

A Semiotic Analysis of Humor in *Jenifa's Diary* and *Professor Johnbull*

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Abstract: Studies on multimodal analysis of humor in Nigeria have concentrated on stand-up comedy and computer-mediated-communication, but have glossed over the deployment of semiotic cues as humor strategies in situation comedies. This study, therefore, analyzes the use of semiotic resources in constructing humor, using two Nigerian situation comedies, *Jenifa's Diary* and *Professor JohnBull*, as case studies. The data were purposively sampled from the first three seasons of the two sitcoms and were subjected to a multimodal analysis, within the purview of Kress and van Leeuwen's socio-semiotic approach to multimodality and an eclectic use of the superiority, incongruity, and relief theories of humor. Semiotic resources such as props, gaze, gesture, and dressing were used to tease out the humor in the data. The analyses of the humorous plates revealed the use of semiotic cues to show the discourse functions of depicting characters' level of education and sophistication, correcting vices, and teasing other characters. Semiotic resources perform both comic and communicative functions in sitcoms.

Keywords: Situation comedies, Incongruity, Relief theories, Multimodality, Nigerian context

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1. Introduction

Humor primarily serves as a means of amusing people. Beyond this primary purpose however, it is a veritable tool for addressing societal issues in different forms of discourse. Beneath humorous expressions and acts usually lie issues relating to ideologies, identities, implicature and countless discourse topics. This is buttressed by Olaosun (2016:87) who holds that, “Beyond its amusing content, a humorous discourse appeals to reason and understanding, sharpens the intellect and serves in constructing micro and macro ideologies.” This confirms that there are implicit or explicit social functions that humor performs in interactions. Humor, most times, cannot stand apart from the world of seriousness. The nature, creation, uses and effects of humor have been the foci of research across academic disciplines, ranging from medicine to psychology, sociology, art, literature, and applied linguistics. As a subject of scholarly interest, the language of humor has been investigated in Nigerian scholarship in the areas of stand-up comedy (Adetunji 2003; Filani, 2015; Nwankwo 2019), computer-mediated-discourse (Taiwo, 2013; Inya, 2016; Lamidi, 2016), literary texts (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 2004), music (Bamgbose, 2019) and situation comedies (Azeez and Doghudje, 2015). Aside the generally limited research on humor in Nigerian sitcoms, the deployment of semiotic cues in the realization of humor in Nigerian sitcoms has not enjoyed scholarly attention in research.

The manifestation of humor in sitcoms takes an entirely different nature from what obtains in stand-up comedy and other forms of comedy where there is direct communication with the audience. Sitcoms take a two-layered interpretation of humor on the part of the viewers. Viewers may decipher humor plainly from the characters’ perspective by paying attention to the surrealistic verbal and nonverbal behavior. They may also consider the entire act as an artistic craftsmanship drawn up by a collective sender who can be likened to the producer. In this regard, Messerli (2016: 79) explains thus:

This double role of the viewer is complemented by two tiers of intentions: (1) based on processes of characterization, viewers form mental models of characters and accordingly interpret actions based on assumed character intentions; (2) based on knowledge of the fictionality and scriptedness of the cultural artefact they are

engaged with, viewers situate intentionality on the level of the collective sender.

In line with the second layer of interpretation which conceives humor as the collective sender's craft, this paper sets out to investigate nonverbal cues as strategies of humor in two Nigerian sitcoms; namely *Jenifa's Diary* and *Professor JohnBull*. The study will not consider humorous acts as emanating at the character level in the sitcoms but as construed intentionally by the collective sender. The study will answer the following research questions:

- i. What nonverbal cues are deployed as humor strategies in the sitcoms?
- ii. What discourse functions are performed by the highlighted nonverbal cues in the selected sitcoms?
- iii. What multimodal and humor techniques aid the interpretation of the nonverbal cues?

2. Literature Review

The deployment of semiotic and multimodal cues for humorous purposes is not uncommon in Nigerian scholarship. Studies have considered the use of semiotic cues for humor in standup comedy (Filani, 2016); blogs (Adegoju and Oyebode, 2015; Tella, 2018); social media (Olaosun 2016; Chimuanya and Ajibode, 2016) and cartoons (Sani, Abdullah, Ali and Abdullah, 2015). In addition to these, a few studies have also examined humor in stand-up comedy from the purely textual linguistic (pragmatic) viewpoint. These include Nneji (2013), Filani and Ajayi (2019).

Nneji (2013) investigates the extent to which Nigerian jokes conform to the principles of humor, especially as encapsulated in Attardo's (1994) incongruity theory of humor, with an emphasis on standup comedies to the exclusion of situational comedies. Filani (2016) discusses nonverbal cues in stand-up comedy. He categorizes the cues observed into physical and prosodic cues. The physical cues, which can be described as semiotic cues identified in the study, include gestures, which were further categorized into iconic, deictic, and metaphoric; posture, which was primarily open; dressing, which connoted professionalism, costume or affiliation with the audience; layout/space, which denoted the comedian's superior conversational role, and dance, which mirrored participants-in-the-joke actions. Adegoju and Oyebode (2015) examine the

patterns of humor evidenced in the deployment of Internet memes (both verbal and visual) in the online campaign discourse of the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. The data for the study comprised memes produced, disseminated and consumed by netizens via Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. Using van Dijk's socio-cognitive model with particular reference to the theoretical concept of the "ideological square," in complementarity with Neuendorf et al.'s (2014) taxonomy of theoretical perspectives on humor, the study reveals that the memes deployed in the online presidential election campaign discourse largely serve subversive purposes to detract greatly from the electoral value of the targets. The major downside of this study is in its non-recourse to semiotic resources in teasing out humor in the analyzed memes, despite making reference to pictorial elements in the analysis.

Taking a step farther than Adegaju and Oyebode (2015), Tella (2018) analyzes an integrative deployment of visual and verbal resources afforded by Internet memes to generate humor and construct specific frames for election candidates in the campaign context of an emerging democracy in Nigeria. Precisely, the study investigates the use of language and visuals for humor generation and for the creation of definite frames for the two major presidential candidates, Jonathan and Buhari, in Internet memes created during the 2015 Nigerian presidential election campaigns. In an eclectic use of Attardo's (1997) set-up-incongruity-resolution theory of humor, Kuypers' (1997, 2002, 2009, 2010) model of rhetorical framing analysis, Bauman & Briggs' (1990) concept of entextualisation, Kress & van Leeuwen's (1996) socio-semiotic model for visual analysis and Sperber & Wilson's (1986) relevance theory, the researcher concludes that supporters of election candidates deploy humorous Internet memes for negatively portraying opponents, and positively projecting their favored candidates. Essentially, Tella's work too does not consider humor in situation comedies, especially as they relate to the Nigerian political space. Away from the use of visual humor in political discourse, Olaosun (2016) socio-critically analyzes some visual constructions of humor on Facebook and submits that visual humor incorporates and interrogates such social phenomena as religion, education, morals, love, health, and politics. In a similar study which addresses the deployment of humor in social discourse, Chimuanya and Ajiboye (2016) examine humorous graphics, texts and memes posted on Facebook during the heat of the Ebola virus pandemic that raged across some parts of West Africa in 2014. The researchers submit that such posts are not just meant to produce laughter; they are informal awareness campaigns that are even more apt than straight-on

messages. As evident from the review of the studies mentioned above, not enough attention has been given to situation comedies in Nigeria; not even from Nigerian scholars interested in humor.

On sitcoms in Nigeria, Azeez and Doghudje (2015) consider comedy as a discursive exchange for social change, focusing on the social themes of *Papa Ajasco* and its interpretation by Nigerian audiences. This study investigates the discursive process through which *Papa Ajasco* comedy series condemns some social behavior and constructs such as bad or inappropriate in funny but strong terms. The study seeks to understand how a randomly selected audience of 50 members, who regularly view *Papa Ajasco* series on television, interpret the discursive exchange and jokes in the comedy. This was done through an indepth interview that allowed the audience to air their views spontaneously. The study found that *Papa Ajasco* series indeed appeals to the majority of Nigerians with its unique capacity to relax their minds and provide them with escape valves with which they relieve tensions resulting from work and life. Also, the series, in melodramatic forms, condemns some social vices and behaviors that are deeply rooted in Nigeria culture. This study too neglects the importance of the socio-semiotic approach to analysing humor in sitcoms.

Beyond the Nigerian context, there are several humor and humor-related studies, none of which has considered situation comedies. Some of these studies include Audrieth (1998), Schmidt (2011) Yus (2013a, 2013b), Rochmawati (2017), Gironzetti, Attardo and Pickering (2016), and Gironzetti (2017). For instance, Audrieth (1998), while commenting on the art of using humor in public speaking, notes that humor could be deployed to accentuate the affects of speech, and the ability of a public speaker to use humor effectively to engage and entertain the audience is a special gift. Schmidt (2011) examines how humor is used in a prison in the United States to project users' occupational ideology and institutional inclinations in their correctional responsibility. Yus (2013a), working on a corpus of 1000 jokes randomly sampled from an online joke repository (*jokes2go*) and *The Adult Joke Book*, none of which revolves round situational comedies, attempts an analysis of jokes within the purview of the *Intersecting Models* of humorous communication. Yus (2013b), still within the scope of the *Intersecting Models* of humorous communication, comes up with the notion of "mutual parallel adjustment" which he claims is pivotal to the cognitive deconstruction of inferences in jokes and humorous activities. Gironzetti, Attardo and Pickering (2016) and Gironzetti (2017) are particularly closer to this

study for their multimodal approaches to humor. Attardo and Pickering (2016) examine the role of smiling as a marker of humor in naturalistic conversation.

The study analyzed both qualitative and quantitative data in order to determine if there is a relationship between gaze patterns, humorous events, and the smiling behavior of native English speakers taking part in a dyadic face-to-face conversation. They submit that the presence of humor may correlate with a greater attention being paid to facial areas involved in smiling and that in order for discourse participants to be capable of using each other's smiling behavior as a marker indicating the presence of humor in conversation, participants should pay attention to the facial areas involved in this gesture which are the mouth and the eyes area. Gironzetti (2017) analyzes and describes humorous exchanges in an ecologically valid manner, a speech situation approximating real-life situations in which humor occurs spontaneously in conversation. Analyzing a corpus of face-to-face dyadic conversations, the author submits that the combination of eye-tracking data and the analysis of participants' facial expressions and joint non-verbal behaviors paint a rich picture of how speakers negotiate the humorous nature of given segments of conversation and indicate that an increase in an individual smiling intensity is used by speakers to negotiate humorous pragmatic intention. The studies do not directly address the realities and peculiarities of sitcoms in Nigeria.

Although these studies (as reviewed above) serve as a springboard for the current study, it (the current study) is significantly different from them in that, while the previous studies have focused on jokes and verbal, and semiotic humor in stand-up comedies, naturalistic and quasi-conversations, and occupational settings to the neglect of situation comedies, the present study examines humor in situation comedies, with an emphasis on the potentiality of semiotic cues in Nigerian situation comedies; a phenomenon that has been glossed over in humor scholarship in the Nigerian context.

3. Synopses of the Selected Sitcoms

Jenifa's Diary is a comic series revolving around the funny, absurd and amazing adventures of Suliati, who later christened herself Jenifa. She is a secondary school dropout turned hairdresser who lives in a town called Aiyetoro. Jenifa, who is the eponymous character in the series, nurses the ambition of leaving her community and making something of herself. She is always trying to prove her worth and wants to be recognized and noticed among her more sophisticated peers.

Her competitive spirit with her peers comes to the forefront when she realizes many of her friends in Aiyetoro are in higher institutions. Jenifa is motivated to leave her community and pursue her dream of attending a higher institution and becoming a huge success as well as enhance her status in Aiyetoro. Her humor mainly emerges from her horrendous grammar and attitudinal inconsistencies. The themes of the sitcom series are mainly around friendship, family, love and self-actualization.

Professor JohnBull is a sitcom which is satiric in its aim. The lead character of the series, and from whom it derives its name, is Professor JohnBull. The role is played by a Nollywood actor, Kanayo O. Kanayo, who in the series is a widower and retired academic. The erudite professor lives with his son, (Churchill), daughter (Elizabeth) and housemaid (Caro) in a serene neighborhood in Enugu, the eastern part of Nigeria, where he, by virtue of his academic and social exposure, becomes a consultant to the other residents in the neighborhood on all kinds of issues. Professor JohnBull's grandiloquence and high-sounding words with which he throws his kinsmen off balance is a main source of humor in the series. Beyond the humor of the sitcom, it shows itself to be a strong voice in the war against social vices in Nigeria. It deploys exciting dialogues and dictions to address societal happenings, especially the vices. The series has a cast of 12 regular performers and other regular and irregular cameo appearances by notable artistes from Nigeria and Ghana.

4. Theoretical Framework

The study deploys Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) socio-semiotic approach to multimodality and incorporates aspects of the relief, superiority and incongruity theories of humor. The former helps substantiate the visuals in line with the analytical tools of the theory which can be likened to Halliday's transitivity system, while the latter accounts for the humor potential of the images.

Van Leeuwen (2005: 93) states that "social semiotics explores two closely related issues: the material resources of communication and the way their uses are socially regulated." The material resources may be physiological which refers to facial expression, gestures, non-verbal communication or technical which includes communication through instruments, clothes, and other modes that extend the potential of physiological resources. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) take a view of Halliday's systemic-functional grammar to study visual images. This was done in line with Halliday's metafunctions of language and the transitivity system. Kress and van

Leuwen (2006) focus on visual images and hold strongly to the belief that visuals, like other communicative modes, can appropriately communicate meaning. For this reason, they developed a visual grammar which has been applied to the analysis of images in discourse. *The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006) is a multimodal approach to visual communication which provides a comprehensive and systematic illustration of the grammar of visual design in discourse. Adopting Halliday's metafunctions for the analysis of visual images, they named representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning in correspondence with Halliday's ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. This study employs Kress and van Leeuwen's representational meaning of visual images. The representational meaning involves the ability of a semiotic mode to represent an aspect of the world as experienced by humans. In other words, it must be "able to represent objects and their relation in a world outside the representational system" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 42). The representational meaning splits into narrative representation and conceptual representation. The narrative representation means "when participants are connected by a vector, they are represented as doing something to or for each other" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 59). A vector is a pictorial element which forms "an oblique line, often a quite strong, diagonal line" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006:59). Such kind of vectorial patterns show "unfolding actions and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006 :59). A vector can be likened to a verbal element which connects other elements of the clause. The vector determines the type of narrative process in the visual act which could be action process, reactional process, or mental process. The narrative process is dependent on the number and kinds of participants involved in the visual image which could make the action conveyed by the vector transactional (transitive) or non-transactional (intransitive).

On the other hand, conceptual representation is a non-narrative process which involves "representing participants in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, or structure or meaning" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 79). Compared with narrative representation, conceptual representation has no vector and has three structures involved, namely classificational process, analytical process and symbolic process. In the classificational process, at least one set of participants will play the role of Subordinates with respect to at least one other participant, the "Superordinate" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 79). Analytical processes help to link participants in terms of a part-whole structure. Two participants

involved in these processes are respectively one Carrier (the whole) and any number of Possessive Attributes (the parts). Lastly, a Symbolic process focuses on what a participant means or is. This study will benefit from the analytical tools of Kress and van Leeuwen's socio-semiotic approach to multimodality by considering how elements of visual grammar such as physiological resources (facial expression and gesture) and technical resources (dressing and instrument) help poke fun at the viewers and communicate pragmatically significant issues within the Nigerian socio-cultural context.

Three categories of humor theories are usually used in literary studies. These are release theories, hostility theories and incongruity theories. Release theorists explain humor based on psychological mechanisms. They opine that humor functions as a "release trigger" for reduced inhibitions and panic which are warranted by conventions and laws. According to Attardo (1994), the original idea of superiority theory was proposed by Thomas Hobbes who thought that laughter is an expression of sudden glory and realization of being better than someone else. In general, this theory, which is based on sociological approaches and emphasizes the aggressive aspect of humor, assumes that people laugh at the tragedies of other people and, laughter, which occurs when such a situation happens reflects one's feeling of superiority. The core of incongruity theory is explained by Arthur Schopenhauer's definition of laughter: "The cause of laughter in every case is the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity" (Attardo 1994: 48). The idea of incongruity is based on the notion that there is a certain pattern to the relationships between components of ideas. When the system of arrangement does not match with the expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous. The interplay of these humor theories is seen in the analysis of the data in this study. In an eclectic approach, the analysis in this study reveals how humorous frames poke fun at viewers and performs communicative functions through the outburst of laughter (release), which may be consequent upon the tragedy or ridicule of others (superiority) as expressed through semantically opposing scripts (incongruity).

5. Methodology

The data for this study were purposively selected from the first three seasons of *Jenifa's Diary* and *Professor JohnBull*, two popular Nigerian situation comedy series, which, apart from their

episodic transmission on the national television in the country, are also available on the Internet. The producers made the series available on the Internet so that they could gain more popularity beyond the Nigerian space and be easily accessible to interested viewers. The comedy series critically reflect on different sociocultural realities and practices in Nigeria from the prism of humor. Their availability, popularity and thematic relevance informed the preference for them in this study. A total of 10 plates (which are representative of the salient themes identified in the study) which capture various humorous activities in photographic forms were specifically selected based on their humorous and thematic relevance from the 2 situation comedies and analyzed as data. The sampled series provide the scenes and acts laden with relevant semiotic cues, which afford the plausibility of the realization of the thematic focus of this paper, which is the assessment of the communicative imports of the identified paralinguistic acts in the series. Data were grouped into themes and subjected to multimodal analysis, with reference to Kress and van Leeuwen's socio-semiotic approach to multimodality and an eclectic use of the superiority, incongruity and relief theories of humor.

6. Data Analysis

The analysis in this study discursively reveals three discourse functions which are performed by the extracted visuals from the two selected Nigerian sitcoms. The discourse functions are the depiction of level of education and sophistication, the correction of vices, and teasing. These functions are considered for their salience in the two series beyond other issues which are also evident in the sitcoms. These functions are depicted through various semiotic cues such as dressing, costume, gaze and gesture as seen in the analysis below.

6.1. Depiction of Level of Education and Sophistication

Semiotic cues are used to depict some characters' level of education and sophistication. In what can be likened to Dynel's (2017) contrived involuntary humor where, according to the recipient design to the analysis of humor in filmic discourse, social gaffes, malapropisms, slips of the tongue, and utterances which are indicative of characters' sheer stupidity are deployed as humor strategy to amuse the viewers, just as semiotic cues are also deployed to show characters' low level of education and sophistication. Characters are made to exhibit sheer stupidity which is

indicative of their low education and sophistication by the collective sender in order to amuse the recipients/viewers. This is seen in the plates below

Plate 1: One of the students in the adult class comes to class in his butcher's dress and bowl. JD Season 1 Episode 3 (3:41)



Plate 1 displays the deployment of both attire and prop as nonverbal devices for the creation of humor. The scene is set in a classroom where adult students learn basic literacy skills. The scenario depicted in the excerpts is a familiar one within the Nigerian educational context where those who are unable to acquire formal education at early age can do so later either through private home teachers or by enrolling in coaching centers to acquire literacy skills. The narrative process in this plate involves the use of circumstantial tools. Circumstances subdivide into setting (locative circumstance), means (tools), and accompaniment. The plate above achieves humor using locative circumstance and tools which are incongruous in the situation. In the first place, the two scripts of being a butcher and being a student are simultaneously activated to the viewers as seen in the character of the man in blue who comes to class in his work attire. The resolution of these jointly activated scripts within the locative circumstance of a classroom can ignite a humorous reaction in the audience. Further establishing the incongruity of the visual is the bowl which accompanies the butcher's attire. The bowl in addition to the attire is a deliberate strategy by the collective sender to strengthen the inherent absurdity of the two different, juxtaposed scripts which are visually enacted in the plate, hence propelling a humorous reaction

in the viewers. This act of appearing in a learning environment with a butcher's attire and bowl is indicative of the character's low education and lack of sophistication.

Plate 2: Jenifa meets Toyosi and her friends on campus. JD Season 1 Episode 2 (18:33)



Plate 2 is an instance of both narrative representation and conceptual representation. In the narrative representation, the gaze of the first three ladies to the right serves as a vector which is used to achieve stratification between themselves and the fourth character, Jenifa. From the conceptual representation analytical standpoint, the plate also “represents participants in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, or structure or meaning” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 79). Aside the transfer of visual action which is achieved through gaze, the plate also presents the characters in terms of class grouping which is suggestive of their varying levels of education and sophistication, using the non-visual cue of dressing. The plate is, therefore, an instance of the classificational process of conceptual representation wherein at least one set of participants will play the role of the subordinate with respect to at least one other participant, the “Superordinate” (Kress& van Leeuwen, 2006: 79). Jenifa’s looks in this plate in terms of her color combination positions her in a class different from that of the other ladies. Jenifa is therefore presented as the subordinate character and the other ladies are the superordinate characters. Her use of vibrant colors and use of ribbon which are uncharacteristic and untypical of anyone found within the university system (in which the interaction takes place in the video) make her appearance incongruous with the expected fashion sense of a grown woman. The setting of the plate contributes to the absurdity of the subordinate

character as anyone who is grown up enough to study in a higher institution is expected to demonstrate a good dress sense and be able to combine colors appropriately in their dressing.

This unusual use of color combinations, especially with a red ribbon on a red blouse can makes the viewers laugh at the character.

Plate 3: Caro takes a selfie with a bucket PJ S2 E3 (8:38)



Plate 3 is an instance of narrative representation which uses a vector as a distinctive feature of narrative processes, is usually realized by elements appearing in pictures that form “an oblique line, often a quite strong, diagonal line” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 59). The plate is an instance of non-transactional narrative action process. It is non-transactional because it features an actor, in this case Caro, whose action depicts stupidity and whose action is equally not directed at any goal. The incongruity in this plate which is capable of propelling humor in the viewer is the inappropriate vector being used by the actor to perform an action. The plate features scenarios involving one appropriately performed action and an inappropriately performed action. The vector in this visual image, therefore, serves as a carefully deployed humorous tool which is used by the producer to show the character’s sheer stupidity and lack of sophistication. The mental juxtaposition of these two scenarios captured in the plate presents opposing scripts through the use of one appropriate tool and another inappropriate tool; the essence of which is to poke fun at the viewers by the collective sender through a character’s self-deprecation.

Plate 4: Mallam Medoya measuring yam PJ S1 E8 (6:55)



Plate 4 captures a character, Mallam Medoya measuring a tuber of yam for an appropriate division as instructed by one of the buyers, Professor JohnBull. The scenario depicted in this plate is an example of transactional narrative action process. The transactional structure consists of both actor and goal. The goal is “the participant at whom or to which the vector is directed” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In the plate above, Mallam Medoya is the actor, the measuring tape is the vector and the tuber of yam is the goal. The humor in this plate is activated through the absurdity presented via the opposing scripts of food and tailoring. The relational and social disconnect between the vector (tape measure) and the goal (yam) raises the incongruous feeling whose resolution can induce a humorous reaction in the viewers as envisaged by the collective sender. Such a move depicts the actor as one exhibiting sheer stupidity which shows lack of education. The humorous effects of this plate are appreciated when viewed within the Nigerian context where it is not common practice to measure food items, particularly tubers of yam, with tailoring tools hence the absurdity.

6.2. Criticism of Vice

Again, some aspects of the data reveal that some semiotic symbols are carefully deployed to show characters' moral and political vices through humorous visual reactions. Such semiotic moves captured as data below, can be said to have corrective intent beneath their primary humorous purpose given the deprecating effect of the semiotic moves on the butts of the plates as seen in the excerpts.

Plate 5: Jenifa makes a face for Mercy JD S1 E13 (26:47)



The plate is extracted from a scene featuring four friends: Jenifa, Toyosi, Kiki and Mercy. Mercy appears late at the wedding anniversary of Toyosi's parents and lies about her lateness. Jenifa is seen in this plate looking away in a ridiculous manner and with a gaze which suggests that someone has just made an infelicitous utterance. The plate is a transactional narrative action process which shows only the goal, Jenifa, reacting to the vector, which is the lie uttered by Mercy. Mercy, who had earlier told Kiki that she missed her flight, tells Toyosi, Jenifa and Kiki again that her flight was cancelled. Jenifa reacts to Mercy's lie with a look-away which was accompanied by folding her mouth and producing a funny sound which suggest that she knows that Mercy had told a lie. The accompanying expression rendered just as she looked away which is *Amara on'iro aye*; meaning "Amara the world class liar" made her funny gaze meaningful to the viewers as a reaction to Mercy's lie. This semiotic cue is, in tandem with the

superiority theory of humor wherein humor serves “as a social corrective used by society to correct deviant behavior” (Attardo, 1994: 50). The reaction primarily amuses the viewers but subtly addresses the social vice of lying and the difficulty in sustaining a lie.

Plate 6: Emmanuel Nwafor’s boxers JD S1 E1 (21:32)



This plate is an instance of a transactional narrative action which features a vector (the boxers) and the goal (Emmanuel Nwafor), who is on the other side of the clothesline and owns the boxers. The background to the humorous interpretation of the excerpt is that earlier in the series Emmanuel Nwafor had had an encounter with Jenifa and told her that he is based in London and stays on the Island of Lagos (where rich people live) when he is in Nigeria. Jenifa who had come to live with Toyosi in Lagos to pursue her education decides to visit her boyfriend’s (Emmanuel Nwafor) house on the Island when Toyosi frowns at her action of coming to her house without her consent. It turns out that her supposed boyfriend does not only live in the Mainland (an area for the poorer residents of Lagos), he also squats in a students’ hostel where Toyosi lives. The plate above is used to portray Emmanuel Nwafor as wretched and poor as the supposed London based Nigerian is found washing his torn boxers outside the apartment where he squats. The shift from the eloquent British resident (as seen earlier in the series) to a poor squatter washing his torn boxers is an incongruous mismatch which has a

humorous effect on the viewers. The well foregrounded vector is therefore a transitive narrative action process within the visual grammar which is geared towards ridiculing the goal (Emmanuel Nwafor) and exposing his lies. This is also within the superiority theory of humor which shows the negative and the aggressive side of humor, which is mainly used to disparage and humiliate specific opponents (Schwarz, 2010).

Plate 7: Olaniyi opens his mouth in surprise at Udo's electoral promise. PJ S3 E7 (21:27)



Plate 7 depicts the picture of Olaniyi reaction to Udo's electoral promise during the campaign for hospitality chairman in the fictional society of the series. The plate is another instance of transactional narrative action process which features only the goal in person of Olaniyi. The goal (Olaniyi) reacts to the vector which came from Etuk in form of words. Before the goal's reaction, Etuk, who is Olaniyi's opponent in the Hospitality Chairmanship race, has just pronounced that for all the electorate who have been complaining that they have never boarded plane, they will all can do so if they vote him as the Hospitality Chairman as he promises to replace all of the taxis in the city with airplanes. It is to this statement that Olaniyi screams and makes the facial expression captured above which is meant to satirize the unrealistic electoral promise made by Udo. This reaction is satiric and it captures the political reality of Nigeria where politicians sometimes make promises they cannot fulfill. Given that humor has the

communicative feature “usually shared between interactants and portrays social, psychological, cognitive processes, cultural norms and value judgment” (Sani, Abdullah, Ali and Abdullah, 2012: 151), the reaction of Olaniyi is a mutually and contextually understood aggression shared by Nigerian viewers of the sitcom where the sitcom is set. The humorous reaction by Olaniyi does not only function within the superiority ambit of humor as an implicit corrective measure but also functions within the relief theory as it enables viewers to laugh about what can be described as a serious political predicament in Nigeria.

Plate 8: Olaniyi and Udo engaging in physical combat during electoral manifesto
PJ S3 E7 (21:49)



Plate 8 is a narrative representation where Olaniyi and Udo are “represented as doing something to each other” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 59); in this case engaging in a fight. The action process in the plate is transactional, given the eye contact and the hands of the two key participants which jointly serve as vectors; thereby representing them as engaging in a physical combat. The plate in the context of the sitcom is designed by the collective sender to amuse the viewers, especially with the comic postures of the participants in the fight; it speaks volumes about the political attitude of Nigerian politicians who are known to engage in physical combat, especially on the floor of the legislative house. This is, therefore, a comic representation of Nigeria’s reality and has the effect of satirizing political. The humorous interpretation of visuals

depends on the shared knowledge of the Nigerian situation by the viewers who are likely to perceive and appreciate the corrective dimension to the nationally ridiculous gesture of the country's lawmakers beyond the primary intent of the act to create laughter.

6.3. Teasing

One common element across different functions of teasing is the notion that it combines elements of provocation and playfulness directed at others or self (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp, 2006). In the production of teases, speakers do not originally have the intent of ridiculing or insulting the hearer; rather there is the underlying intention to joke or create an atmosphere of amusement for both the other interlocutor(s) and other ratified and unrated listeners (viewers) in the communication environment. Fascinatingly, teasing can be achieved through nonverbal cues as seen in the plates below.

Plate 9: Jenifa pokes fun at Mercy JD S1 E9 (9:09)



The plate above is captured in Kiki's house where Jenifa had gone to do her hair. Kiki is pleased with the hairstyle and promises to link Jenifa up with other clients and Mercy immediately remarks that Kiki might be making a wrong choice. Kiki disagrees with Mercy, saying there is nothing wrong with introducing Jenifa to more clients. Jenifa activates Kiki's disagreement with Mercy's stance as a chance to poke fun at Mercy. She achieves this through a gestural display of "eye covering" which is understood in the Nigeria as a display of mockery.

This gesture, therefore, is a transactional narrative action process as it has Jenifa as the actor, the eye covering gesture as the vector and Mercy who is seen sitting unhappily on the bed as an agent. The humor in this plate is not just designed for the viewers; it is also meant to amuse other character(s) at the scene as evidenced in Kiki's laughter at Jenifa's humorous gesture. This is an instance of a superiority or aggressive humor described by Dynel (2017) as non-intentional humor. This humor category encompasses cases when the speaker intentionally produces an utterance which conveys a particular (intended) speaker meaning towards a ratified hearer but which, simultaneously, carries humor for the recipient independent of the speaker's lack of intent to amuse anybody. Dynel explains it as arising from the perspective of overhearers (the vicarious pleasure of overhearing two people quarrelling fiercely over something trivial). This semiotic move by Jenifa, therefore, combines the superiority and relief functions of humor as he scorns one character and entertains the other.

Plate 10: Olaniyi gazes at some ladies. PJ S1 E1 (9:24)



The plate is set in Olaniyi's shop where a person who looks like DBanj, a popular Nigerian artiste, impersonates the artiste just to command some influence in town. The young man who dresses and acts like Dbanj comes to Olaniyi's canteen to eat free food and Olaniyi demands, in return, the collection of a token from everyone who will come to see him. The plate is transactional in that it is targeted at some ladies who were earlier in the scene seen approaching Olaniyi's shop to see "D Banj." He chases them back and gazes at them just to mock and spite them. Olaniyi is, therefore, the actor; his gaze, the vector and the ladies who are not captured in

the plate whom he tried spiting away with his humorous gaze are the goal. This gaze which comes with the popping out of his cheek is uncharacteristic of a grown up. It is usually children's way of teasing one another. Such gesture, deliberately deployed to tease the said ladies, is incongruous given the age of the person involved, who as seen in the plate already has grey hair. The plate is a deliberate design by the collective sender to induce laughter in the viewers.

7. Conclusion

This study is an analysis of how humor is induced through the manipulation of characters' physical and physiognomic activities in two Nigerian sitcoms, *Jenifa's Diary* and *Professor JohnBull*. The study concentrates mainly on viewer-based humor, given that there are two layers of communicated humor in sitcoms and other filmic series which are the character to character layer and the collective sender to viewer layer. This layer conceives of humor in sitcoms or filmic series as a specially designed script by a collective sender through a careful manipulation of characters with the sole aim of amusing viewers. Data which are in form of plates showing physical states of one or more characters are randomly captured from three seasons of the sitcoms and the analysis was done using Kress and van Leuwen's socio-semiotic approach with an eclectic use of superiority, incongruity and relief theories of humor.

The analyzes of the humorous plates reveal the use of semiotic cues for depicting characters' level of education and sophistication, correcting vices and teasing. The first discourse function of what? is reflective of character's stupidity. It is line with Dynel's (2017) involuntary humor which depicts characters as unknowingly and unconsciously silly. Beneath such stupidity is the expression of realities bordering on poor education and sophistication. The characters who serve as the butts of the sheer stupidity are presented as manifesting ridiculous and societally unacceptable attitudes. This, therefore, signifies the importance of education, sophistication and exposure as values people must strive to possess to be positively and respectfully perceived by others in the society. The second discourse function of what? shows the subtle use of humor to correct socio-political vices. Two major vices which are lying and making unrealistic political promises are satirically captured in the sitcoms. This is deliberately utilized by the collective sender to make the series achieve thematic relevance and address the state of the nation where it is set. A shared knowledge of the Nigerian political situation makes clear to the viewers the pragmatic intent of the collective sender to address prevailing political problems which have

contributed to the country's perpetual state as a developing country; years after the nation could have become a developed nation given her human and material resources. Lastly, teasing is deployed by some characters in the series to poke fun at other characters. Semiotic resources such as props, gaze, gesture and dress are used to tease out the humor in the data analyzed for the study.

Paralinguistic moves in sitcoms, as shown in the analysis, serve not only humorous but also communicative functions. They are veritable tools in the hands of collective senders/producers for identifying and correcting societal ills. This is, therefore, in line with Graham, Papa and Brook's (1992) enforcement function of humor which allows a communicator (in this case the collective sender) to enforce norms delicately by leveling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification with an audience (Graham et al., 1992). Further studies can analyze what semiotic resources portend for the construction of ideologies and identities in Nigerian sitcoms.

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