

THE INTERACTIONAL CONTEXT OF HUMOR IN NIGERIAN STAND-UP COMEDY

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Abstract

Research in the pragmatics of Nigerian humor is almost nil. This article, therefore, highlighted the major pragmatic strategies used by Nigerian stand-up comedians to involve their audiences in the creation of the interactional context of humor. Data comprised fifteen randomly-sampled extracts from the video compact disc recordings of the routines of five stand-up comedians. Analysis revealed the saliency of linguistic coding, stereotyping, formulas, call-and-response, self-deprecation, and shared experiences which not only involved both comedian and audience in humor production and consumption but which additionally reduced the stage authority of the comedian to the barest minimum. It was concluded that Nigerian stand-up comedy's interactional tenor could be uniquely hinged on linguistic coding, essentially the code-alternation of Nigerian Pidgin (especially) and English Language.

Keywords: Context; Humor; Nigeria; Nigerian pidgin; Night of a thousand laughs; Stand-up comedy.

1. Introduction

Research in the pragmatics of humor performed in English has almost entirely been devoted to native-speaker contexts, with Tsang and Wong (2004) being one of the few exceptions. Although native-speaker contexts are credible environments for studying any instance of language use, the English Language has become a global language, used widely, and expectedly subjected to all kinds of pragmatic investigations. This article, thus, explores the situation of English in a "peripheral" (non-native speaking), "Outer Circle" (ESL) environment, by examining aspects of the pragmatics of Nigerian humor, specifically the interactional context of its stand-up comedy.

Operationally, a text (spoken, written, or visual instance of meaningful language) is pragmatically defined as humorous whose effect (extra-linguistic or perlocutionary) is laughter (Attardo 1994: 13). And "stand-up comedy" is "... an encounter between a single standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle" (Mintz 1985: 71). The interactional context of comedy is predicated on the co-presence and co-operation of comedian and audience: While the comedian provides the jokes and routines, the audience responds, minimally, with any

or all of silence, laughter, or delayed laughter (Attardo 1996), and specifically, in stand-up comedy, with clapping, yelling, heckling, and questioning (Fabiola and Spagnolli 2009; Gilbert 2004; Rutter 1997). Although its audience contains individual members, stand-up comedy is “pseudo-dyadic”, because members usually abandon (for the duration of the performance) their individualities and often respond as a collectivity (Rutter 2011). I operationalize stand-up comedy’s interactional context here, very much in the tradition of the post-Griceans, as the local linguistic and extra-linguistic forms and background knowledge, relevant to the production and consumption of humor, and oriented to by both comedian and audience. This context facilitates the recognizability and acceptability of jokes.

2. Background to the study

The linguistic situation in Nigeria is locally plural but globally dual. By this it is meant that there are hundreds of Nigerian languages (most accounts put the figure around five hundred), acquired unconsciously and spoken as First Language (L1) in different geographical boundaries, while only two languages - English and Nigerian Pidgin - are widely spoken, across all boundaries. Similarly, Deuber and Hinrichs (2007: 24) claim that English and NP share a diglossic co-existence in Nigeria: “English constitutes the H variety, as it is the language of most public/formal communication, while NP is the L variety, “being associated primarily with private/informal domains of language use. However, while English has to be acquired consciously, essentially in the classroom, Nigeria Pidgin (henceforth NP) can be acquired, either unconsciously (as a first language) (especially in South-Eastern Nigeria) or consciously, though informally (on the streets, through interactions with the speakers). Although NP is usually considered an English-derived contact language, its identity could be traced to any or all of the following: Nigerian languages spoken along the coast before the coming of European traders (in the fifteenth century); linguistic contacts between Nigerians and European traders; European incursion into Nigeria via missionary work (Faraclas 1996). Without doubt though, NP is derived from many European languages, (especially, English, Portuguese, and Dutch) and various Nigeria languages. Because Nigeria was eventually colonized by the British, English Language became NP’s main lexifier, prompting the alternative nomenclature, Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE).

Classifying NP’s status has been a bit of a problem; over the years it has been hovering, essentially, between “pidgin” and “creole”, especially in the South-Eastern and South-Southern parts of Nigeria. According to Faraclas (1996: 3), NP could be pidginized, creolized, or/and decreolized, depending on the social context of its use:

acrolectal (decreolized) varieties which show significant influence from Nigerian Standard English, basilectal (pidginized or repidginized) varieties which show significant influence from other Nigerian languages, and mesolectal (creolized) varieties which typify the speeches of those who use Nigerian Pidgin in most of their daily interactions or who have learned Nigerian English as a first language.

As such, a linguistically-versatile Nigerian could use any of these varieties to achieve different interactional goals and in different contexts. The Nigerian stand-up comedy arena is an admixture of the three NP sociolectal varieties, although tending towards the

mesolectal, probably because most of the comedians are of the South-Eastern Nigerian extraction.

NP's major appeal lies in its lexicon and this researcher considers its word formation processes, especially coinages, its most intriguing aspects. Essentially, old words acquire new meanings (e.g. "mouth" and "bottom power" mean "influence"), hitherto non-existent words are coined (e.g. "kpai" means "die"), and many NP words are close approximations of English equivalents ("siddon" means "sit down").

However, NP falls short in the area of orthographic standardization. Probably because of its relatively fledgling status, NP is yet to have standardized morphemic and phonemic symbols. Thus, most NP words are spelt as closely as they approximate English, as they are "distanced" from English, or as they reflect the conventions in the user's indigenous language, all determined by the context of use (Deuber and Hinrichs, 2007). These three possibilities have all been reflected in the (NP) orthographical style employed in this study. Almost every Nigerian can speak or understand NP, and so, it has become the unofficial or *de facto* language of advertisement, entertainment, and any other form of information intended for mass consumption. As will be shown in the analysis, Nigerian stand-up comedians have tactically appropriated this linguistic resource for their profession.

Stand-up comedy in Nigeria is usually traced to 1993, when its progenitor, Allelujah Atupota Akpobome (a.k.a. Ali Baba) performed, regularly, at a Lagos nightclub. Born in 1989 and a graduate of Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma (Delta State of Nigeria), Ali Baba began professional stand-up comedy in Nigeria and (incidentally) was the favored comedian of Nigeria's former president, Olusegun Obasanjo. He has since mentored many comedians, most notably, Ayo Makun (a.k.a. AY). Other successful Nigerian comedians include, but are not restricted to, Basketmouth, I Go Dye, Klint the Drunk, Lepacious Bose, and Gordons (all stage names).

The most popular source of Nigerian stand-up comedy is "Night of a Thousand Laughs" (NATL), a national road show, produced since 1996 and staged at unspecified intervals in the country's major cities. In any instance of NATL, a comedian is given 10-15 minutes to make a seated audience laugh, in monologues interspersed with musical performances, mimes, and pantomimes. Apart from the institutionalized NATL, specific national and international events or holidays - National Democracy Day (May 29), Independence Day (October 1), Valentine's Day (February 14), Christmas (December 25) - provide opportunities for stand-up comic shows. Still, a number of nightclubs, especially in the major Nigerian cities of Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt, serve comedy as a part of their menu, on specific, sometimes previously-publicized, nights. For example, I.K. Osakioduwa, hosted MNET's (a cable network's) weekly comedy show, "Comedy Club Live in Lagos". Finally, (the established) comedians sometimes organize self-sponsored shows, where the sponsor performs for most of the period but allows other comedians to add some variety to the performance (for example, "AY Live", "Basket Mouth Uncensored").

This article addresses, centrally, the question, "what major pragmatic strategies do Nigerian stand-up comedians use to involve their audiences in humor production and consumption?", with the aim of proving, in tandem with extant literature, that comedians and audiences co-produce and co-consume humor, in more ways than are evident. Apart from its introductory section, outlined so far, this study is delineated into

four other major parts: The third section is devoted to a review of relevant literature; the fourth section contains information on research methodology; the findings are analyzed in the fifth section; and section six is devoted to concluding statements.

3. Literature review

The interactional context of stand-up comedy (henceforth SUC) has been approached from various perspectives (most especially, sociological and psychological), a subtle confirmation of the multi-disciplinary nature of humor studies. From the sociological perspective, Rao (2011) reveals the saliency of comedians' mediation of the disruption of hecklers in contextualizing the social and cultural indices of what is acceptable or unacceptable as funny in stand-up comedy. Also, Rutter (1997, 2000, 2011) has posited that SUC is an interactional common ground of a "triumvirate", comprising the performer, compere, and audience, each with specified though overlapping roles. Markedly, while the performer employs specific rhetorical tools (e.g. reincorporation, character footing, intonation etc) to access desired responses from the audience, the audience makes decisions about what to laugh about and when to laugh. In psychological studies, Fabiola and Spagnolli (2009), for example, trace the comedian-audience coproduction of humor in SUC to comedians' use of specific strategies: Questions; colloquial language; fillers (e.g. catchphrases and exclamations); surveys (involving the audience in a joke's preface); "pags" (punchlines built on the same preface because of audiences' acceptance of previous punchlines); accounts (repairing not-too-acceptable jokes); and referring to the audience in the punchline.

In Lockyer and Myers' (2011) socio-psychological study of the factors that motivate audiences into watching live SUC, they identify, appreciating the comedian's ability, expecting the unexpected, and affording opportunities for social interaction and spatial closeness. They specify that every member of the live SUC audience engages with SUC on two levels, public/social (member of an audience) and private (individual). In anthropological studies, the connection of the performer with the audience has been located in the performer's affiliative use of the microphone and performance of personal testimonial/autobiography (Brodie 2008) as well as the deployment of dialogue to voice colonialism (Glick 2007). And while relating SUC to politics, Wells and Bull (2007) find common to comedians and political speakers the use of invitation and rhetoric to orient to audiences.

Among linguists, the research has also had various foci. Furukawa (2007) projects a contextualization of the linguistic actions of speaker and audience in meaning-making in Hawai'ian stand-up comedy. Analyzing a compact disc recording of Andy Bumatai's (a Hawai'ian comedian's) routine, he identifies the comedian's strategic use of code-switching between English Language and Hawai'ian Creole for doublevoicing, that is, to align with a predominantly local (Filipino) audience and to accommodate non-Pidgin speakers. The code-switching not only allows Bumatai to juggle his identity (as pidgin speaker and local Filipino) but also permits a performance of carnivalistic or playful subversion (by destabilizing the authority of English Language as the superior language of discourse in Hawai'i). In Katayama's (2008) sociolinguistic comparison of "manzai" (Japanese SUC enacted by two performers at once) and American SUC, he submits that both forms reflect common and shared societal values, so that "the audiences laugh at the comedian with a sense of shared feelings" (Katayama 2008: 219), not as "we" laughing at "him/her". In Mellvenny *et*

al's (1992) conversational analytic study, they note the performers' strategic use of laughter, laughtrap, and specific conversational devices (list, contrast pair, disclaimer) to achieve audience responses. The study also reveals how some of the performers construct identities for their audiences through membership categorization.

Tsang and Wong (2004) study an instance of comedian-audience co-construction of identity and find salient the comedian's use of personal pronouns (I, you, we) and code mixing (between Cantonese and English) to construct with the audience a shared Hong Kong identity. Yus (2002) does a (relevance-theoretic) pragmatic analysis of comedians' shaping of their audience's cultural knowledge of sexual stereotypes. Analyzing "an eight-case typology of possible interactions between the comedian's 'input' monologue and the audience's background private mental representations" (Yus *ibid*: 289), he submits that cultural stereotypes are reinforced in half of the cases and challenged in the other half. This modest review not only reveals the study of the language of SUC in the language's native environment, it also underscores a preponderant focus on Western and American performers and venues.

Only one study of Nigerian SUC (Orhiunu 2007) was found. In his sociological study of one video-compact disc recording of Nigeria's *Night of a Thousand Laughs*, Orhiunu (2007) identifies Nigerian comedians' enactment of various tribal stereotypes: Prostitution by Edo girls in Italy; the Hausaman's low level of intelligence; Igbos' craze for money; the Yorubas' lavish spending at parties. He then zeroes in on the people of Calabar, whom he describes as the most recurrent victims of negative stereotyping and tribal insults in Nigerian SUC. He submits that Calabar people are lampooned for their accent, culinary love for dog meat, stupidity, and the excessive sexuality of their girls/women. No major linguistic study of Nigerian SUC has been documented. This study is intended to add to the literature on the linguistics of stand-up comedy, generally, but specifically to provide some insight into the contextualization of interaction in Nigerian stand-up comedy.

4. Methodology and design

All the routines (except one) have been randomly selected from the video-compact-disc recordings of the annual Nigerian road show, *Night of a Thousand Laughs* or (henceforth NATL). NATL comprises all instances of Nigerian SUC, specifically directed by Opa Williams, since the year 1996. The performances of five popular Nigerian comedians - Ali Baba, Basket Mouth, Gordons, I Go Dye, Lepacious Bose - are targeted, in this study. While the first four comedians are male, the fifth is female. This selection is done with a view to have a relatively fair representation of both sexes, according to their population in professional SUC (although this is to the advantage of the females who actually are not up to one-fifth of the total number of Nigerian stand-up comedians). Since most of the monologues are rendered in NP, I have translated them into Standard English; the translations are located either directly below or opposite the NP expressions. Only the non-English words are italicized and translated in the transcript. Audience's behavior and utterances are identified by capital letters and placed in brackets. Since the data is oral, some transcription peculiarities, outlined in the "Appendix", are employed.

5. Findings

5.1. Linguistic coding

About the strategic use of language in SUC, comedians have been discovered to use code-switching, essentially to orient to their audiences (Furukawa 2007; Tsang and Wong 2004; Woolard 1987). In the Nigerian SUC context, three broad languages are spoken: (Standard/Nigerian) English, NP, and local languages (L1s). While local languages are minimally used (considering the multilingual nature of both comedians and audience), English and NP are preponderantly deployed. Also, timing is tactically used by comedians to activate their audiences' responses.

As mentioned in passing in the introductory part of this study, NP is the major language of Nigerian SUC. The reason for this linguistic choice lies in part with the lack of a lingua franca in a multilingual country, and also in part with the low level of formal education of the citizens. Realizing then that performing in English (Standard British English or SBE) would reduce the size of their audience and constrain the comprehension of their messages, Nigerian comedians mostly perform in NP. And since most of the comedians are university-degree holders, their choice of NP would be (seen additionally as) an affiliative resource, an index of a desire to speak with, rather than to, their audiences. Sometimes though, NP is switched or mixed with SBE. In the following short scripts from Ali Baba's (a university graduate's) introductory statements, in one of his performances, the comedian uses NP, first independently, and then as code-alternated (code-switched and code-mixed) with SBE.

Ex. 1: *Na dis kind crowd naim good to mess.*

(This is the kind of crowd in which it would be good for one to fart.)

Ex. 2: *I bought one drum like that and hung it in my living room. One day like dat wey meat no dey to cook for the dogs, I look the pomo ... look am, look am, look am ... well, dey enjoyed it sha.*

(One day like that, when there was no meat ... I took a good look at the hide ... looked at it, looked at it, looked at it ... well, they enjoyed it anyway).

(NATL 3)

Pausing is also significantly linguistically coded in Nigerian SUC. Pausing, an aspect of "timing" (a complex of "a composite built up of hesitations, false starts, repetitions and formulaicity in the build-up along with a more rapid, fluid delivery of the punch-line ...") (Norrick 2001: 260-261) has been found useful in humor performance, to signal the punchline significantly (Dean 2000; Norrick 2001) and insignificantly (Attardo and Pickering 2011). Research has also shown that timing (especially pausing) is an essential part of the comedian-audience relationship in SUC (e.g. Dean 2000; Schwarz 2010).

In Basket Mouth's popular routine, Ex. 3, he uses the significant and emphatic pauses¹, eighteen times as a pragmatic resource, for activating shared co-textual and contextual backgrounds of the meanings of his utterances.

¹ While Brown *et al.* (1980) classify the duration of pauses as falling between 0.2 seconds (short pauses) and >0.8 seconds (topic pauses) and Hieke *et al.* (1983) and posit a 0.13 pause as psychologically relevant, Attardo and Pickering (2011: 239) submit that "... the pauses used in humor may go up to 30 seconds. " However, since I couldn't find any authoritative statement on the duration of a

- Ex. 3: 1. Well let me tell you this.
2. You see, in this life we live, there are two things involved.
3. It's either you're a man or you're a woman.
4. If you're a woman you're safe but if you're a man, there are two things involved.
5. It's either you are a civilian or you're in the military.
6. If you're a civilian you're safe but if you're in the military, there are two things involved.
7. It's either you are in the office or at the war front.
8. If you're in the office you're safe ...
(LAUGHTER)
9. but if you're at the war front, there are two things involved ...
(LAUGHTER)
10. It's either you kill somebody or somebody kill you ...
(LAUGHTER, CLAPS)
11. If you kill somebody you're safe ...
(LAUGHTER, CHEERS)
12. but if somebody kill you there are two things involved ...
(LAUGHTER, CHEERS)
13. It's either you're being buried or your body is used for manure ...
(LAUGHTER, CHEERS)
14. If you're being buried you're safe, if your body is used for manure there are two things involved ...
(LAUGHTER, CHEERS)
15. It's either you're used to grow plants, flowers or you are used for trees.
16. If you are used for flowers, you are safe
17. If you are used for trees, there are two things involved.
18. It's either you're used to make paper and tissue paper or you are used to make furniture.
19. If you are used for furniture you are safe
20. If you are used for tissue paper, there are two things involved
21.
(LAUGHTER, CLAPS, CHEERS)
Thank you.
22. It's either you are being used by a man ...
(LAUGHTER)
23. or you are being used by a woman...
(LAUGHTER)
24. If you're being used by a man you're safe
25.
(LAUGHTER, CHEERS, CLAPS, CATCALLS)
Thank you
26. But ... <if you're being used by a woman>, there are two things involved
...
27. It's either she use you from the back ...
(LAUGHTER)
28. or <she use you from the front> ...
(LAUGHTER)

normal pause in SUC, I chose intuitively to classify the pauses in Nigerian SUC into four types, as can be found in the Appendix section.

29. If you're being used from the back, you're safe ...
 30. <If you're being used from the front>, there are two things involved ...
 (LAUGHTER, CHEERS)
 31. It's either you contact gonorrhoea, or you contact HIV ...
 (LAUGHTER)
 32. If you contact gonorrhoea you are safe
 33. If you contact HIV ... there's only one thing involved ...
 (LAUGHTER)
 34. You will die.

(NATL 7)

The performer-audience co-production of the joke begins essentially from the eighth turn, as marked by the performer's use of the first significant pause and the audience's response, of laughter. From then onwards, the performer activates and sustains the audience's response by significantly pausing at chosen intervals when he feels there is a need for response. And the audience obliges, moving from laughter to laughter complemented by other forms of applause.

The comedian's pauses are quite longer (than other significant pauses) and so, emphatic in turns 21 and 25 (that's why they are made distinct turns) and these achieve the audience's uptake (the audience is loudest at these turns), most probably because of the audience-performer shared background knowledge about tissue paper and how it could be put to sanitary uses differently by men and women. And the comedian utters, 'Thank you' (I consider this an "aside", and so have left it unnumbered) after the audience's responses to the emphatic pauses, surely to acknowledge its (the audience's) sensitivity to the special effect intended. Interestingly too, the audience echoes the comedian's repetitive utterance, "there are two things involved", from turn 20, thereby revealing that they are interactively attentive and can predict, from the patterning they have noticed, when he would make the utterance. Coupled with the echoing, the audience's response of (minimally) laughter to each instance of significant pause denotes its acceptance of its responsibility in making this routine a one-shot coordinated communicative event or "joint act" (Clark 1996: 82).

5.2. *Stereotyping*

A stereotype is defined as "a typical feature of a kind", which may be true or false, but which individuals need to get on with the world (Reyes 2004: 181). From the social sciences to linguistics, stereotypes are considered pragmatic phenomena which are employed to position the self and the other in socially meaningful manners. Reyes (2004) identifies "typification" and "typicality" as essential to any discussion of stereotypes; the former, attributed to Wortham and Locher (1996), "means relating some aspect of behavior (predication) to a particular social category of persons [reference]" (Reyes 2004: 181) while the latter, paraphrases particular linguistic or discursive elements that type (e.g. the adverb "always") (Reyes 2004: 181). Stereotyping is crucially employed in the Nigerian comedic space, to categorize all sorts of people, institutions, and ethnic groups. The comedians, in the main, make use of the stereotypes to identify a shared background with their audiences and to indicate that they (comedian plus audience) have common perspectives of the world.

The Warri people of South-Southern (really South-Central) Nigeria are recurrent butts of Nigerian jokes. In (4), a Warri comedian (I Go Dye) pokes fun at his own people, by inferring that they are not just thieves (in (a)) but daring ones at that (in (b)). As an ethnic insider, he finds it wholesome to “play the audience” (Dave Gorman, quoted in Double 2005: 107) by reappropriating a negative stereotype as a celebratory resource, by cleverly starting with the celebratory chant (in the initial part of 4 (a)) before moving to the negativity (in the later part of 4(a) and the whole of 4(b)). In the introductory part of Ex. 4(a), the comedian begins by assigning the reference “Warri indigene” with the positively affiliative predication “to be respected” before switching to the negative (implied) predication “steals” (since people should secure their phones from “any Warri indigene”). And in Ex. 4(b), the same reference, contextually indexed by both “they” and “he”, has a backgrounded predication, “don’t care to be identified as thieves.”

Ex. 4:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>(a) <i>Any Warri guy dey here?</i>
 <i>AREA</i>
 <i>(Audience: “eh”)</i>
 <i>AREA</i>
 <i>(Audience: “eh”)</i>
 <i>(Giving a fist salute) I respect.</i>
 <i>Just now wey light off</i>
 <i>I dey wan beg people make dem hold</i>
 <i>dia fone o.</i></p> | <p>Is there any Warri indigene here?</p> <p>I salute
 Just as the lights went off
 I was going to advise people to
 secure their phones.</p> |
| <p>(b) <i>Na so dem tief one guy fone</i>

 <i>After two weeks as di guy dey pass for</i>
 <i>di area, na im dem call di guy</i>

 <i>“Oga, come here ... your fone no los?”</i>

 <i>>“Yeah, they stole my phone here two</i>
 <i>weeks ago.”<</i>
 <i>E say wait ... di guy enter carry one Ghana</i>

 <i>Must Go bag come, fone na im full inside</i>
 <i>... Na im dem bring one Sony Erikson ...</i>

 <i>“Na you get dis fone?”</i>
 <i>“Yeah, this is my fone”.</i>
 <i>Na im di Warri boy say,</i>
 <i>> “EH EHN... SO NA YOU LOCK</i>

 <i>DIS FONE WEY WE NO FIT SELL AM↑<</i>

 <i>OPEN DI FONE NOW MAKE YOU DEY RUN.</i></p> | <p>That was how they stole a guy’s
 phone
 two weeks later, when the guy was
 passing through the neighborhood
 they called him,
 “Mister, come here, didn’t you lose
 your phone?”</p> <p>He said wait .. the guy appeared with a
 big
 traveling bag filled up with phones ...
 They brought out a Sony Erikson
 brand
 “Is this phone yours?”</p> <p>Then the Warri boy said,
 “eh ehn ... so you are the one who
 locked
 this phone, preventing us from selling
 it
 unlock it immediately and run.</p> |

(NATL 6)

This joke belongs within the “second developmental stage of ethnic humor” in which ethnic humorists are “critical of their own group in a kind of self-deprecation” (Nilsen and Nilsen 2000: 116). In the Nigerian SUC context, the comedian, in this act, is believed to be identifying with his people, and interacting with the audience.

Gender stereotypes are also used by Nigerian comedians to orient to their audiences. The two genders, in the Nigerian context, are the traditional, male and female. Although both genders are stereotyped, the female gender is the butt of the majority of the often negatively-valued jokes. I illustrate with two routines: One is told by an insider, a female comedian, Lepacious Bose, while the other is told by an outsider, a male comedian, I Go Dye.

Bose’s script, Ex. 5, extracted from a performance in Ghana, satirizes females’ laborious but futile efforts to satisfy the male demands of an attractive female body image. Here, the reference “slim girls” has a predication “are insecure” foregrounded by the typicality device “so”. On the other hand, “he” and “they”, pronouns used to converge “male lovers”, are attached to a predication “cheat”, and emphasized by the typicality device “still”.

- Ex. 5: 1. I don’t know why slim girls are so insecure ...
 2. He’s cheating on me ... I can’t believe he’s cheating on me.
 3. What more does he want?
 4. I’ve got all it takes ...
 5. Me, I’ve got three times extra they still dey cheat
 6. (Me, ... they cheat still).

(Laugh and Rock 2007)

The comedian, via “character footing”, that is, quoting or creating a character in a SUC narrative (Rutter 2011), mimics a heart-broken girl, by making turns 2 and 3 in-between sobs. Moreover, she does a double, stereotyping the Nigerian woman as feeling insecure about her physical structure (especially her size) and stereotyping the Nigerian man as a cheat, despite the woman’s efforts to satisfy his requirement that she be slim. So, Lepacious Bose’s script which seeks to falsify the “widespread typification” (typing that dwells on societal circulation) (Reyes 2004), “the slim woman is attractive and preferred by men”, serves additionally to project her as identifying not just with broken-hearted slim women but also fat women who might think that their extra pounds are the reason for their lovers’ infidelity. She, thus, invites the audience to reason along with her, like women, for women.

I Go Dye’s routine, Ex. 6, furthers Bose’s appeal to “widespread typification”. Here, the comedian moves from aligning with (using the demonstrative, “our”) to distancing himself from (indicated by “they” and “you”) the referent. Thus, the reference “Nigerian girls” has the predication, “have confused faces” (euphemistically, “are ugly”), reinforced by the typicality device, “too soon”. The fact that the comedian uses analogies in order to drive home his point implies that he is putting much effort into advising Nigerian girls and therefore, affiliating with them.

- Ex. 6: *Our Nigerian girls face dey quick change.
 Before I tink say na hardship
 Until I come know.
 Check your Papa and Mama,
 you go see say dem two don dey
 resemble each other.*

Our Nigerian girls’ faces change too soon.
 Before I used to attribute this to hardship
 until I knew (what it was).
 Cross-check with your father and mother
 you’d realize that the two of them have
 begun to look alike

>Why?<	
<i>Wen di man don dey put too much</i>	When the man has been inserting regularly
<i>Di sim card for di fone,</i>	the “simcard” into the phone
<i>Wen di tin don too full di body</i>	when the thing has filled up the body
<i>E go come dey chang, di face, of your</i>	it will then begin to change the faces of
<i>Mama and your papa</i>	your mother and father
<i>Dem two go don dey look</i>	The two of them would begin to look alike
<i>Like brodas and sistas</i>	like brothers and sisters
<i>Dat is why if woman get belle</i>	That is why when a woman is pregnant
<i>If she born di pikin go resemble</i>	and she is delivered, the baby would look
<i>Iida di papa or di mama</i>	like either the father or the mother
<i>Na blood</i>	it’s (related to) blood
<i>If GIRLS stop TO DEY DATE DIFRENT MEN</i>	If GIRLS stop dating different men
<i>Dem go look sweet ...</i>	they would look sweet
<i>DIFFERENT MEN WEY UNA DEY FOLLOW</i>	The different men whom you date
<i>DEY CONFUSE UNA FACE</i> ↑	make your faces confused.

(NATL 16)

5.3. Formulaic expressions

Nigerian comedians also use formulaic expressions as pragmatic strategies to contextualize their performances. When they do, such verbalizations serve either as signature tunes (expressions which identify the opening or closure of a comedian’s performance) or boundary markers (expressions which signal the beginning or end of a joke). For example, Gordons is identified by many formulas, including the (Christian) religious utterance, “Alle-lu-ya” (as pronounced), “hello (“are you still there”), and “abi I lie” (“am I lying?”) so much so that the audience anticipates any of these utterances and replies with whichever one he chooses, when he gets to the end of a joke. It must be noted, however, first, that he sticks to one formula in a given performance, and second that he chooses sometimes to use the formula as an in-joke discourse filler.

Another form of formulaic utterance, “Area”, is used to precede the telling of a joke that has the Warri indigene as its butt. As such almost all Nigerian comedians chant, “Area” to preface an ethnic joke directed at the people of Warri, regardless of the joke’s face value (i.e. whether the joke promotes a positive or negative face). Because the Warri people are the butt of many jokes and because many comedians (from my count, almost half of the popular ones) are of Warri extraction, this formula serves both to activate the mutual entertainment background of Nigerian SUC and to bond comedian and audience emotionally. In the following excerpt, I Go Dye (a Warri indigene) seems to merely identify the Warri members of his audience, but really orients towards this (his) ethnic group, and the audience, as a whole.

Ex. 7: <i>Warri boys dey here?</i>	Do we have Warri boys here?
<i>AREA</i>	
<i>(AUDIENCE RESPONSE) Eh</i>	
<i>AREA</i>	
<i>(AUDIENCE RESPONSE) Eh</i>	
<i>Some people wey no be Warri</i>	Some people who are not Warri indigenes
<i>Dey just wan make dem fear dem</i>	Just want to be feared
<i>Eh ... eh</i>	

5.4. Call-and-response

Related to formulas are exchanges between comedian and audience, much in the spirit of the call-and-response type of African oral tradition (Okpewho 1992), with the former initiating the call and the latter obliging the response. These come in the forms of question/answer, puzzle/resolution, and elliptical statements (whose complete components are sought from the audience). In each of the following excerpts, (8) and (9), we find combinations of some of these dialogic verbalizations.

In Ex. 8, I Go Dye pokes fun at the predisposition of Nigerian women to make-up and artificiality, predicating his argument on a hypothesis, for which he seeks the audience's approval: Nigerian women are greater liars than Nigerian men.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>Ex. 8: 1. <i>A lot of guys lie, same thing with girls</i>
 2. <i>But na girls lie pass ... anyway</i>
 3. <i>Girls and guys who lie pass</i>
 4. <i>Make I break am down for you</i>
 5. <i>Guys own na word of mouth ... na im</i>
 6. <i>Girls own, everything for una body na lie</i>
 7. <i>Hair</i>
 (<i>Audience: "lie"</i>)
 8. <i>Finger nail</i>
 (<i>Audience: "lie"</i>)
 9. <i>Eye lash</i>
 (<i>Audience: "lie"</i>)
 10. <i>Eye brow</i>
 (<i>Audience: "lie"</i>)
 11. <i>Lips</i>
 (<i>Audience: "lie"</i>)
 12. <i>Height</i>
 (<i>Audience: "lie"</i>)
 13. <i>(touches both parts of his chest)</i>
 (<i>Audience: "lie"</i>)</p> | <p>Girls lie more
 Who lie more between girls and guys?
 Let me break it down for you
 Guys lie by bragging ... it is
 For girls, everything on your body is
 a lie</p> |
|---|---|

(NATL 16)

Here, the comedian starts with a general statement in turn (1) and moves on to make a controversial conclusion in turn (2), obviously depending on the audience's reaction (indicated by the significant pause) before introducing the joke. Turn (3) is an alternative question whose answer (whichever way it goes) is supposed to introduce the joke. The comedian assumes the position of authority in line 4, and to some extent, turns (4) and (5). But from turn (7) till the end of the excerpt, he transfers part of the responsibility of solving the puzzle and answering the lingering question— who lies more between men and women?— to members of the audience, by gesturing to them with the microphone, to fill in the elliptical information. And in turn (13), he paralinguistically invokes call-and-response via gesturing.

In Ex. 9, Gordons invokes a shared (self and audience) "common ground", " ... the sum of [their] mutual, common, or joint knowledge, beliefs, and suppositions" (Clark 1996: 93) to humorously allude to Nigeria's (then) president's (Olusegun Obasanjo's)

route to power. Using Clark's (1996) terminologies, the comedian exploits a "communal common ground" to homogenize his audience as a "cultural community" within which he belongs. He thus constructs a script based on a set of "inside information", "particular information that members of the community mutually assume is possessed by members of the community" (Clark 1996: 101) — that they know about (Nelson) Mandela and his prison-to-presidency saga; that they know the unmentioned Nigerian "somebody" whose story is similar to Mandela's; that they know why it might be inappropriate or politically incorrect (even in the discursively free context of comedy) to specify the "somebody".

Ex. 9: <i>Now, for dis contry, dia is difference between cell and prison</i>	Now, in this country there is a difference
<i>if you go cell wen you come out you go be EX-CONVICT,</i>	If you are locked up in a cell, when released you'd be called "ex-convict"
<i>but wen you go prison omo you go be PRESIDENT</i>	but when you are locked up in a prison, baby you would become a president
...	
(APPLAUSE)	
<i>Abi I dey lie?</i>	Am I lying?
(Audience : "No")	
<i>Mandela, na PRISON e go abi na cell</i>	Mandela, was he locked up in a prison or a cell?
(Audience : "Prison")	
<i>Ehn?</i>	Pardon?
(Audience : "Prison")	
<i>E get one oda person for dis contry wey go somewhere</i>	There is one other person in this country who went somewhere
...	
<i>Wia e go?</i>	Where did he go?
(Audience : "Prison")	
<i>Wen e come outside nko?</i>	When he was released?
...	
(Audience : "President")	
...	
<i>for dis contry</i>	<i>in this country</i>
(disjointed comments from audience)	
<i>You say?</i>	Did you say?
(Audience: "Call im name")	(Call his name)
<i>Make I call im name?</i>	Should I call his name?
(Audience: "Yes")	
<i>You no get mouth?</i>	Don't you have a mouth?
(LAUGHTER)	
<i>You no get mouth, ehn?</i>	You don't have a mouth, is it?
(LAUGHTER)	
<i>You wan take your reggae spoil my blues?</i>	Do you want to put me in trouble?
(LAUGHTER)	
<i>Na my mouth you wan hear say king mess?</i>	Do you want me to say the king has farted?
(LAUGHTER)	
<i>Na somebody I tok</i>	I said, "somebody"
(LAUGHTER)	
<i>Somebody na somebody name?</i>	Is "somebody" somebody's name?

(LAUGHTER)

E go somewhere, he became a president He went somewhere ...

(LAUGHTER)

If you tink say I dey lie, you go prison If you think I'm lying, you go and get
locked up in a prison

wen you come outside, may God help you when you are released ...

Alleluia.

(NATL 18)

Gordons thus exploits the pause, audience laughter, and question-answer to invite the audience to a joint action of humor construction.

5.5. Self deprecation

Because a stand-up comedian performs before an audience holding on to the (only) microphone (at the venue) and taking center 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. To de-emphasize this positioning, therefore, comedians employ self-deprecation (making self's abilities, characteristics, or achievements seem less important) to connect with their audiences. This is used to achieve comedian-audience intimacy, whereby the latter identifies (and probably sympathizes or/and empathizes) with the former (Russell 2002).

Nigerian comedians use self-deprecation (most often self-devaluation) as a rhetorical strategy to warm up to their audiences. This pragmatically tells the members of the audience that the comedian is just like them. This is perspectivized, here, in two instances of the recurrent themes of physical appearance and socio-economic status; while Lepacious Bose continues to dwell on her weight (see Ex. 5), I Go Dye claims to be of a poor parentage, and Basket Mouth presents himself as poor.

In the first instance, the tag "Lepacious Bose" is a humorously ironical name which alludes to the body image of the comedian. The NP term, "lepacious" ordinarily means "very slim" or "skinny", and thus when used to qualify or describe a lady weighing more than 200 pounds, it not only suggests self-disclosure (an aspect of self-deprecation), it also instantiates punning and promptly invites laughter. In Ex.10, Lepacious Bose directs the audience's attention not only towards the ironical content of her nickname or stage-name (in 10a) but also impliedly to a self-devaluation occasioned by her fatness (in 10b).

Ex. 10:

- | | | |
|-----|--|--|
| (a) | <p><i>Wen dem introduce me as Lepacious Bose</i>
<i>You people would shout</i>
<i>Why are you shouting?</i>
<i>I mean it's obvious.</i>
<i>You have eye problem?</i>
<i>Can't you see?</i>
<i>I too fine ... forget ... wetin</i></p> <p>Slim ... beautiful ... sex symbol.
Honestly, I keep telling you</p> | <p>When I was introduced as Lepacious Bose</p> <p>I am very beautiful ... don't mention it
... what is it?</p> |
| (b) | <p>God was in a good mood when he created me</p> | |

Sunday ... he was supposed to be resting,
 my mother started troubling him.
 Give me child, give me child, give me child.
 God stood up ... said, I must create an unusual being
 He asked all the angels in heaven.
 He said, "Bring mud". They started packing the mud.
 God started making me. Making me.
 By the time God finished making me in heaven, mud finished.
 He used all the mud in heaven to create only me.

(NATL 4)

In the last two utterances of 10a-- *I too fine ... forget ... wetin, Slim ... beautiful ... sex symbol--* Lepacious Bose revisits the body image theme (in Ex. 5), by inviting the audience to either confirm or deny the extant Nigerian cultural conceptualization of the value of body size in determining a beautiful lady. Following Attardo (2002: 68), her use of irony can be seen as both "evaluative" (muting both the positive effect of praise and negative effect of criticism) and "retractable" ("allows S [speaker] to take a non-committal attitude towards what he/she is saying.") Since she is fat, and so by global, beauty-pageant standards, not likely to be regarded as beautiful and sex-symbolic, the comedian's punchline is ambivalent, likely to provoke the audience's cognition, and thus, audience-interactive.

In (10b) (which follows 10a seamlessly), she abdicates irony, and returns to the reality of her physical structure, albeit in hyperbolic terms, by regarding herself as "an unusual being, created with all the mud in heaven". Apart from making mutually manifest the somewhat popular Nigerian traditional belief-system that human beings are made from mud, she self-uglifies (very much in the tradition of female comedians' performance of marginality (Gilbert 2004)), thereby inherently inviting the audience to empathize with her.

In the following extract, I Go Dye inserts the poor-family-background script (illustrating with the fact that his parents do not drive cars) into his routine, and states that he doesn't want to share his parents' lot.

Ex.11: *Like me, I no dey fear death
 I fear POVERTY pass death
 It's better for me to RICH and DIE
 with the RICH than poor and DIE
 with the poor.
 Because my family dem no even hussle

 Papa and mama poor
 Papa poor mama poor,
 family meeting, dem hold am
 na legezen everybody dey drive come
 I tell myself say I can never be poor.*

As for me I don't fear death
 I fear poverty more than death
 It's better for me to be rich and die
 with the rich than be poor and die

 Because members of my family didn't
 struggle enough
 My father and mother are poor
 My father is poor, my mother is poor
 When family meetings are held
 Everybody comes on foot.
 I convince myself that I shouldn't be
 poor.

(NATL 12)

With the kind of script in Ex. 11, the comedian offers himself to the audience not as a superior, standoffish member of society, but as having the same social status as even the person probably occupying the lowest social class within the audience.

In Ex. 12, Basket Mouth self-ridicules by claiming that while Nigerian musicians, his fellow entertainers, were buying brand new cars, he could only afford to buy a brand new, cheap mobile phone, SAGEM X5. By so doing, he aligns with the audience, by bringing himself to the level of some of the poorest people in his audience (whose phone could even be more expensive than the said phone). Also, by leaving out “Lincoln” in “Navigator” and referring to Mercedes cars simply as “E-class”, “E330”, and “M-class”, the comedian is sharing with the audience the responsibility of filling in the gaps as regards the types of cars he means.

<p>Ex. 12: <i>See Tuface buy Navigator wey just come out</i> <i>Di next tin, e buy E-class, E330, ></i> <i><tear,ru,bber. cha,cha.></i> 11.2 million naira. <i>P-Square dem buy M-class, di latest one</i> <i><tear,ru,bber.></i> 16.4 million. <i>D Banj, BMW is it 3 abi 4, 5 series</i> <i><tear,ru,bber.></i> 8.9 million. <i>NAIM MAKE I VEX.</i> <i>naim I buy my own</i></p> <p>... X5</p> <p>... SAGEM</p> <p>... <i><tear, ru,bber.></i></p>	<p>See Tuface bought the latest Navigator Then he bought ... brand new costing ... P-Square they bought brand new 16.4 million naira. D Banj, ... 3 or 4, brand new</p> <p>So that got me annoyed so I bought mine</p> <p>brand new</p>
--	--

(NATL 12)

5.6. Shared experiences

According to Double (2005: 116), “Much of what stand-up comedians do is about sharing shared feelings, shared experiences, creating a sense of community with the audience.” Along this line, comedians often tell jokes which would identify them with their audiences, among other categorizations, according to region, gender, social orientation, and nationality.

Nigerian comedians exploit this resource in various ways. I illustrate, below, with extracts from the performances of Basket Mouth (Ex. 13) and I Go Dye (Ex. 14).

<p>Ex. 13: <i>And the girls if you catch your boyfriend,</i> <i>dey cheat on you</i> Express your feelings the right way. <i>If una catch una boyfriend una dey</i></p> <p>una dey subject una emotions <i>because of the kind girl wey him dey with.</i> with him It’s wrong. If you catch your boyfriend with girls, express your feelings the same way.</p>	<p>cheating on you</p> <p>when you catch your boyfriend you usually you usually subject your emotions because of the kind of girl you find</p>
--	--

<p><i>If girl catch im boyfriend with ugly girl</i></p> <p><i>her reaction dey different o.</i></p> <p>You don notice am?</p> <p><i>If you dey with girl and your girl waka come</i></p> <p><i>and the girl you dey with, ugly.</i></p> <p><i>She go just waka (XXX)</i></p> <p>“Mark, what is this? No, no, what are (XXX)</p> <p>What are you doing with this thing?</p> <p>> NO, NO, WHAT ARE YOU ... IN MY HOUSE<</p> <p>>NO, NO, DON’T TALK<</p> <p>>CAN YOU LEAVE THIS PLACE?<</p> <p>> YOU THIS UGLY<...<</p> <p>>ARE YOU DRUNK?<</p> <p>Now if di girl fine ...</p> <p><i>(Sobbing) hm, hm ...</i></p> <p>Mark, why are you doing this to me?</p> <p>Hm, am I not good enough for you?</p> <p>Am I not good enough for you?</p>	<p>If a girl catches her boyfriend with an ugly girl</p> <p>Her reaction is usually different</p> <p>Have you noticed this?</p> <p>If you are with a girl and your girl arrives</p> <p>And the girl you are with is ugly</p> <p>She will just walk</p> <p>Now, if the girl is fine</p>
--	--

(NATL 19)

Here, Basket Mouth instantiates observational comedy (comic presentation of “everyday phenomena that are rarely noticed or discussed” (Double 2005: 116)) to remind the audience of how ladies depict their self-assessments of self-worth in the emotional reactions they exhibit when they discover whom their cheating boyfriends are dating. By asking the rhetorical question (*You don notice am?*), the comedian not only addresses the audience as a collectivity (“you”) but also compares his experience of an aspect of male-female romance with theirs. The audience’s initial response of near silence - a subtle indication that this part of the routine demands serious contemplation - when the joke is being prefaced (until the rhetorical question), probably confirms the sharedness of his experience.

In Ex. 14, I Go Dye makes everybody in the comedic space - performer and audience - one nation, Nigeria, through a script about the menace of armed robbery.

<p>Ex.14: <i>People de complain dis contri evriday</i></p> <p><i>Evriday, arm robber, arm robber tief,</i></p> <p><i>I don tink am I don tire.</i></p> <p><i>Di reason why arm robber dey dis contri</i></p> <p><i>be say, first na government.</i></p> <p><i>Dem make gun DEAR and bullet CHEAP</i></p> <p><i>How you go sell bullet 30 NAIRA?</i></p> <p><i>If you get gun and get your bullet 30 naira</i></p> <p><i>If someone even ol 1000 naira,</i></p> <p><i>you go take 30 naira tief am.</i></p>	<p>People always complain in this country everyday</p> <p>Everyday armed robber, armed robber, thief</p> <p>I have thought about it till I got tired</p> <p>The first reason why there’re armed robbers</p> <p>is the government</p> <p>It made gun expensive but bullet affordable</p> <p>How would you sell bullet for 30 naira</p> <p>If you have a gun and have a 30 naira bullet</p> <p>If someone has 1000 naira</p> <p>you would rob the person with the 30 naira</p>
--	--

*No be di gun be di fear na di bullet
 If fedra govment fit do am make
 <EVRY NIGERIAN GET GUN>
 no arm robber again.
 But make di bullet DEAR.
 Di bullet go be like 1.5 MILLION,
 How much you wan take 1.5 million tief?*

the fear is in the bullet, not the gun.
 If the federal government can allow
 every Nigerian to own a gun
 there won't be armed robbers anymore
 but let the bullet be expensive
 the bullet could cost 1.5 million naira.
 How much would you steal with
 1.5million?

(NATL 12)

Although the focus of this routine seems to be the (high) cost of bullets, as the emphasized words depict, the underlying argument is that the comedian discusses a national, critical issue of security. This would then be classified, following Double (2005: 123) as an instance of “found comedy”, “presenting something not designed to be funny as an object of amusement.”

In the process of sharing experiences, Nigerian comedians sometimes divide their audience, by humorously identifying and setting one section apart from another, to re-awaken either its liveliness or energy. In Ex. 15, Basket Mouth triggers the audience's enthusiasm by classifying the audience into fans of different English football (or soccer) teams, drawing on the shared background of Nigerians' passion for these teams.

Ex.15: *Make we just hail all di people*

Let's hail all the people

All the Arsenal fans,
 ALL THE ARSENAL FANS REPRESENT YOURSELF ↑
 (NOISE, SOME HANDS ARE RAISED)
 All the Chelsea fans
 ALL THE CHELSEA FANS, MAKE SOME NOISE ↑
 (NOISE, SOME HANDS ARE RAISED)
 ALL THE MANU FANS ↑
 (NOISE, SOME HANDS ARE RAISED)
 And the final one, and the best one, and the best team
 ALL THE EYIMBA FANS ↑
 (LOUDEST NOISE, MANY HANDS ARE RAISED).

(NATL 16)

Here, the comedian deploys exaggeration in the utterance preceding the punchline—“And the final one, and the best one, and the best team”—to prepare the mind of the audience for the point being made about football fandom in Nigeria. Given that Nigerian fans support English Premier League (EPL) teams (e.g. Arsenal, Chelsea, and ManU) to the detriment of Nigerian Premier League teams (e.g. Eyimba) (Adetunji, forthcoming), the irony, intended in the utterance and punchline, is contextually activated by the common ground shared by the comedian and audience, as evidenced obviously by the increase in the voice volume of the audience's response to the punchline.

4. Conclusion

This article sought to investigate the prominent pragmatic strategies employed by Nigerian stand-up comedians to achieve interaction in the production and consumption of humor. An analysis of 15 routines of 5 comedians reveals five major strategies: Linguistic coding, stereotyping, call-and-response, formulaic expression, self deprecation, and shared experiences. In terms of linguistic coding, findings reveal a preponderant use of NP (either as an independent code or as alternated with SBE) and the deployment of significant and emphatic pauses. These linguistic choices parallel Tsang and Wong's (2004) observations of the preeminence of Cantonese in C. W. Wong's comic language, as an admixture of Cantonese with a strategic sprinkling of Mandarin and English. In terms of stereotyping, men and women as well as the Warri ethnic group are negatively typed, much in the tradition of Reyes (2004) "widespread typification". The call-and-response patterns, found in the data, foreground, in the spirit of Brodie's (2008) hypothesis, the comedian's use of the microphone, to forge with the audience, a shared rhetorical authority. All the comedians use the chant, "Area", as a formula to preface a joke about Warri or the Warri indigene, while only Gordons uses peculiar formulaic expressions as rhetorical tools. The Nigerian comedians' use of self-deprecatory scripts serves the purpose of reducing their stage-authority and social or economic aloofness, a performance style which makes the audience warm up to them, as real human beings, with whom it has so much in common. And in their performance of shared experiences, the comedians at once converge and diverge the members of the audience by inviting them to co-produce humor on social relationship and national issues (security and football fandom).

The interactional tenor of Nigerian stand-up comedy has been achieved uniquely by a linguistic strategy in which the comedians intelligibly deploy English and NP, with the aim of reaching their audiences. Even though it would be assumed that most of (if not all) the members of the audiences are literate and so should understand English, the comedians have felt it necessary to perform - most often - in NP since this informal language is the most widely used and understood variety in Nigeria's multilingual society. Yet, the preeminence of NP clearly excludes members of the audience who aren't very versatile in this language (especially non-Nigerians) from independently processing the meanings intended by the performances. A study of the performances of only one Nigerian comedian - either within a single show or across some shows - could be a worthwhile exercise in further research on the context of Nigerian stand-up comedy.

Appendix

Transcription conventions

(.) Falling intonation

(↑)	Prominent rising intonation
(?)	Questioning intonation
(...)	Significant pause (>2 seconds)
(...)	Emphatic pause (> 5 seconds)
(.)	Normal pause (2 seconds)
(,)	Micro pause (< 2 seconds)
(<u> </u>)	Emphasis
(XXX) =	Unable to transcribe
CAPS	Louder than surrounding talk
(> <)	Quicker than surrounding talk
(< >)	Slower than surrounding talk

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