeria's interlingual communication context. Therefore, it goes without saying that pronunciation mastery is a fundamental linguistic competence, which predisposes one to recognise accidental humour deriving from the obverse side of linguistic cum communicative competence.

Lexical gaps

Scholars (Ivir, 1977; Dagut, 1981; Rabin 1958) explain lexical gaps as the holes in the semantic blanket in any given language. This feature, which is common to all known languages, as Al-Kharabshah (2003) observe, does not mean that languages may variously not be capable of expressing some propositions due to lexical gaps. On the contrary, every language has its own ways and means to express any thought in the world, and to abridge the lexical gaps communicatively functionally and idiomatically; a fact that explains the existence of different concept systems across languages and cultures. In other words, every language has the ability to improvise ways and means to fill in the lexical gaps communicatively, i.e. independently of lexical compression where one specific lexeme is employed. In fact, it is evident from the data analysis that follows presently that unintentional humour in some cases emanates from the communicator's inability to handle script oppositions between the two domains of *source language text* (SLT) and *target language text* (TLT).

This pragmatic failure is evident in examples (2-5) where the TLT perforated yawning holes in the lexical wall of the SLT, a linguistic situation that overwhelmed the interlingual communicator to the sorry point of embarking on what one may refer to as 'convoluted linguistic extemporisation'. The unintentional humour in the above examples oozes out from the communicator's sweating efforts to fill in the lexical gap by recourse to the SL expressions – *same sexing*, *two sexing*, *man climbing man/woman climbing woman*, all of which are far-fetched, unfathomable, and grossly incomprehensible in English and thus the reader would work it out based on his/her encyclopaedic knowledge which may avail him/her nothing in this linguistic maze. As a result, this unsatisfactory choice compels the reader to encounter an incompatible sense which unavoidably yields incongruity and script opposition. The accidental humour in examples (2-4) derives from the communicator's ignorance of the appropriate terms – homosexuality / lesbianism – needed to meet his/her communicative intentions and the linguistic exigency pointed to the wisdom of taking recourse to the SL expression *climbing*, whose sexual semantics lacks lexicalization in the TL, English. The communicator's fitful and pitiful attempt at 'explaining' the erotic trappings of examples (2-4) in example (5) only came off diffidently tragic as it successfully failed to choose the right word – sex, perhaps safely ensconced in his/her cocoon of bloated confidence to believe that *sex* and *romance* are synonyms, which could be easily used interchangeably.

In a way, the communicator's pragmatic failure in this regard may be excused on the basis of subsisting lexical gap in the SL given that this weird sexual habit of 'man climbing man / woman climbing woman' is not part of the African culture. To make up for this linguistic-cultural gap between the source language text and target language text, the communicator fell back on the rich mines of SLT's rich linguistic repertoire to dig up *same sexing* and *climbing* as the appropriate phrasal expression for the TL's *homosexuality/lesbianism*. The unintentional humour here emanates from the communicator's bogus self-confidence that he/she had succeeded in appropriating the seemingly inexhaustible linguistic resources of SLT to express his/her deep feelings about

this bizarre sexual habit that is totally alien to his/her linguistic-cultural milieu. The implication of the foregoing is that a working knowledge of concept systems across languages and cultures provides useful guide to an objective assessment of how interlingual communicators address the challenges posed by instances of lexical gaps, and which by extension, determines the extent to which the resultant humour is generally appreciated by the target language audience.

Semantic inaccuracy in TLT

The failure of the interlingual communicator to render in the TL a given message adequately and accurately due to semantic inaccuracy can lead to communication breakdown, which may elicit humour as evident in examples (6), (8), and (13). In (6), the communicator failed to grasp the semantic import of the lexeme, *fellow*. A fellow is one who is a member of or belongs to one's class or profession, marked out from the rest by certain peculiarity. The unintentional humour deriving from collocational and contextual mishaps would not have arisen if the communicator belonged to the same class of women, whose husbands had died, that is, widow. Incidentally, the reverse was the case. In other words, the communicator's husband was still alive, hale and hearty at the time the statement was made. Therefore, the communicator could not have belonged to the class of women, she addressed as *my fellow widows*. As a result of this inadvertent introduction of incongruity and script opposition, the intended message is turned upside down, thus giving rise to accidental humour.

Also, the accidental humour in (8) and (13) is triggered by the communicator's failure to appreciate the semantic imports of *nationality* and *continent*. The commonality of origins that binds Nigerians together confers on them the status of having one nationality. In other words, all Nigerians share equal status of belonging to one nation, Nigeria by virtue of birth, marriage, or naturalisation. Therefore, Nigerians do not belong to different nationalities that would warrant such a sermon, admonishing them to love one another. It is the same script-switch trigger, which instantiates incongruity and opposition in the preceding examples that predisposed the communicator to embark on another fortuitous humour construction in example (13), when he/she chooses to dress Nigeria in the borrowed garbs of a *continent*.

From the foregoing, it is evident that semantic inaccuracy in the target language text constitutes a fertile breeding ground for interlingual mishaps that create incongruity and script opposition and, and the resultant unintentional accidental humour. In almost all the cases, unintentional humour occurs because the interlingual communicator fails to employ the semantically-accurate lexeme. Consequently, he/she falls an easy prey to an emergent incongruous and opposing script.

Transliteration

This refers to direct rendition of the TLT in the light of SLT. Typical of this local logic or what may be referred to as *Nigerianisms*, is example (7) where the communicator's idea of taking the second position in a sporting competition can best be expressed in the target language by the phrasal expression – carry second. The unintentional humour generated by this lingua-cultural localism arises from two factors: (i) the transliterated phrase can be effortlessly rendered in English without losing any meaning; (ii) the target language rendition becomes a needless incongruous and opposing script.

Ideational somersault

In this context, ideational somersault refers to erroneous process of forming and relating ideas and concepts through the use of convoluted registers and conflated phrasal lexemes, which tend to yield a somewhat clumsy, dodgy, or even weird linguistic localisms. Consequently, such linguistic tomfoolery excels in injecting comical punctuations into the script. In this regard, (9) and (11) provide a sample of pragmatic failure, which leads to unintentional construction of humour in a typical inter-lingual communication context of Nigeria. The obvious lack of communicative competence in Standard English (SE) and gaping lexical holes in the verbal

repertoire of the NE user predisposed the speaker to prefer the use of 'killing oneself' to 'suicide bombing' in (9) as if the two syntactic constructions represent antonymous propositions.

Perhaps, due to the relatively newness of 'suicide bombing' in the Nigerian inter-lingual communication context, the NE speaker blissfully appropriates the linguistic licence to twist this piece of information into a factual error, thereby igniting risible linguistic ineptitude. Also, (11) presents another clear instance of ideational somersault, which like a volcanic upheaval spews forth molten rocks of crass self-contradiction that yields information redundancy. The erroneous formation and relation of the AIDS concept predisposes the NE user to conflate the disparate states of positivity and negativity and yield an incongruous script in a manner that collapses the wall of pathological difference of Nigerians. If testing positive to AIDS represent the reverse side of testing negative, all Nigerians would then not said to have AIDS. However, given the speaker's lack of communicative competence in English, he/she failed to grasp the full semantic import of AIDS as a pathological condition and gladly lapped up the seeming irresistible allurements of classifying all Nigerians as patients.

Grammatical resources

Defective word order and reference

In all languages, the grammar specifies the word order, that is, the different ways words relate to one another in syntactic structures - phrases, clauses, and sentences. However, failure to adhere to the syntactic rules of the language in this regard can give rise to structural ambiguity. In some cases, the wrong concatenation of constituents in syntactic structures can trigger humour deriving from incongruous script as evident in (18). Here, the unintentional humour is caused by the erroneous placement of the third person possessive pronoun 'his' as an anaphoric referent to 'United States of America' giving the impression that the person being granted state pardon for drug trafficking is the brother of United States of America. In terms of intentions, the speaker wanted the anaphoric reference marker 'his' to refer textually to the referent 'Bill Clinton'. However, this intended reference script fails due to erroneous word order.

Also, in (14), the accidental humour derives essentially from wrong word order. Erroneous word order altered the intended meaning of the sentence, thereby yielding an incongruous script. The speaker's intention was to announce a donation of 20 million on behalf of his family but ended up 'donating his family on behalf of 20 million'.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have examined pragmatic failures of speakers of English as L₂ in the Nigerian interlingual communication context and how unintentional humour results therefrom. It is evident from the data analysis that unintended humour differs fundamentally from intentional humour in terms of deliberate contrivance. Whereas accidental humour lacks the producer's intention to amuse his audience, intentional humour derives its legitimacy from the producer's aim at eliciting laughter from his audience. The latter category typifies the comedy shows of Nigeria's entertainment industry in contemporary times wherein humour-related conversational implicature underpins the activity of joke telling.

From the foregoing, it is evident that humor arising from pragmatic failures in the interlingual communication context of Nigeria typifies accidental humor. The speakers' obvious lack of communicative competence in the target language (English) provides inspiration for generation of such humour. Such accidental humour derives from script opposition through the deployment of such linguistic mechanisms (lexical and grammatical resources) as ambiguity, mispronunciation, lexical gaps, semantic inaccuracy in TLT, transliteration, ideational somersault, defective word order, and faulty reference.

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