Stand-up Comedy as an Activity Type

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to characterise stand-up performance as an activity type and explore ways through which the participants in a stand-up comedy performance, especially the stand-up comedians, manipulate the parameters of an activity type so as to achieve their interactional goals. Data comprised extracts from routines of randomly selected six Nigerian stand-up comedians in a recorded video. Analysed routines indicated that the participants' goal and institutional identities influenced how they manipulated the parameters like allowable contribution and interpersonal maxims; for instance, the audience made use heckling to negotiate allowable contribution so as to indicate that their interactional goal was unfulfilled while stand-up comedians made use self-denigrating motif so as to elicit laughter and reduce the interactional distance between themselves and the audience.

Key words: Stand-up Comedy, Activity Type, Participants, Audiences and Stand-up Comedians

Introduction

Humour has been described as a condition for humanity and part of human cultural universals (Oring, 2003). Attardo (2011, p. 135) notes that it is the technical term that covers "anything that is or maybe perceived as funny, amusing and laughable." It is usually associated with laughter, gaiety, mirth and feelings of happiness. Since humour is primarily expressed through language, language scholars have approached it from linguistic perspectives. Schwarz (2010) opines that humour research is central in English linguistics while Attardo (1994) has shown that linguistic theories and approaches have been applied to the study of humour.

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One of the reasons why linguists are interested in humour is that humour is primarily expressed through language, and just like language, it is embedded with meaning. Another reason is that humour is often employed in conversations; therefore, it is necessary for linguists who are interested in conversational analysis to investigate how humour is used and the purpose it serves in human interactions. In addition, since humour is an innate as well as a social phenomenon for humans, studying it helps us to understand, more clearly, the aspects of human nature which enable the use of humour. Lastly, the linguistic investigation of humour helps to describe, understand and state principles or generalisations that surround the use of humour in language.

The main objective of this study is to characterise stand-up comedy performance as an activity type. The study adopts a discourse theoretic approach, activity type theory, to the study of humour, which is generated from stand–up comedy performance. The genre of stand-up comedy is chosen because it readily provides humorous texts and situations where conversational humour takes place. Moreover, as observed by Schwarz (2010), only scant attention has been paid to research on stand-up comedy.

In what follows, an overview of the concept of joke and its various types are presented. Particularly, I focus on stand-up comedy as a form of talk-in-interaction and describe the nature of the interaction, after which Levinson's theory of activity types is presented. In the last section, I illustrate how the interactions between stand-up comedians and their audiences fit into an activity type following the indices provided by Thomas (1995).

For analytical purposes, illustrations were taken from Nigerian stand-up comedy performances. Particularly, extracts were taken from the performances of six randomly selected stand-up comedians in volume seventeen of *Nite of a Thousand Laughs* (NTL). The NTL is a comedy show that is staged in major Nigerian cities on national holidays; it is the most popular and oldest brand of the Nigerian stand-up comedy (Ayakoroma, 2013 and Adetunji, 2013). It features a large number of professional stand-up comedians in the country. The NTL live performances are made available in Video-Compact-Disc (VCD) formats. The extracts were transcribed from the VCD. Nigerian stand-up comedians perform mainly in Nigerian Pidgin, which may be alternated with English and/or one of the country's native languages. In cases where necessary, English

translations of extracts were provided. The selected comedians are *Eneche, Mc Shakara, I Go Dye, Gordons, Buchi and Lepacious Bose.* The chosen extracts are parts of the comedians' routines that reflect the features of activity types in the performances. For historical and linguistics perspectives on NTL and Nigerian stand-up comedy, see Ayakoroma (2013) and Adetunji (2013) respectively.

Jokes

The definitions given to jokes and the analysis of jokes in the linguistic studies of jokes and other genre of humour have focused on how a joke generates humour, or the functional use of jokes in conversations. In the first instance, theorists like Raskin (1985), Giora (1991), Attardo and Raskin (1991) and Lew (1997) have explicated the concept of joke by looking at how the linguistic constituents of jokes result in humour. In the second instance, theorists examine the functional use of jokes in interactions, for instance (Schmidt 2011; Holmes 2006).

According to Schmidt (2011), a joke is a discrete unit of language which functions as a speech act. Its perlocutionary effect is aimed at amusing the recipient. The joke is made up of different parts and it is spoken with a joking register; the recipients understand a joke as a joke, know that it is irreducible and that it carries meanings larger and more complex than the meanings of the individual parts and/or the literal sum of its parts (Schmidt, 2011). According to Hockett (1960), cited in Schwarz (2010), a joke is made-up of three different parts: build-up, pivot and punchline. The build-up is the part of the joke that introduces the joke, presents orientation and the obscuring action. The pivot of the joke is the utterance around which the ambiguity in the joke is created while the punchline concludes the joke by introducing a conflicting point of view or a new scene entirely. The punchline presents the surprise effect of the joke and is responsible to the humour in the joke since it produces an incongruity with the build-up. The build-up is also known as set-up or setting (Dynel 2012) while in several studies, the pivot is not recognised, such that a joke is commonly said to be made up of two parts: the build-up/ set-up/ setting/ and the punchline (Attardo 1994, Dynel 2009 and 2012).

Raskin (1985), which has become a highly influential study in humour research, describes a joke as containing two opposing scripts, with a script trigger that makes a

switch from one script to the other possible. Raskin's theory, the Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH), postulates that a joke text is unambiguous to the point of the punchline to recipients. The punchline triggers a shift from one script to another and makes the receiver to recognise that the text has potentials for other interpretations, which s/he has not taken note of. The attendant review of the SSTH, the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) is a pragmatic approach to the analysis of joke which sees a joke as a sextuple, containing six Knowledge Resources (KR) which are language (L- the linguistic components that make up the joke text), narrative strategy (NS- the narrative organisation of the joke), target (TA-the butt of the joke), situation (SI-the objects, participants, surroundings and activities in the joke), logical mechanism (LM-how the scripts in the joke are brought together) and script opposition (SO- the overlapping requirement suggested in the SSTH). The GTVH proposes a hierarchical organisation of the KRs, with a basic principle that one KR will be determined by another. The proponents present the hierarchical organisation of the KRs as: SO, LM, SI, TA, NS and LA (Attardo 1994).

Jokes are classed into two categories: canned jokes and conversational jokes. Canned jokes are prepared texts and could be described as "the prototypical form of verbal humour, produced orally in conversations or published in collections" (Dynel, 2009 p. 1284). To Attardo (1994, p. 295-296), a canned joke is "a joke which has been used before the time of utterance in form similar to that used by the speaker, such as those which are found in books, collections of jokes; its text does not depend on contextual factors...and is quite interchangeable with respect to context." On the other hand, a conversational joke "is improvised during a conversation draws heavily on contextual information for its setup, they have their origin in the ongoing interpersonal process...it is almost impossible to transfer it from one situation to another." Conversational jokes or conversational humour as posited by Dynel (2009), are instances of spontaneous interactional humour and they include any form of language constructions, words, phrases, sentences and multi-turn exchanges, which are aimed at deriving humorous response from the recipients. According to Dynel (2009, p. 1286), the term conversational humour is preferable to conversational jokes because "it embraces units such as humorous words or witticisms, which do not resemble jokes formally and often

cannot be entirely subsumed under the humorous mode/frame/key." Conversational humour is taken as an encompassing term for any form of situational humour or verbal chunks constructed spontaneously so as to amuse the recipient, either directly contributing to the semantic content of the ongoing interaction or diverting its frame into the non bona fide mode, in which speakers are not sincere to truth of their propositions.

Much of the mainstream research in the linguistic approaches to humour has focused on the analysis of canned jokes (Dynel 2012). It is in view of this that Gunther (2003, p. 1) asserts that the "linguistic analysis of humour have generally been based on prepared material (texts, canned jokes) and introspection." Since stand-up comedy has not been investigated as much as other genres of humour in linguistic studies on humour, this study focuses on this genre and show how the stand-up interaction falls within what Levinson (1979) terms activity type. It explores ways by which stand-up comedians in their performances organise their monologues and ways by which their audiences' contributions fit into the frame of the activity.

The Nature of Stand-up Comedy

Stand-up comedy is a performance in which the stand-up comedian behaves comically and/or says funny things directly to an audience (Mintz 1985). Schwarz (2010, p. 17) describes stand-up comedians as "individual performers who plant themselves in front of their listeners with their microphones and start telling a succession of funny stories, one-liners or short jokes, and anecdotes… in order to make their audience laugh."

Several scholars have recognised stand-up comedy as a genre which success depends so much on the comedians' use of language, nonverbal cues and the audience's approval of the comedians' presentations. In line with this, Greenbaum (1999) describes the performance as a rhetorical discourse that depends on the humourist's ability to convince the audience to view the world through their comic vision, and which strives to entertain and persuade the audience. McIlvenny et al. (1993) recognise that linguistic resources are crucial to the success of a comedian's show while Mintz (1985) opines that the essence of the art of stand-up comedy is creative distortion, which is achieved via language through exaggeration, stylization, incongruous context and burlesque. In

addition, the manipulative uses of language are employed by the stand-up comedians to form conversational and rhetorical devices for the comedian to build humour.

Further still, Schwarz (2010) characterises stand-up comedy performances as monologues which are not different from jokes from a textual point of view, but which are distinguishable from jokes due to their complexity. In stand-up comedy, the comedians plant themselves in front of the audience and do the talking without expecting the audience to reciprocate the jokes or interrupt their monologues. In conversational monologue, on the other hand, the participants all want to take part in the conversation either by waiting for a turn to reciprocate the speaker's joke or by giving feedbacks in form of their responses. It is in view of this that Schwarz observes that phenomena like simultaneous talk in the form of overlaps, co-constructions, joint productions and latching which are features of conversations help to distinguish stand-up joking from conversational joking; for instance, stand-up comedians do not expect their audiences to comment on their jokes while in conversational joking, the humourist always wants a reaction from the recipients.

Regardless of the differences between joking in stand-up monologues and conversational joking, stand-up comedy performance can still be characterised as an instance of conversational joking. As a conversation, the stand-up comedy performance produces a structured form of talk presented by the stand-up while the audience present their contribution through their affiliative or disaffiliative responses. The structure of talk in the performance also reflects some features like repetitive structures, formulaic structures and the use of various discourse markers and disfluencies found in conversational joking (Schwarz 2010). Similarly, Adetunji (2013) observes that stand-up comedians make use of formulaic expressions as signature tunes to begin their monologues and as boundary markers to signal the start and end of a joke. Just like any other conversation, stand-up performance is also aimed at achieving certain goals. In this case, it achieves the same conversational goals with conversational joking, which is the elicitation of humorous effects in the recipients.

The conversational nature of stand-up comedy performance can be further specified as an institutional form of talk-in-interaction as argued by Scarpetta and Spagnolli (2009). First, in any stand-up performance, the participants' roles are tied to their institutional

identities. The stand-ups, as the humourists, are the addressers while the audience are the recipients. The recipients gather to be entertained by the humourist who constructs his/her monologues in a way to amuse the recipients. Second, there are restrictions on who can contribute to the interaction and the kinds of permitted contribution. Third, the talk in the performance reflects an institutionalised practice as it shows coherence, orderliness and meaningful succession of sequences of acts or moves. Lastly, as an activity, it can be reproduced by keeping to the conventional practice.

Activity Types

Activity type theory can be viewed as a specification of social pragmatics since it accentuates how social constraints and interactional goals influence a speaker's choice of an utterance and the hearer's favoured interpretive patterns. It creates room for how participants' contributions impact the development of talk-in-interaction. It also shows why and how speakers exploit a situation to achieve their interactional goals. According to Levinson (1979), systematic constraints on language usage, and, the rules governing the roles and functions that language is expected to perform within a specific social activity, determine the inferences of the participants during such activity. With activity type, Levinson accentuates how participants use language to shape a speech event (Thomas 1995).

An activity type is a "culturally recognised activity, whether or not that activity is coextensive with a period of speech or indeed whether any talk takes place in it at all" (Levinson 1979, p. 368). Therefore, an activity type which is made up of "a collection of particular conversational contributions, including speech acts that stand in particular pragmatic relationships to each other and have become a relatively conventionalised whole", can be "a seminar, a family dinner event, or a birthday party" (Culpeper et al 2008, p. 299).

Levinson (1979, p. 368) further states

> I take the notion of an activity type to refer to a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded, events with constraints on participant, setting, and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions. Paradigm examples would be teaching,

a job interview, a jural interrogation, a football game, a task in a workshop, a dinner party and so on.

From Levinson (1979), it can be deduced that constraints on contributions in any activity result in corresponding strong expectations about the functions that any utterance at certain points in the activity can fulfil. An expectation arises because each activity type has its own corresponding set of inferential schemata which is employed in the interpretation of the utterances produced in the activity and which determines the kind of utterances that the participants in the activity produces. Levinson (1979, p.393), in addition, points out that apart from placing constraints on what counts as allowable contributions to each activity, activity types "help to determine how what one says will be taken", that is, "what kind of inferences will be made from what is said." With AT, Levinson presupposes "a conventionalised bundle of contextualised communicative actions" (Culpeper et al 2008, p.300). As observed by Odebunmi (2010), activity types pictures each discourse participant as playing a communicative role that suits the interactional context and that is responsive to the peculiarity of the activities being carried out.

From the foregoing, it can be said that the concept of activity types accentuate a conventionalised or institutionalised interaction. However, Levinson (1979) fails to fully specify the interactional features of an activity type. As a result, Thomas (1995) specifies a checklist or parameters of the interactional features of an activity type: the goals of the participants, allowable contributions, the degree to which Gricean maxims are adhered to or are suspended, the degree to which interpersonal maxims are adhered to or suspended, turn taking and topic control, and the manipulation of pragmatic parameters. In the next session, these parameters of an activity type are applied to stand-up comedy.

Stand-up Comedy as an Activity Type

The goals of the participants

From Levinson (1979) illustration of activity types, it can be deduced that the concept of activity type accentuates the goals of the participants in an interaction rather than the goal of the interaction. For instance, as demonstrated by Levinson (1979) and opined by

Thomas (1995), the goal of a court hearing is to come up with a fair verdict, but the goal of the prosecution lawyer (to get a guilty verdict) is entirely opposing to that of the defence lawyer and the defendant.

The participants in stand-up performances have different goals and these goals are tied to their institutional identities as addressers and addressees in the event. The stand-up comedians are the addressers while the audiences are the addressees.

The goals of stand-up comedians can be viewed from different perspectives: the first is to win and sustain the approval of their audiences and the second is to direct the audience attention to view "the world through their comic vision" (Greenbaum 1999 p. 33). In the first instance, the comedians' goal is to initiate the humorous interaction with the grounding of their presence before the audience, while in the second, the comedians' goal is to direct the audience to the social import of the humour generated in the interaction. Previous scholars have identified these goals as part of the institutionalised aims of the stand-up comedians as performers, and, the different methods they use in achieving them. For the first goal, the comedian begins by "working the room" (Mintz, 1985).Working the room may be achieved by an MC, a warm-up comic or by the comedians themselves by presenting an introduction which could be a form of salutation. With the introduction, comedians achieve mutual attention and willingness to carry on the interaction with the audience. Schwarz (2010) identifies the use of paralanguage like gestures and facial expressions as strategy of raising and sustaining the audience excitement. There is also the use of shared knowledge of topics, events and cultural beliefs as a means of sustaining the audience attention to the material being presented (Yus 2004, Schwarz 2010, Glick 2007), especially, the comedians are known "to set-up up the relevant background knowledge for the audience within the performance" (Glick 2007 p. 293).

Nigerian stand-up comedians win and sustain the approval of the audience by commencing their narrations with a salutation, asking questions from the audience and referring to previous discourse. Text A below which is taken from *Eneche's* performance illustrates an overt use of salutation to win the audience attention.

Text A

Calabar, good evening. I bring you greetings from the political power of the middle belt, the talent and food basket of this great nation, the heartbeat of Africa.

Calabar una fine, una city fine [Calabar your city is beautiful]

In short when I entered Calabar, I come dey think say I don enter abroad, the city neat, make una clap for unaself. [When I arrived in Calabar, I thought I was abroad, the city is neat, please clap for yourself]

Eneche's greeting was directed to the people of Calabar, a capital city in Nigeria where the performance was taking place. Eneche also identified a positive value in the city- the city was neat and attractive. His style of greeting was fashioned after a salutation style which is common in several cultures in Nigeria, in which the person saluting overtly expresses that s/he 'brings greetings' from her/his place of origin. This is what *Eneche* did by saying *I bring you greetings from the political power of the middle belt, the talent and food basket of this great nation, the heartbeat of Africa.*

Asking questions from the audience is an act which is usually embedded in the stand-up comedians' monologues. When questions are thrown to the audience, the comedian makes the audience to take a more influential role in the performance as the audience response may determine the comedians' subsequent narration. Text B, from *MC Shakara's* routine, presents an example where question are directed at the audience.

Text B

How many of una know plantation boys? You know why dem separate? Make I tell you now. [How many of you know plantation boys? Did you know why they separate? Let me tell you why right away]

In referring to previous discourse, stand-up comedians make references to what has been mentioned by other comedians in the venue of the performance. In some instances, they may refer to topics or issues that have been the subject of discourse in the wider society. When stand-ups refer to previous discourse, the audience are able to make connections with what has been previously mentioned and what is being mentioned. In this way, the audience will easily find a link in their short term memory with what is being narrated by the comedian. An example, from *I Go Dye's* performance,

of referring to previous discourse is presented as Text C below. Here, *I Go Dye* referred to the compere's (*Basketmouth*) introduction:

Make God let me fit crack good things make una laugh oh. All the ones wei dey don hype person like this he come fuck up, me myself go come dey vex for basketmouth; he go dey call person like say if he just dey talk, you go just die for laughter [May God help me to say funny things to make you laugh; now that I have been overrated by *Basketmouth,* should my jokes fail to make you laugh, I too will be disappointed in *Basketmouth* for exaggerating my comic acts while introducing me to you]

For the second goal, comedians bring to the fore the inconsistencies regarding the collective culture and behaviour of the participants. It is in view of this goal that stand-up comedy performance is described as a rhetorical discourse (Greenbaum 1999 and Morris 2011), and, the stand-up comedians as articulators of culture and contemporary anthropologists (Mintz 1985). Here, the comedians' goal is to create humour by expressing their dissatisfactions with the society or culture, and thereby provide alternative perspectives to life and living. This explains why stand-up comedians base their joking stories on common matters such as gender roles, raising children, making/receiving phone calls etc.

The performance of *Gordons* exemplifies how stand-up comedians rhetorically identify inconsistencies in collective culture. In his routine, he played on the word *change* and the concepts it signifies. He overtly asserts that everybody in the country is demanding for change: *we need change*. He then mentions the rebranding strategies of financial institutions in the country as an instance of and a result for the demand for change. *Gordons'* goal is not to talk about change in corporate organisations but to satirise the new trend in the collective sexual behaviour- homosexuality, which his audience view as inconsistent with their traditional culture.

As the addressed participants, the audience goal is to be entertained. The audience only gather to passively take part in the interaction by listening to the stand-ups' monologues and watching their moves and acts. However, the members of audience could indicate their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a comedian through their affiliative or disaffialiative responses. Affiliative responses include laughter, applause,

whoops, cheers and whistles while disaffiliative responses are jeers, boos and verbal heckles (McIlvenny et al. 1993). In the volume of stand-up comedy investigated, there are two affiliative responses: the first is denoted by cheers, laughter and applause; while the second is denoted by the audience response to the comedians elicitations such as request for clap, answers to the comedians' questions, and the audience joining in the comic use of formulaic expressions such as *praise the lord/ Hallelujah*, *Holy Ghost/fire.* These responses function as signals to the comics that they are well accepted by the members of the audience. However, there are instances where the audiences give out verbal heckles, which are disaffiliations, and which attack the personality of the comedians.

Allowable contributions

According to Thomas (1995), allowable contributions refer to the characteristic constraints, legal or social, on what participants may say. This parameter highlights institutional restrictions on allowable contributions from the participants. To apply this parameter to stand-up performance, there is need to work out the restrictions and how the participants bypass them.

On their part, the audiences negotiate this parameter to "contribute" their verbal heckles and other disaffiliations to the performance, rather than the conventionally permitted affiliative responses. Pragmatically, the audience disaffiliation shows that they are not satisfied with the performance and that their interactional goal of being entertained has not been achieved. Disaffiliations also indicate to the comedian that his/her routine is not accepted.

The convention of stand-up comedy performance, places no constraints on the stand-ups, therefore, they could say anything in whatever way they like. They could even violate the social conventions about language by manipulating language structures and by using taboo words and other non-socially acceptable expressions such as verbal abuse, attacks and insults.

Mintz (1985) describes the comedian as possessing license for deviate behaviour and expressions, this is why comedians play on conventions and manipulate traditional restrictions on utterances for humorous effects. Similarly, Mesropova (2003)

documents how Russian female stand-up comedians use the licence for deviate behaviour in their monologues by projecting highly negative men-denigrating motifs.

Buchi's performance in Volume 17 of the NTL illustrates how stand-up comedians violate social conventions and inhibitions on speech so as to accomplish their goal of achieving humorous effects in the audience. In the routine, the comedian overtly lunched a verbal attack on Nigerian pastors by ironically claiming that he respects them and that one must forcefully agree with pastors so as not to be a victim of the pastors' call for "fire fall". The extracts below are taken from the routine.

Text D

But I dey respect pastors, no provoke pastor. Nigerian pastors no dey use fire play. Reverend King, he tried spiritual fire, the demon no comot. Now he used physical fire, roast the girl life. That is why if you see a man of God, dey quick agree for am. [But I do revere pastors, do not provoke pastors. Nigerian pastors don't play with fire. Reverend King tried spiritual fire but the demon was not expelled. Then he used physical fire to roast the girl. That is why if you see a man of God, be quick to concede to his request]

Text E

I go dey wonder sometimes, these foreign ministers, why dem no dey shout like we Nigerians dey shout [Sometime I wonder why foreign pastors don't shout like the way Nigerian pastors shout]

In Texts D and E, *Buchi,* lampoons the behaviours of Nigerian pastors. Nigerians are very religious people and it is commonly believed that pastors are anointed men of God, on whom people must not cast aspersions. In Text D, *Buchi* ironically commented that he revered Nigerian pastors. In the text, he observes Nigerian pastors' use of (Holy Ghost) fire to burn up their enemies. He made reference to a pastor in the country who decided to burn up a girl on the accusation that the girl is demon-possessed. His reference to this incident is to condemn Nigerian pastors' mannerism of "calling down" Holy Ghost fire while praying. Similarly, he criticises the pastors' mannerism of shouting while praying in Text B. *Buchi*'s attack on pastors reflect that the social inhibitions on utterances do

not hold in stand-up comedy performances. It thus show that the there is no limit to what can come up as the subjects and butts of stand-up comedians' joking stories.

The degree to which Gricean maxims are adhered to or are suspended

Gricean maxims provide principles that guide speech exchanges. It is commonly observed that the way in which the maxims are observed varies from one from society to another, and also, it varies from one activity type to another (Thomas 1995). In some instances, inference and implicature can only be drawn in relation to the activity type.

In the application of the cooperative principles to joking exchanges, it has been found out that humour results from the violation of maxims (Attardo 1994 and Pan 2012). However, Raskin (1985) differentiates humorous dialogues from non-humorous dialogues and presents a different theory of humour cooperative principle. He suggests that conversational joking entails a different kind of communication mode which is governed by a different set of principles, since the hearers do not expect the speakers to tell the truth, to be conspicuous, exact or give related information. Raskin (1985) opines that the Gricean maxims account for the bona-fide communication mode in which speakers are sincere to the truth of their propositions and which excludes joking exchanges. Joking exchanges are said to belong to non-bona-fide communication mode in which speaker may not be sincere to the truth of their propositions. According to Raskin, the non-bona-fide mode is governed by a different set of maxims:

Maxim of quantity: Give exactly as much information as is necessary

Maxim of quality: Say only what is compatible with the world of the joke

Maxim of relation: Say only what is relevant to the joke

Maxim of manner: Tell the joke efficiently

(Attardo 1994 p. 205-206)

To derive a consequence of the Gricean maxims for stand-up performances, this question is asked: do stand-up comedians adhere to the cooperative principles? To answer this, one needs to take into cognisance the convention of the conversation in stand-up performances, which is primarily one-sided in that only the comics are permitted to talk unless the comics directs interrogatives to the audience. The second is that the comics have a social licence for non-cooperation in behaviour and speech.

Therefore, by convention, the stand-up monologues do not adhere to the maxims. The comedians deliberately violate and/or suspend the maxims to generate the humorous effects in their monologues through their creative distortion techniques. The audience, too, cooperate with the stand-ups in this regard, not taking at the face value the utterances in the comedians' routines. In stand-up interactions, the participants cooperate not to adhere to the cooperative principles.

Secondly, do stand-up comedians adhere to non-bona-fide maxims? To answer this one needs to examine how the comedians present life and cultural realities in their routines. An illustration is given in Text F below:

Text F

Now there is a difference between prison and cell. When you go cell, if you come outside you go be ex-convict. But if you go prison, when you come outside, you go become president. And nowadays people don dey commot for prison come become president. [There is a difference between prison and cell. When you are thrown into a cell, and then released, you will become an ex-convict; but if you are imprisoned and then released, you will become president. Nowadays people are leaving prison to become president]

Here, the stand-up comedian, *Gordons,* puns on the synonymous words *prison* and *cell*. He asserts that *prison* is different from *cell*, however, in real life a prison is also a cell. By differentiating *prison* from *cell,* Gordons adheres to the non-bona- fide maxims of quality and relation since it is only in his joke routine that *cell* is different from *prison*. *Gordons'* conceptual differentiation is necessary for the construction of his joke and achieving humorous effects. It is important to note that he differentiates *cell* from *prison* because he wanted to poke fun at the country's former president, who after being incarcerated became the president of the country.

The consequence of the non-bona-fide maxims also suggests that rather than cooperating, the participants of stand-up interactions do not expect any form of cooperation a la Gicean maxims. Rather, what guides the inferencing, according to Yus (2004) is the mood of the participants in the interaction and their search for relevance. In any stand-up exchanges, the participants are geared towards entertainment, such

that they, especially the audiences, are in the mood to be entertained. This mood motivates the audience to find what is funny in the comedians' routines. It also influences the comedians to create a garden path which lead the audience to discover incongruity between the comedians' verbal behaviour and paralanguage and the audience cultural and encyclopaedic beliefs about the world. Some studies have described this process of inferencing in terms the search for relevance (Jodlowiec, 1991, Yus, 2003 and 2004). Yus (2003 p. 1289) argues that "humourists may be willing to keep relevant information to themselves, be obscure, be ambiguous etc., for the sake of pursuing the creation of humorous effects, but the principle of relevance invariable applies to both humorous and non-humorous discourse, without having to evoke any principle of cooperation or maxims whose flouting justifies these effects."

The degree to which interpersonal maxims are adhered to or suspended

Interpersonal maxims have been conceptualised in pragmatics research as politeness phenomenon in interactions. Particularly, Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1987) have theorised politeness using different approaches: for Leech, it involves the use of maxims and principles, while for Brown and Levinson it is dependent on the concept of face. Leech (1983) theory of politeness is described to be majorly flawed in that there is no conceptual means for restricting the number of maxims or principles that helps interlocutors to keep to the interpersonal structure of communication (Thomas 1995).

Following Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness phenomenon is a strategy of saving a participant's face in interaction. In this approach, face is best understood as an interlocutor's self-image, which could be damaged, maintained, or enhanced through interaction with others (Thomas 1995). There are two aspects of face: positive face which is an individual's desire to be liked, approve of, respected and appreciated; and negative face which is an individual's desire to have liberty to act or choose and not to be impeded. Brown and Levinson (1987) go further to discuss the phenomenon of face threatening acts which are utterances that could damage or threaten a participant's face. An utterance could "damage the hearer's positive face (by, for example, insulting H or expressing disapproval of something which H holds dear), or H's negative face (an order, for example, will impinge upon H's freedom of action)." An utterance may also

damage a speaker's positive face "if S has to admit having botched a job, for example or S's negative face if S is cornered into making an offer of help" (Thomas 1995 p. 169).

To apply this parameter to stand-up performance, one has to take note of the nature of the stand-up interaction, since, as suggested by Thomas (1995), the nature of an on-going activity influence the manner in which participants of the activity obey or suspend interpersonal maxims. Also, one needs to ask, to what extent does the participants of stand-up comedy perform the face-threatening acts?

From the audiences' angle, their contribution of affiliative responses strengthens the stand-up comedians' positive face as performers. Whenever they contribute an affiliative response, say applause, cheer, whistle or laughter, the comedians' interactional goals becomes fulfilled and the comedians' positive face as a performer is recognised and reinforced in the interaction. However, should they give out a disaffiliative response, say jeers, boos or verbal heckle, they pragmatically indicate that their interactional needs have not been fulfilled and their goal for participating in the interaction has not been achieved. Through the disaffiliative responses, they threaten comedians' negative face as performers. This is why stand-up comedians deliberately focus on hecklers who make themselves loud enough in their shows, cutting them down and turning them into the butt of their humour. Text G shows an instance where a comedian (*I GO Dye*) cuts hecklers who threatened his negative face.

Text G

VIP dey front (unclear heckle)*. You say watin?* (unclear heckle) *Wait now, Make one mumu first talk before another mumu; the first mumu, you say watin?* (Heckle: you dey bleach?) *Your father dey bleach.* [VIPs are seated in the front row(unclear heckle). You said what? (Unclear heckle) Wait a minute, let one idiot speak before another idiot; the first idiot, what did you say? (Heckle: are you bleaching your skin?) Your father is bleaching his skin]

Text G shows the three occurrences of heckling, although the first two were unclear for transcription. The hecklings constitute face threatening acts to the comedian as a performer. Since the hecklings constitute attacks on the comedian's personality and comic image, especially when he was asked if he was bleaching his skin, *I Go Dye* responded with verbal attack as a means of cutting down the hecklers. He labelled the

hecklers *mumu* which means idiots. He also turned his attention to the last heckler by directing the abusive term- *your father,* to the heckler. *I Go Dye*'s label and abusive term for the hecklers are strategic in that they restore his negative face as a performer and they damage the positive face of the hecklers.

The audience use of heckle is an indication of their dissatisfaction with the comedians' routines. A good comedian reads hecklings as signs for him/her to change his/her techniques of performance or joking routines. Therefore, the audience use of hecklings is geared towards achieving their goal of being entertained. Likewise, the cutting down of hecklers by stand-up comedians helps the stand-ups to sustain their role in the interaction and achieve their goal of eliciting humorous responses.

On the stand-up comedians' part, they seek to enhance their positive face through deliberate construction of their utterance to elicit humour from the seated audiences. Similarly, they enhance their negative face, even at the expense of their personality, through the use of self-denigrating/deprecating joking stories. In self-deprecation, the comedians deliberately make themselves the butt of their humour and direct humour to a perceived social attribute or physical feature in them. The comedians' use of self-deprecation would have, outside the context of the performance, been a negative face threatening act to the persons of the comedians. However, in the context of the performance, it becomes a pragmatic strategy for enhancing the negative face of the comedians as the audience would not take a face-value interpretation of the denigrating motif, rather, the audience would see the comedians as people who make jokes out of inadequacies. Mintz (1985 p.74) opines that when the comedians present denigrating motifs to the audiences, the audience would recognise the comedians license for deviate behaviour and utterance, and then "forgive or even bless" their "mistakes". An instance of this is found in the routine of *Lepacious Bose,* a female stand-up comic who is overweight. In the routine, she deliberately devalues herself because of her weight. She used her weight as an excuse for promiscuity as she requested to be with *six solid guys* (six well-built men)*.*

The comedians may also choose to be impolite in the sense of Leech (1983) politeness principle for humorous effects. When they are impolite, they contradict social expectations of language use and draw humour from their licence for unexpected use of

language, say the use of taboo words such as sexually-oriented utterance or verbal attack on members of the society. Here again, *Buchi's* performance (Texts D and E) reflects the violation of politeness principle. His attack on pastors contradicts Leech's politeness principle, and, in the Nigerian context, it contradicts the social expectation that pastors should be revered. The flouting of this social rule was done deliberately because of the on-going activity type.

Turn-taking and topic control

Turn-taking is a set of practices through which an interaction is structured or scheduled. Turn-taking mannerisms have been found to be culturally oriented and language specific (Baker and Ellece 2011). Topic control refers to the manipulation of the subject matter in an interaction. Turn-taking and topic control are important for the establishment of an activity type because different activity types allow different patterns of turn-taking and topic control. More so, participants in an activity can exploit the turn-taking norms in order to control an interaction as well as to achieve their individual goals rather than the primary goal of the activity (Thomas 1995).

Turn-taking in stand-up performances follows from the second parameter- allowable contribution. The conventionalised structure of the interaction impedes the realisation of the normal format of turn-taking in which a speaker speaks and then another speaker speaks after the first speaker has relinquished the flour. The interactional context of the performance (Scarpetta and Spagnolli 2009 and Adetunji 2013) permits only one turn in the interaction and this is exclusively reserved for the stand-up comics. However, the contributions of the audiences occur in two instances, first, when the comedians deliberately invite them to give affiliative responses. In such instance, the comedians deliberately relinquish the floor for the audience so that they can contribute their inputs to the interaction. Whenever they relinquish the floor to the audience, the comedians strategically deemphasize their institutional conversational superiority so as to achieve interactional intimacy with the audience. Also, the stand-up comics adopt this deliberate relinquishing of the floor in order to show the collaborative nature, between themselves and the audience, of the performance (Schwarz, 2010). Nevertheless, the comics still hold their superiority in the interaction as they determine when to relinquish the floor,

for how long and in what form. Thus, in relinquishing the floor, the comics still keep their institutional identity.

In the second instance, the audience do not wait for the comedians to select the next speaker- the audience; therefore, they self-select themselves and thereby challenge the institutional authority of the stand-up comedians. This kind of audience self-select occurs whenever the audience gives disaffiliative responses.

The imbalance structural roles assigned to the participants in stand-up comedy interactions are reflected in the nature of topic control realised in the performances. As much as the comedians dictate the pattern of talk and the points where the audiences give their responses, they are also permitted by practice to dictate the kinds of jokes in the interaction. The subject and the structure of jokes, one-liners and anecdotes, the butts and the activity described in the joke are dictated by the comedians. It is in view of this that Schwarz (2010 p. 85) describes the stand-up comedians as having "exact programme in mind and does not rely on the audience" for their jokes. However, there are constraints that limit the kinds of topics and/or activity in the jokes, the butts in their jokes, anecdotes and/or one-liners. Adetunji (2013) denotes these constraints as the comic's shared experiences with the audience. By shared experiences, Adetunji (2013) refers to the common ground between the comedians and their audiences. The common ground in the performances is articulated in terms of contextual beliefs, such as language, situational and cultural between the stand-up comedians and their audiences. According to Adetunji (2013 p. 16), "comedians often tell jokes which would identify them with their audiences, among other categorisations, according to region, gender, social orientation and nationality". Buchi's routine in which he satirises Nigerian pastors illustrates how shared experiences influence the joking stories of the comedians. Buchi focuses on pastors mannerism because it is a common phenomenon in the country and he is aware that the audiences

The manipulation of pragmatic parameters

Pragmatic parameters refer to the interactional power and social distance between the participants in a speech activity. According Thomas (1995 p. 192), this parameter indicates how an "interactant use language in order to increase or decrease social

distance… power, rights and obligations and size of impositions… to what extent can the individual increase or decrease the formality of the situation."

In stand-up performances, the manipulation of pragmatic parameters follows from the institutionalised roles of the participants in the interaction. In any performance, there is an imbalance power structure in the interaction in that the institutional identity of the comedian makes him/her the powerful participant and this creates a social distance between the stand-up comics and their audiences. Adetunji (2013 p. 14) asserts that "a stand-up comedian performs before an audience holding on to the only microphone at the venue and taking centre stage with the light directly focused on him/her, he/she assumes inherent authority and power, and by implication conversational superiority, at least for the duration of his/her performance, in relation to the audience."

Primarily, the stand-up comics deemphasise their inherent interactional authority and limits the social distance between themselves and their audiences through certain strategies. The comedians employ self-denigrating motifs in their routines to play down their institutional authority and reduce the interactional distance between themselves and their audiences. On this, Adetunji (2013 p. 14) asserts that "comedians employ self-deprecation (making self's abilities, characteristics or achievements seems less important) to connect with their audiences. This is used to achieve comedian-audience intimacy." In this view, the comedians identify with the audience by presenting themselves less than the audience have viewed them. Interactionally, this will limit the distance between the comedians and their audiences as the audiences would view the performer as inferior rather than superior as presented by the conversational structure of the interaction.

A common way in which the Nigerian stand-up comedians belittle themselves is by claiming that they are from poor families. For instance, *Gordons* in his routine claimed that his family was so poor that poor people were calling them poor. Similarly, *Mc Shakara* claimed that they he hailed from a poor background. Apart from disparaging their background, the comedians do make themselves the butt of their jokes, such that the audience see them as the objects of scorn. With these strategies, the comedians present themselves to the audience not as superior members of the society, but as belonging to the same or lesser social class with the members of the audience. In this

manner, they limit the social distance between themselves and the audience, which is suggested by their institutionalised roles. Another way by which the comedians limit the social distance is by walking off the stage, into the audience area. In this instance, the comedians leave behind the foregrounded power position in the venue of the performance and move into the ordinary position occupied by the audience.

Conclusion

In this paper, stand-up comedy performance has been described as an activity type. From the data analysed, only the stand-up comedians are able to negotiate all the parameters of activity types. The audiences are limited and cannot manipulate majority of the parameters since they perform a passive role in the SUC interaction. The way the participants are able to negotiate the parameters in order to achieve their interactional goals is tied to and influenced by their institutional identities as addresser (stand-ups) and addressee (audience). It is also connected to the structure of the activity type of humour performance, which places the comedian in foregrounded position where s/he is the focus of the interaction.

Specifically, the stand-up comedians' pattern of starting the interaction, violation of social conventions, manipulation of interpersonal maxims, turn-taking and topic control, and use of self-denigrating motifs, among others, are geared towards the realisation of their roles in the interaction. Similarly, the audience use of heckling to negotiate allowable contribution indicates that their interactional goal is unfulfilled. Indirectly, heckling is a strategy for demanding for the fulfilment of their interactional goals.

Form the foregoing, it can be concluded that the institutional nature of stand-up as an activity results in a peculiar observance of the parameters that make up an activity type. The goals of audience make them to take a passive role in the interaction while that of the comedians make them to take an active role in the interaction.

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