

Ayo Osisanwo* and Lekan Atoloye

“Silence is the best answer for a bully”: an exploration of humour techniques in selected Nigerian newspaper political cartoons

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Abstract: Newspaper political cartoons, known for their satirical nature, employ semiotic and linguistic techniques to comment on or criticise political leaders and events humorously. While previous studies on Nigerian newspaper political cartoons have focused on ideological issues and discourse frames, little attention has been given to the linguistic investigation of semiotic humour techniques in these cartoons. This study, therefore, investigates these humour techniques, utilising Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin’s General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) as the framework within a descriptive design. Three newspapers – *Punch*, *The Guardian*, and *Daily Trust* – were purposively selected for their regular publication of cartoons, criticising Nigeria’s politics. Eleven political cartoons were purposively selected for their semiotic and humorous depictions of Nigeria’s politics, and subjected to linguistic analysis. Six semiotic humour techniques were identified in the cartoons: exaggeration, humorous metaphor, distortion of formulaic expressions, neologism, innovative collocation, and sarcasm. These techniques were employed to satirise three governance issues in Nigeria – misgovernance, corruption and insecurity.

Keywords: general theory of verbal humour; humour techniques; Nigerian newspapers; political cartoons

1 Introduction

Politics and media are intricately intertwined, with political events communicated through various media platforms like newspapers, radio, television, and the internet

***Corresponding author: Ayo Osisanwo**, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria; and Leuphana Universität, Lüneburg, Germany, E-mail: ayosisdelexus@yahoo.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5365-0926>

Lekan Atoloye, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria, E-mail: lekanatoloye@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5337-2772>

(Strömbäck et al. 2008). Within newspapers, political cartoons serve as condensed yet impactful commentary on political issues, compressing complex narratives into single images. These cartoons utilise semiotic and linguistic techniques to influence public opinion and criticise political figures (Akande 2002; Sani et al. 2012). Humour, a universal social phenomenon, is heavily influenced by cultural context (Andrew 2012; Bamgbose 2019; Shifman 2007). Its structure and content evolve alongside sociocultural and technological advancements, reflecting societal themes like politics, religion, and gender (Sen 2012). Applied linguistics has emerged as a prominent field for humour research, with linguists applying various theories and approaches to study humour, including cognitive linguistics, translation studies, and sociolinguistics (Attardo 2017a; Bergen and Binsted 2003; Chiaro 2008; Lin and Tan 2010).

Nigerian newspapers like *Punch*, *The Guardian*, and *Daily Trust* regularly feature political cartoons that satirise government programmes, policies, and personalities (Sani et al. 2012). These cartoons serve as powerful tools for influencing public opinion and critiquing political issues. This study aims to examine the linguistic techniques employed in selected political cartoons from Nigerian newspapers. The objectives of this study are, therefore to:

- i. explore humour techniques and their semiotic implications in selected Nigerian newspaper political cartoons;
- ii. analyse the socio-political context surrounding the use of these techniques.

1.1 Linguistic techniques of humour

Linguistic techniques of humour encompass various creative elements that contribute to the generation of laughter and amusement. According to Dynel (2013), humour is characterised by imagination, creativity, and linguistic innovation, often utilising colourful language to convey relevant meanings. This includes a wide array of linguistic features such as analogies, metaphors, puns, innovative collocations, exaggerations, euphemisms, paradoxes, register clashes, neologisms, allusions, irony, and more (Dynel and Poppi 2019).

The foundation of humour lies in lexemes and phrasemes, where humour stems from the originality and unique stylisations of language components. Humorous lexemes, or neologisms, are newly invented words, while semantic phrasemes rely on originality and unexpected phrasings (Dynel 2009a). Collocations, which combine multiple lexical items, are manipulated creatively in Nigerian newspaper political cartoons to elicit humour (Gramley, Gramley and Patzold 1992). Exaggeration is a common technique, amplifying situations to extremes to create incongruity and laughter (Godioli and Little 2022). Humour also employs euphemisms, paradoxes, and metaphorical expressions, with humorous metaphors being particularly

innovative and surprising in their pairing of concepts (Ritchie 2004). Creative metaphors introduce novel perspectives, relying on the interpretation of the audience to infer intended meanings (Dynel 2009b). Irony, a prevalent aspect of humour, involves conveying meanings opposite to literal expressions, often relying on implicatures and context for interpretation, while Sarcasm, which is a harsher form of irony, contrasts positive expectations with negative outcomes, requiring both a dissociative attitude and echo for its humorous effect (Colston 2015). Punning introduces deliberate ambiguity, playing with words to convey multiple meanings (Şaganean 2022). Register clash, another form of humour, involves linguistic features that do not correspond with social status, either upgrading or downgrading language usage (Tsakona 2017).

Humorous allusions rely on existing materials, distorting or directly citing texts for comedic effect (Carbajal-Carrera 2023). Witticisms and retorts are situation-specific elements, with witticisms cleverly incorporated into discourse and retorts serving as swift reactions to prior utterances (Dynel 2009a). Teasing, putdowns, and banter are additional pragmatic functions of humour, used to playfully challenge or mock others in social interactions (Bergen and Roustia 2019). Self-deprecating humour involves acknowledging one's shortcomings or mistakes, often cushioned to maintain a humorous tone (Norrick 1993). Finally, humour may be embellished with anecdotes, humorous stories drawn from personal or others' experiences, enriched with witty language (Norrick 1993, 2003). Together, these linguistic techniques form a colourful palette of humour, enriching communication and fostering laughter in various social contexts.

1.2 Political cartoons: an overview

Cartoons, defined as humour-laden visual or visual-verbal creations with inherent incongruity for punchlines (Hempelmann and Samson 2008), serve as social responses to events, aimed at societal commentary (Al-Momani et al. 2017). Combining both verbal and visual elements, they convey humour in a multimodal manner (Tsakona 2009). Akande (2002) notes that political cartoons, featured in newspapers and magazines, provide commentary on politics beyond written words, employing both lexes and visuals. Seymour-Ure (1986) argues that political cartoons, known for their satirical nature, are employed to criticise political figures and governments, presenting a distorted yet compelling portrayal. Similarly, Akande (2002) observe that political cartoons serve as potent platforms for bold commentary and criticism, bridging the gap between the masses and political leaders. Shaikh et al. (2019) analyse how Pakistani political cartoons were used as communicative tools on the Internet and print media to produce significant meaning and dominant political themes. The

study opines that techniques of symbolism, exaggeration, analogy, irony and labeling are used to highlight specific moves in the cartoons. It also avers that cartoon frequency shows how the genre has become a tool at both social and official levels.

Through clever humour and satire, political cartoons engage and entertain readers while challenging prevailing narratives and questioning political intentions (Genova 2018). Akande (2002) highlights the various levels of humour present in political cartoons, ranging from rapid wit to outright ludicrousness. Such humour not only generates amusement but also serves as a powerful vehicle for conveying complex political issues in a graphic metaphor (Bivins 1984). This combination of entertainment and message delivery makes political cartoons a compelling force in political discourse, appealing to diverse audiences with their witty commentary and sharp observations.

1.3 Linguistic studies on humour

Linguistic studies on humour encompass a diverse range of topics, including crisis-motivated humour in Nigerian computer-mediated platforms, linguistic devices in Nigerian sitcoms, and humour strategies of Nigerian stand-up comedians. Akinola (2018) employs Hymes' ethnography of communication and Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory to analyse crisis-motivated humour in Nigerian computer-mediated platforms. Thirty randomly selected WhatsApp and Facebook compositions reveal humour blending English and Nigerian Pidgin, satirising socioeconomic/political challenges. This study shares similarities with that of Akinola in the linguistic exploration of governance issues in Nigeria. However, they differ in their data and linguistic approaches. Similarly, Osisanwo and Agunbiade (2024) deploy a blend of Jacob Mey's pragmatic acts theory, Attardo & Raskin's general theory of verbal humour and Peter Auer's typologies of code-switching to examine how students deploy language manipulation with purposefully composed humour in their conversation on virtual academic communities. Besides identifying humour techniques, the study also reveals code-switching as a central humour strategy, validating existing knowledge that humans naturally participate in humorous speech and behaviour. It submits that students also engage in humorous interactions amidst their academic engagements. Despite the similar theoretical consideration between the study and the current one, they differ in their data focus.

Adetunji (2013) examines Nigerian stand-up comedians' strategies for engaging audiences in humor creation, analysing performances by Gordons, I Go Dye, Lepacious Bose, Ali Baba, and Basketmouth. He identifies stereotyping, linguistic coding, call-and-response, formulas, shared experiences, and self-deprecation as the humour strategies in the performances. He also emphasises linguistic coding's role,

alternating Nigerian Pidgin and English. However, the study lacks a humour theory foundation and clarity on strategy deployment. In another study, Schwarz (2010) examines how stand-up comedians structure performances to evoke laughter, drawing on data from Jerry Seinfeld and Steven Wright. Using the Incongruity, Hostility (or Superiority), and Release theories, she identifies linguistic elements like wordplay, hyperbole, and timing as key to humour creation. Schwarz notes comedians develop unique personas and styles, emphasising the importance of linguistic aspects, especially incongruity in punch lines. However, the study's focus on traditional humour theories limits its exploration of linguistic aspects of humour.

Employing a multimodal-ESP theory, Ogoanah and Ojo (2018) analyse Nigerian stand-up comedy performances, considering both verbal and visual elements. They collect data from online sources, studying 15 comedy series and 21 comedians. The study reveals comedic rhetorical strategies, including emblematic, metaphoric, iconic, and deictic gestures, alongside linguistic techniques like intonation and repetition. It outlines a generic structure for Nigerian stand-up comedy, noting the role of kinetic mechanisms. Similar to Ogoanah and Ojo's research, the present study explores techniques of humour, but in political cartoons. Using Attardo and Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humour, Osisanwo and Ilesanmi (2023) analyse humour strategies of selected Nigerian stand-up comedians (SNSCs), with focus on exploration of gender, ethnic, and class reflections. YouTube performances by Bovi, Akpororo, Basket Mouth, and Kenny Blaq are examined via context-of-the-joke and context-in-the-joke frameworks. Identified strategies include comparison, distortion of shared knowledge, projection of collective belief, and denigration. They expose societal issues, often using Nigerian Pidgin, reflecting gender, class, and ethnic differences. This study, however, does not investigate the semiotic techniques of humour in the comedic performances.

1.4 Linguistic studies of humour studies in political cartoons

Political cartoons have served as rich subjects for linguistic analysis. Numerous linguistic studies have focused on political cartoons, possibly due to their ability to succinctly convey cartoonists' views in a manner that thousands of words cannot achieve (Amore and Atoloye 2016). Medubi (2003) applies Turner and Fauconnier's (1999) Conceptual Integration Theory to Nigerian political cartoons, focusing on language and ideology. Using 150 cartoons, she examines the tension arising from Nigeria's multi-ethnicity and the interaction between verbal and non-verbal cues. Her findings highlight Nigerians' prioritisation of ethnic and economic interests over national identity. She observes that Nigerian newspaper political cartoons portray political leaders as unreliable and self-centered, neglecting public welfare. Similar to

this study, both investigate linguistic and visual elements in Nigerian newspapers' cartoons. However, Medubi's analysis lacks depth in semiotic features. Additionally, the humour in the cartoons remains unaddressed.

In their study on the semiotics of political cartoons, Al-Momani et al. (2017) examine the Arab Spring's sociopolitical context, with a focus on the changes in the practices and positions of the Jordanian people towards politics and politicians. The study examines 57 cartoons by Imad Hajjaj, employing Barthes' semiotic model. The cartoons convey themes of liberation, success, and resistance against corruption, highlighting youth involvement and awareness of societal issues. The study explores lexical, structural, and physical elements, exploring symbolic components and their semiotic interactions. While offering a strong foundation for semiotic analysis, the study overlooks political cartoons' humour and its cognitive impact. Also, employing Kress and Van Leeuwen's multimodality theory and critical discourse analysis, Oamen (2021) examines gender power dynamics in Nigerian newspaper political cartoons. Ten purposively selected cartoons are analysed, revealing nuanced (mis) representations of women. The study highlights semiotic resources and discourse framing, reflecting gender concerns in Nigeria's socio-political context. It suggests that cartoonists ideologically (mis)represent women, illustrating unequal gender relations. While Oamen's study focuses on gender ideologies, the present study explores the humour techniques in Nigerian newspaper political cartoons.

Existing studies highlight linguistic depth in humour and political cartoons, elucidating societal issues and power dynamics. However, a research gap exists in investigating linguistic humour techniques in Nigerian newspaper political cartoons. While humour has been explored in various contexts like computer-mediated communication and stand-up comedy, political cartoons' linguistic strategies have been scarcely investigated. Investigating these techniques offers insight into humour's construction and conveyance in visual media. Bridging this gap presents an opportunity to understand how language enhances humour and satire's efficacy in political cartoons, merging linguistics, humour studies, and visual communication.

1.5 Theoretical framework

The study employs the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) as its theoretical framework. Formulated by Attardo and Raskin (1991), the GTVH expands the scope of the SSTH. Attardo (2017b) observes that the SSTH is not a complete theory because it has two limitations, (i) it does not show the difference between referential and verbal humour as it ascribes the same script opposition and overlap to both forms of humour and (ii) it fails to show that some jokes perceived to be more or less similar to others. The GTVH addresses these limitations by proposing six knowledge resources (KRs) that

must be drawn upon when generating humour. The first and the most abstract level of the KRs, the script opposition (SO) is originally found in the SSTH and five other KRs are added in the GTVH, namely the logical mechanism (LM), the Situation (SI), the target (TA), the narrative strategy (NS) and the language (LA) (Attardo 1994). Three basic types of opposition exist between the “real” and “unreal” situations induced “by the overlapping scripts of a humorous text”, namely “actual/non-actual, normal/abnormal, and possible/impossible” (Raskin 1985: 111). The LM takes care of the resolution that is injected by the incongruity, “whereby the incongruity of the SO is playfully and /or partially explained away” (Attardo 2008: 108). The SI is the environment in which the events of a joke take place (Attardo 2017b). The TA concerns itself with the butt of a joke. The NS deals with the (micro)genre of a joke and how it is structured. The LA addresses “the linguistic choices with which the previous components are verbalised” (Attardo 2017a: 5). The GTVH claims the six knowledge resources are not simply a random collection, but rather they are arranged in a hierarchy that reflects the level of similarity perceived in jokes (Attardo 2017b). This hierarchy means that the choices made using the more abstract and higher knowledge resources have an impact on the choices made using the lower knowledge resources (Attardo 2017a). Attardo (1994) presents the hierarchy of the knowledge resources thus:

Humour is, therefore, seen as “a 6-tuple”, from the perspective of the GTVH, specifying the instantiation of each of the parameters discussed above{LA, SI, NS, TA, SO, LM}. The GTVH is presented as a mechanism that can generate an infinite number of humorous pieces by joining the values that each parameter can handle. To analyse humour in the GTVH, the values of the KRs are listed. While the values for the LM and the SO are seemingly constrained, those of the SI and the LA are very numerous. The TA and the LM are optional KRs; hence they may be empty in terms of value (Attardo 1994, 2001).

This study deploys GTVH to explore the linguistic techniques of humour in political cartoons in selected newspapers. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the knowledge resource known as logical mechanism (LM), which comprises exaggeration, humorous metaphor and sarcasm. LM addresses the resolution of incongruity by playfully or partially explaining the script opposition (SO) (Attardo 2008). In this study, the LM is modified to incorporate other linguistic resources, such as including neologisms, the distortion of formulaic expressions and innovative collocations, that are unique to humour in political cartoons, which Attardo and Raskin’s original framework does not fully account for. The model below is proposed for the analysis in this study (Figure 1).

By adapting the LM to encompass these linguistic elements, the analysis aims to capture the intricacies of humour in the political cartoons under investigation. Exaggerations amplify aspects to underscore the significance or absurdity of situations in Nigerian politics. Humorous metaphors compare dissimilar concepts to evoke

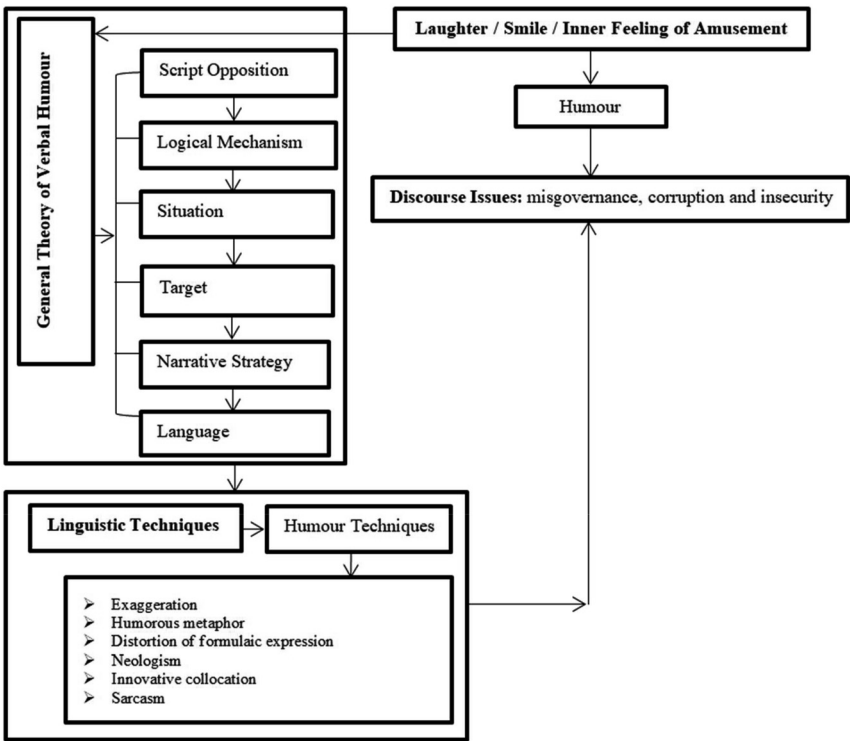


Figure 1: Proposed model for linguistic analysis of humour techniques in Political Cartoons. Source: Researchers (2024).

laughter, aiming for entertainment rather than deeper meanings. Distorted formulaic expressions alter familiar phrases for humour or emphasis, reflecting political discourse's distorted nature. Neologisms coin new terms to critique actions or policies. Innovative collocations creatively pair words to form fresh expressions. Sarcasm employs irony or mockery to criticize political figures or policies, revealing underlying frustrations within political discourse. These linguistic techniques add layers of humour and critique to political cartoons, shaping discourse in Nigerian politics. The choice of the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) for analyzing political cartoons is justified. First, GTVH provides an effective framework for exploring how linguistic elements contribute to humour creation, allowing for systematic analysis of linguistic techniques of humour. Additionally, GTVH addresses limitations of previous theories, proposing six knowledge resources (KRs) to guide humour production. This enables a detailed examination of humour in political cartoons, facilitating deeper understanding of the socio-political messages conveyed.

2 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative method, focusing on linguistic techniques of humour. The techniques targeted in the analysis include exaggerations, metaphors, distorted expressions, neologisms, collocations and sarcasm. These techniques are analysed adopting the Logical Mechanism component of Attardo and Raskin (1991) General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH). Data comprises political cartoons from the online editions of three Nigerian newspapers – *Punch*, *The Guardian*, and *Daily Trust* – between January 2020 and December 2021, a period marked by significant sociopolitical events, such as the COVID-19 lockdown, economic recessions and #EndSARS protests. Selection criteria for the newspapers include online popularity, consistent publication of political cartoons, and regular criticism of Nigerian politics. Eleven political cartoons are purposively selected from the three political cartoons for their humorous and political content. This non-random sampling procedure ensures a representative sample for linguistic analysis.

2.1 Data analysis and findings

The selected Nigerian newspaper political cartoons employ six linguistic techniques to address sociopolitical issues: logical mechanisms, script oppositions, situations, targets, narrative strategies, and language. These techniques, outlined in Attardo and Raskin's (1991) General Theory of Verbal Humour, manifest as normal/abnormal situations, targeting corrupt leadership, insecurity, and societal suffering. Cartoons feature both textual and visual elements, sometimes contrasting language with imagery. Techniques include exaggerations, metaphors, distorted expressions, neologisms, collocations, and sarcasm, shaping the discourse on Nigerian politics.

2.2 Exaggerations

Exaggeration is a common linguistic tool in political cartoons, serving dual purposes. Firstly, it enhances humour, engaging readers by amplifying the criticised situation. Secondly, it emphasises issues by presenting them in exaggerated forms, facilitating comprehension of the cartoonist's viewpoint. Through exaggerated depictions, the seriousness of criticised matters is underscored, making the cartoons impactful. The characteristics of exaggerations in political cartoons have been studied by different humour scholars. According to Burgers et al. (2016), exaggerations in political cartoons can be characterised by three main elements: (i) scalarity, (ii) a distinct shift between the propositional and intended meanings and (iii) a specific referent.

Scalarity refers to the degree of exaggeration used in the cartoon. The shift between the propositional and intended meanings refers to the difference between what is being said and what is actually being conveyed. The specific referent refers to the situation or event that is being exaggerated. Below are examples of cartoons illustrating the humorous employment of exaggeration.

Figure 2 is a dialogic political cartoon that humorously comments on the impact of the closure of the border between Nigeria and Benin Republic by the Nigerian government on the economies of both countries. The cartoon exemplifies how political cartoons can use exaggeration and humour to comment on serious issues and engage readers emotionally. It entails a conversation between a Beninese woman, selling Kenkey, and a Nigerian man. Beninese women are known for hawking Kenkey on the streets of Nigeria. Kenkey is a piece of dough made from maize grains; a special delicacy of the Ghanaian, Togolese and Beninese people. The subject of the conversation is the closure of the border between Nigeria and Benin Republic by the Nigerian government and the attendant economic hardship on both the Nigerian and Beninese people. The Buhari-led government ordered the closure of all the country's land borders on 20 August 2019 for security reasons. There are two instances of exaggeration in the cartoon:

- i. "... your brothers are demanding \$1m from our brothers before doing business in your country."
- ii. "Well, a dish of kenkey is ₦10,000."

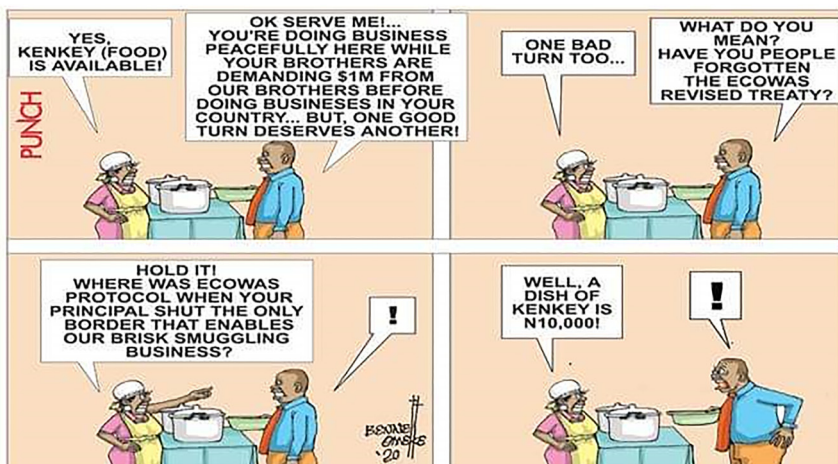


Figure 2: Kenkey conversation amidst the Nigeria-Benin border closure. (*Punch*, 25 August, 2020).

Both instances are quantitative scalar exaggerations as they present overblown quantitative information (Burgers et al. 2016). The first instance of exaggeration in the cartoon refers to the fees levied by the government of Benin Republic as a means of highlighting the absurdity of the situation and the economic hardship caused by the border closure. Contrary to the exaggerated figure of \$1 million (₦415,140,000 converted on Google) that is given in this cartoon, it is CFA9 million (₦6.5 million) that is levied by the government of Benin Republic as retaliatory punitive charges per truck on every vehicle from Nigeria crossing the Benin border to other West African countries or vice versa. The second instance of exaggeration in Figure 2, however, serves as a punch line to trigger humour. A dish of Kenkey is not as expensive as ₦10,000, as at the time of this research, it does not sell for more than ₦200/₦300 but the price has been exaggerated in the cartoon to achieve a humorous effect. The humorous effect is accentuated by the reaction of the Nigerian man as indicated by the graphological sign (!) – an exclamation mark. This is a semiotic feature of humour may make the readers of the cartoon release the tension that must have been accumulated because of the country's economic instability through laughter.

Figure 3 depicts an old man who is escaping from a gunman while running faster than professional athletes. The physical context of the cartoon is the 2020 Kaduna Marathon, an event that took place despite the security challenges that were present



Figure 3: Exaggerated ability of an old man outrunning professional athletes in Kaduna marathon. (Daily Trust, 21 November, 2020).

in the state at the time (*Daily Trust*, 24 September 2020). The cartoon uses exaggeration as a semiotic technique of humour to satirise the Kaduna State Government's decision to hold a marathon despite the security situation. The exclamatory sentence "Woah amazing runner! I wonder where he learnt that" uttered by the professional athletes in the cartoon exemplifies the use of exaggeration as a linguistic technique of humour. The utterance serves to exaggerate the old man's running abilities, making the situation appear absurd and humorous. The verbal exaggeration is complemented by a visual exaggeration: an old man running faster than professional athletes. The humorous effect in cartoon is highlighted by the shock expressed through the exclamatory sentence.

The exaggeration vividly portrays the situation of security in Kaduna in a way that heightens the reality of athletics. This highlights the state government's insensitivity to the security issues in the state by poking fun at them. The deployment of exaggeration is intended to criticise the government's obtuse decision, producing humour that is characterised by aggressive laughter, which gives the readers a sense of superiority over the target.

The running man's actual abilities are exaggerated to create humour and show the absurdity of the situation so as to make the readers laugh. The exaggeration implies a scalar qualitative dimension, which means that the literal meaning is more extreme than the intended one (Assadullayev 2021). The exaggeration is deployed in the political cartoon to point out a sensitive social and political issue in a humorous way. It is also aimed at disparaging the Kaduna State Government for being inattentive to the state's security situation. The cartoon is, therefore, used to make a political statement against the Nigerian government's obliviousness to the people's pressing needs, as it draws attention to the country's insecurity issues, such as terrorism, militancy, kidnapping, and banditry. The Nigerian government, thus, is portrayed as disregarding matters that impact the public in as much as they keep scoring cheap political points.

As shown in Figures 2 and 3, political cartoonists employ exaggerations to ensure that their readers catch their humour's punch line, which typically is a clash of incongruities, comprised of two opposing scripts. The propositional meaning is greater and more extreme than the utterance's intended meaning in terms of magnitude. Also, the understanding of the exaggerations is tied down to specific referents. Hence, it is impossible to tell if the statements are exaggerations when they are decontextualised. This explains why interpreting them requires information from the real world.

2.3 Humorous metaphors

A metaphor is an implied comparison of two seemingly unrelated concepts; a familiar one and an unfamiliar one. Consequently, the features of the unfamiliar

notion are exposed via analogy. In cognitive terms, metaphors are generally regarded as the selective systematic mapping of conceptual structure from one conceptual domain to another (Dynel 2009b). Figures 4 and 6 illustrate the use of humorous metaphors in the data.

In Figure 4, humour is built up through the metaphorical use of language. The utterance “That’s not fair! They have given her ‘a piece of jewellery’ back” and the interrogative sentence “Which one?” both work together to elicit a humorous metaphor, “a pair of handcuffs”. This metaphor is the key element that triggers the humour in the cartoon. The butt of the humour is Diezani Allison-Madueke, the former Minister of Petroleum in Nigeria, who had jewellery worth N14 billion seized from her by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) due to corruption charges against her (*The Guardian*, 28 May, 2021). The Federal High Court in

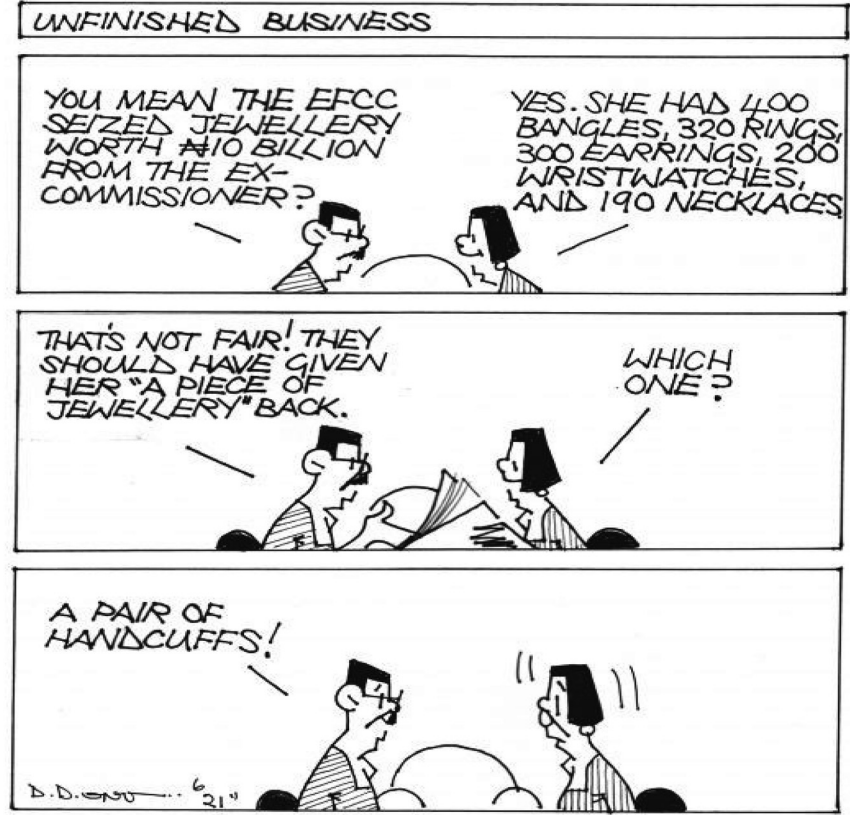


Figure 4: From bangles to handcuffs. (*The Guardian*, 9 August, 2021).

Abuja had ordered her arrest for these charges (*Premium Times*, 28 May, 2021). The metaphor of “handcuffs” in relation to “bangles” expresses the similarity between the two items. The metaphor signals the similarity between the semantic tenor “handcuffs” and the semantic vehicle “bangles” through the notion of imprisonment. The implied comparison of the two items is portrayed through analogy; both handcuffs and bangles are put around the wrists. This analogy is what makes the metaphor so effective in conveying the intended message. The humorous nature of the metaphor has the potential to provoke honest laughter and make the audience more receptive to the message being conveyed.

The metaphor of “handcuffs” in relation to “bangles” is used to make a point about the actions of Diezani Allison-Madueke and the potential consequences of her actions. The analogy used in the metaphor highlights the similarity between the two items “handcuffs” and “bangles” and the message being conveyed. The message is that the actions of Diezani Allison-Madueke are unjust and warrant imprisonment. The use of humour in this cartoon allows for a more effective and memorable message to be conveyed to the audience. The use of humorous metaphor in the cartoon serves as a means to satirise Diezani Allison-Madueke and reflect the issue of corruption in government. Such deployment of humorous metaphor serves as a form of social commentary and could be a powerful way to bring attention to important societal issues so as to hold those in power accountable for their actions.

Figure 5 demonstrates that humour is an essential element of human communication and can be used to convey complex ideas in a simplified and entertaining manner. Humour is engendered in the figure with the use of the humorous metaphor “our stolen chicken.” The humour in this metaphor is generated from the incongruity between the semantic tenor “our stolen chicken” and the semantic vehicle “Ibori’s loot”. This use of humorous metaphor tallies with Kang’s (2016) view that the disparity between the semantic tenor and the semantic vehicle serves as a cartoon’s primary metaphorical source of amusement. The situational context of the cartoon is the case of the £4.2 million loot recovered from James Ibori, the former Governor of Delta State, who was arrested and jailed for money laundering in the UK in 2012. The £4.2 million loot recovered from Ibori was eventually paid back to Nigeria in 2021 after he had served his jail term (*Premium Times*, 9 March, 2021). However, the destination of the recovered loot became a source of confusion and debate. The Attorney-General of the Federation, Abubakar Malami, stated that the recovered loot would be used for Federal Government projects (*The Guardian*, 25 May, 2021). Meanwhile, the Accountant General of the Federation, Ahmed Idris, claimed that it had been returned to the Delta State Government (*Premium Times*, 27 May, 2021).

The similarity between the tenor and the vehicle in the humorous metaphor “our stolen chicken.” is not immediately transparent, which adds to the humour of the metaphor. This is in line with Tourangeau and Sternberg’s (1981) postulation that

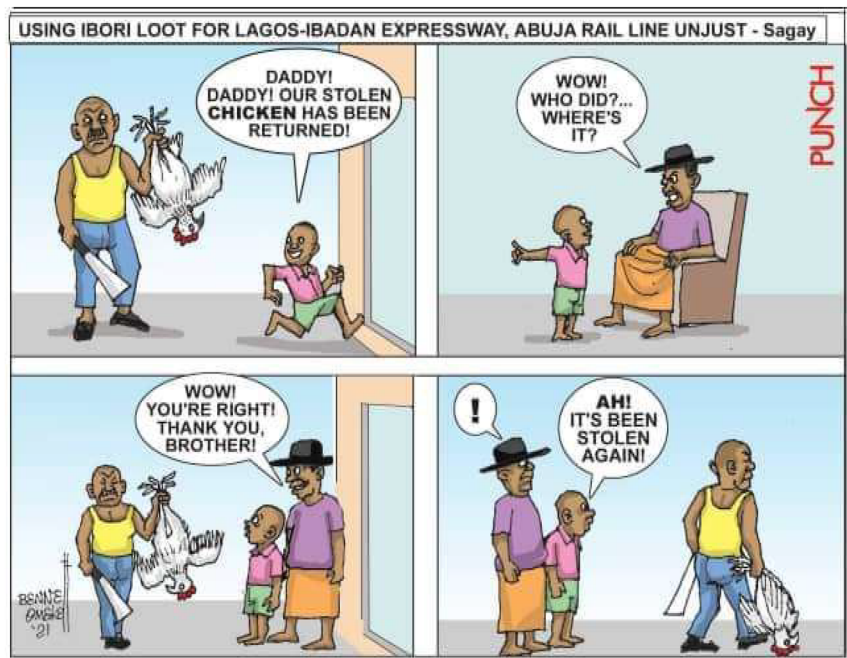


Figure 5: Metaphor of a re-stolen chicken. (*Punch*, 12 March, 2021).

the wider the divergence between a tenor and a topic, the more effective the metaphor. The metaphor satisfies this postulation by highlighting the apparent disparity between the tenor “our stolen chicken” and the vehicle “Ibori’s loot”. The incongruities between these two concepts humorously stand out as there is no immediately obvious resemblance between them. The metaphor in Figure 5 could be said to be humorous because there is an apparent disparity between the tenor “our stolen chicken” and the vehicle “Ibori’s loot” as the convergent points are covert. The use of the humorous metaphor in Figure 5 underscores the incongruity between the semantic tenor and the semantic vehicle to simplify a complex situation while also incorporating an element of humour. This use of metaphor shows the power of humour in effectively articulating concepts while maintaining the seriousness of the subject of discourse.

2.4 Distortion of formulaic expressions

Formulaic expressions are recognisable to native speakers due to their stereotyped form and conventional meaning. Kecskes (2007) notes that formulaic expressions go

beyond the literal meaning of words and require specific contexts and formal language. Examples include conversational phrases, idioms, proverbs, fillers, counting, swearing, and other established multiword units. Despite variations, they are widely known within a linguistic community. Distortions involve altering the original form of formulaic expressions. Such alterations are characterised by omissions, substitutions, or additions, which could entail injecting additional linguistic elements at any point in the referred texts' structure – the beginning, middle, or end. Dynel (2009a) observes that humour can result from distortions that alter the complete meaning of the text. In the data for the study, distortions are found in the use of idioms and proverbs.

Figure 6 conveys humour through a playful distortion of the fixed expression, “a pain in the neck” which refers to a nuisance or annoyance. In this context, the humour comes from the distorted but humorous expression “pain in the legs, pain in

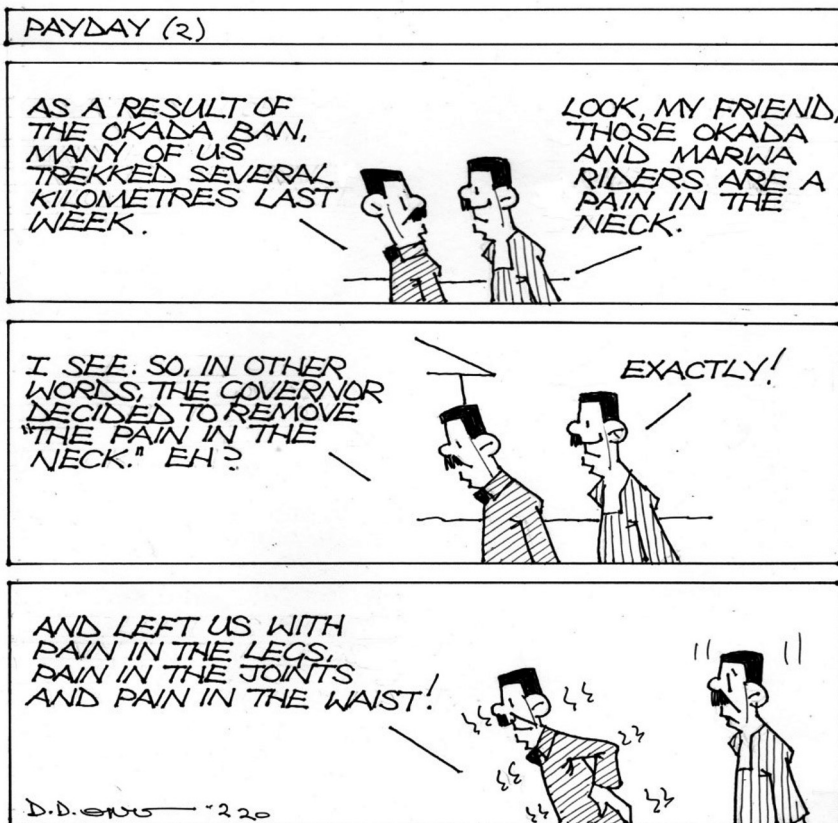


Figure 6: Agonising effects of the ban on tricycles and motorcycles in Lagos. (*The Guardian*, 2 February, 2020).

the joints and pain in the waist.” The cartoon recounts the difficulties faced by the residents of Lagos State, Nigeria, specifically the commoners, as a result of the ban on commercial tricycles (Keke Marwa) and motorcycles (Okada) on major roads. Many Lagos State residents were affected by the restriction, particularly those who needed to access the inner routes where only Okada and Keke Marwa riders could ply (*The Guardian*, 15 June, 2021). Keke Marwa and Okada are popular modes of transportation in Lagos and other parts of Nigeria because of their ability to ply interior roadways. The ban was imposed by the Lagos State Governor, Babajide Sanwo-Olu, who claimed that these modes of transportation had become a source of trouble for the state. The Governor’s explanation for the ban was that Marwa and Okada constituted a menace – “a pain in the neck” – to the state (*Punch*, 23 May, 2021). The cartoonist then takes advantage of the literal meaning of the idiomatic expression “a pain in the neck” to create humour.

The literal meaning of the fixed expression is explored as a source of humour, portraying the agonising impact of the ban on the daily lives of the people. Without the convenience of tricycles and motorcycles, the available commercial vehicles became insufficient to transport everyone, and the already congested roads of Lagos made the situation even worse (*Punch*, 23 May, 2021). People were forced to walk long distances to get to their destinations, hence the playful and distorted phrase “pain in the legs, pain in the joints and pain in the waist.” To create humour and arouse jocularly in the readers, the cartoonist deploys stylistic deviation by altering the phrase “a pain in the neck” to “pain in the legs, pain in the joints and pain in the waist.” The humour in the distorted statement is underscored by the addition of the nominal group “pain in the joints and pain in the waist.” The cartoon humorously portrays the difficulties faced by individuals who are forced to travel on foot due to the ban on tricycles and motorcycles on major roads. The cartoon serves as a reminder of the importance of finding creative and effective solutions to complex problems in the country. It also highlights the need for a balance between safety concerns and the needs of local communities.

Humour is produced in Figure 7 by altering the popular saying, “silence is the best answer to a fool” to “... silence is the best answer for a bully.” This particular adage has its roots in a Biblical verse found in Proverbs 26:4, which states, “answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him.” The verse essentially warns individuals against responding to foolish behaviour as it may lead to them being perceived in the same light. The alteration of the saying in this cartoon is a humorous response to a real-life situation in Nigeria where media practitioners are frequently subjected to harassment by politicians. The “bully” in this cartoon, who doubles as the butt of the joke, is the former Aviation Minister, Femi Fani-Kayode. He is being disparaged in this cartoon for physically assaulting a Daily Trust journalist,



Figure 7: Harassment of journalists by Nigerian politicians. (*The Guardian*, 28 August, 2020).

Charles Eyo, who simply asked him who bankrolled his tour to inspect the projects of various state governors (*Daily Trust*, 25 August, 2020).

The cartoon serves as a witty and humorous perspective on the state of affairs in Nigeria where politicians, who are meant to serve the people, resort to bullying and intimidating journalists who are simply trying to carry out their duties (Onye-nankeya and Salawu 2020). The use of humour to address such a serious issue serves to shed light on the matter in a way that is both entertaining and thought-provoking. It is also important to note that the use of humour in this context is not meant to trivialise the issue of harassment faced by journalists. Instead, it serves as a powerful tool to bring attention to the issue and highlight the absurdity of such behaviour. By using humour, the cartoon effectively conveys the message that such bullying behaviour is not acceptable and should not be tolerated. The cartoon satirises Nigerian politicians' constant harassment of media practitioners, with the intention of eliciting a change of attitude.

2.5 Neologisms

Neologisms are created through a variety of morphological processes in language, including compounding, clipping, hybridisation, affixation, and loan translation (claque) (Khan 2013). Various forms of neologisms are derived words, transferred words, abbreviations, acronyms and “abbronyms.” Neologisms entail the novelty of words to attain humorousness (Manea 2019). The following figures illustrate the instances of deployment of neologisms to create humour in Nigerian newspaper political cartoons.

Figure 8 exemplifies how humour can be generated through the word-formation process of blending. The word-formation process of blending, as demonstrated in Figure 8, is an important aspect of language creation and evolution. In this instance, the blending of the words “pounding” and “pandemic” creates a humorous expression that captures the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession on the people of Nigeria. The nominalised verb “pounding” is melded with the nominal

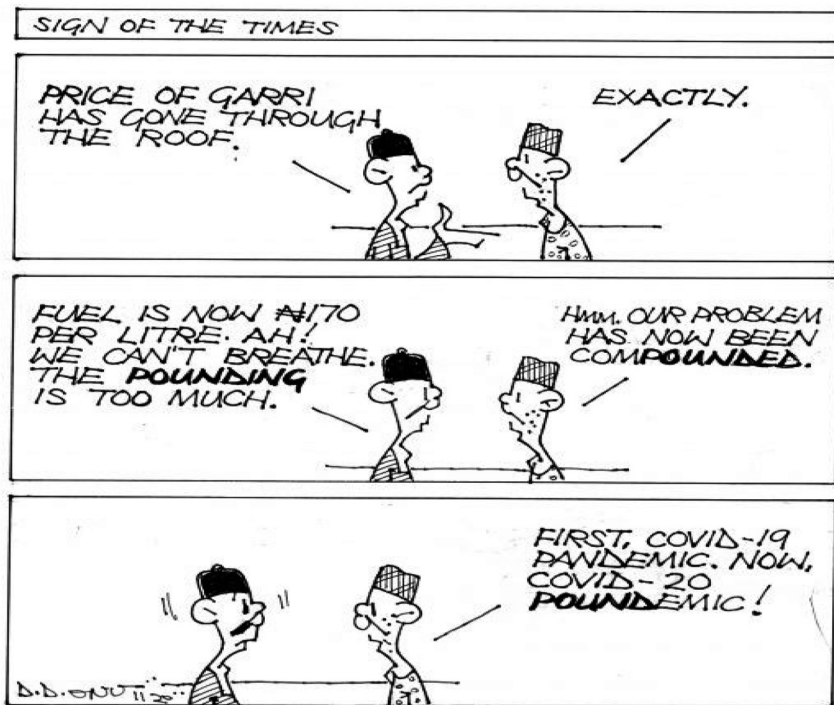


Figure 8: The “pounding” effect of the “compounded” problem brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. (*The Guardian* 17 November, 2020).

“pandemic” to create the humorous expression “COVID-20 poundemic”. Through blending, the new word that is created provides a means of expressing complex ideas and situations in a concise and humorous manner. The instance of neologism in Figure 8 highlights the importance of humour in the language-creation process.

The cartoon’s temporal context is November 2020, a time when the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated economic recession were having a significant impact on the people of Nigeria (Ajemba 2022). One of the interlocutors starts off by saying, “price of garri has gone through the roof”, referring to how expensive garri has become. In Nigeria, one of the staple foods is garri or granulated cassava. An increase in the price of garri is frequently a sign that the inflation rate is rising. The interlocutor also mentions the hike in the pump of Premium Motor Spirit (PMS), otherwise known as petrol, which had risen to ₦170 (*The Guardian*, 13 November, 2020). It was, therefore, a challenging time for the poor masses.

The situation is, however, depicted in a humorous light by switching the monophthong /æ/ with the diphthong /au/ in the word “pandemic” to produce a new word “poundemic.” The expression “COVID-20 poundemic” can be interpreted as the “pounding” effect of the “compounded” problem brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying economic downturn. This use of humour helps to mitigate the negative effects of the situation and provides a source of comfort and relief for the readers.

The humour in Figure 9 is based on the use of a technique known as a pronounceable abbronym. Odebunmi (2001) coined the term “abbronyms” to describe abbreviation and acronyms because the two terms are hard to differentiate. Abbronyms are letters that signify a set of letters, words, or phrases that may or may not be pronounceable (Odebunmi 2001). In this particular cartoon, “CANE” is used as a humorous and pronounceable abbronym for the expression “Calm, address, negate, educate.” The cartoon revolves around the events of the #RevolutionNow movement, which was organised by Omoyele Sowore in 2019. Omoyele Sowore, the founder of Sahara Reporters, is a human rights campaigner and pro-democracy activist from Nigeria. He established the African Action Congress and contested as its presidential candidate in the Nigerian general elections in 2019 and 2023. Sowore was arrested on the accusations of treason by the Department of State Services (DSS) on 3 August, 2019 for his participation in the “RevolutionNow” protest (*The Guardian*, 6 December, 2019). During a protest in Abuja on 1 January, 2021, he was detained and severely assaulted (*Premium Times*, 5 January, 2021). On 31 May, 2021, Sowore was injured by a police officer while taking part in a demonstration in Abuja (*Punch*, 21 May, 2021).

In the cartoon, a high-ranking police officer asks the President what should be done with the protesters, whom he refers to as “irritants.” The president’s response is that he should “calm, address, negate, educate them”. The high-ranking police officer,



Figure 9: The misinterpreted “CANE”. (*The Guardian*, 10 August, 2020).

however, (mis)interprets the president’s response to mean “cane them thoroughly.” It is the (mis)interpretation that derives from acronym “CANE” that carries the humour potential in this cartoon. It is worth noting that on August 5, 2020, the #RevolutionNow protesters were indeed subjected to a brutal crackdown by security agencies. The protesters were beaten and physically attacked, which further emphasises the humour in the misinterpretation of the President’s words. It could, therefore, be argued that the cartoon uses the events of the #RevolutionNow movement to comment on the larger political climate in the country and highlights the absurdity of the situation through the use of humour.

2.6 Innovative collocations

Collocations are expressions comprising two or more words that conform to a convention typical of a language. In collocations, lexical relations are represented

along the syntagmatic (horizontal) axis (Maghsoudi and Ghandi 2020). Collocations are partially or completely fixed expressions which have developed over time by context-dependent usage. However, Nigerian newspaper political cartoonists creatively tweak word combinations to create innovative collocations, thereby achieving humorous effects. Figure 10 exemplifies the use of innovative collocations in the creation of humour in Nigerian newspaper political cartoons.

The humour in Figure 10 is centred on the innovative collocation “our marriage to poverty is no longer the talk of town; it’s now the talk of the universe.” The nominal group “the talk of the universe” is deviation from the collocational phrase “the talk of the town,” which means a topic that has captured the interest of the local community and is widely discussed. The use of humour in Figure 10 targets Nigeria’s political elite and draws attention to the flamboyant lifestyle they lead, even in the midst of the country’s economic struggles. Despite the fact the country is experiencing a major economic downturn, with a high rate of poverty and unemployment, the country’s political elite continues to live a lavish lifestyle and throw extravagant

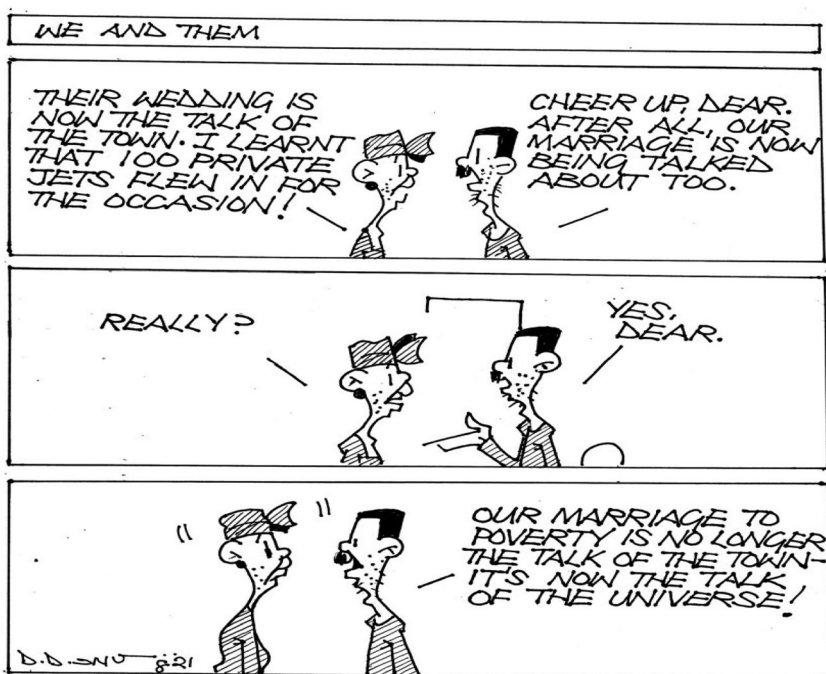


Figure 10: The contrast of extravagance and poverty in the Nigerian socio-political space. (*The Guardian*, 24 August, 2021).

parties. This was seen in the wedding ceremony of Yusuf Buhari, the son of President Muhammadu Buhari, and Zarah, the daughter of the Emir of Bichi, Nasiru Bayero in Kano State. It was flamboyant wedding with over one hundred private jets flying in to the state for the event (*Premium Times*, 19 August, 2021).

At the heart of the humour in the cartoon is the idea of contrast between the extravagant wedding of Yusuf Buhari, son of President Muhammadu Buhari, and Zarah, daughter of Emir of Bichi, Nasiru Bayero, and the poverty experienced by the majority of the country's citizens. The cartoon draws the readers' attention to the fact that political office holders continue to merry and throw lavish parties despite the country's economic austerity. To the cartoonist, if Yusuf Buhari and Zarah's extravagant wedding was regarded as "the talk of the town," then the poor masses' marriage to poverty should be considered "the talk of the universe."

The cartoon's use of the phrase "talk of the town", which typically refers to a subject of widespread conversation, is altered to "talk of the universe" to humorously emphasise the severity of the poverty rate in Nigeria. The cartoon's message is clear: the political elite's flamboyant lifestyle, amidst a struggling economy and a high poverty rate, is a cause for concern. The cartoon is able to bring attention to this issue by using humour. The collocation of the words "marriage to poverty" is an innovative way to describe the reality of poverty in the country, while the alteration of the conventional phrase "talk of the town" to "talk of the universe" emphasises the severity of the poverty rate and the extent of the problem. The humour in this cartoon is, therefore, directed at the political elite, holding them responsible for their insensitivity to the suffering of the masses and their lavish spending in the face of such widespread poverty.

2.7 Sarcasm

In Nigerian newspaper political cartoons, sarcasm is employed through a dissociative attitude to critique or bemoan a scenario, event, opinion, etc. that is echoed and falls short of expectations. Sarcasm is regarded as humorous for two reasons. First, there is a wide disparity between what is explicitly stated and what is meant. Second, the instances of sarcasm in the cartoons emphasise mutually manifest assumptions, which are connected to the cartoonists' background knowledge. Humour is usually produced in the process of mutual vivid manifestness between the cartoonists and the readers (Yus 2016). The following cartoons illustrate the use of sarcasm in the data.

In Figure 11, the declarative sentence "I'm on top of the situation" is a prime example of humorous sarcasm. The utterance uses a resemblance in content to an utterance that may be credited to the Nigeria Police in order to convey a dissociative

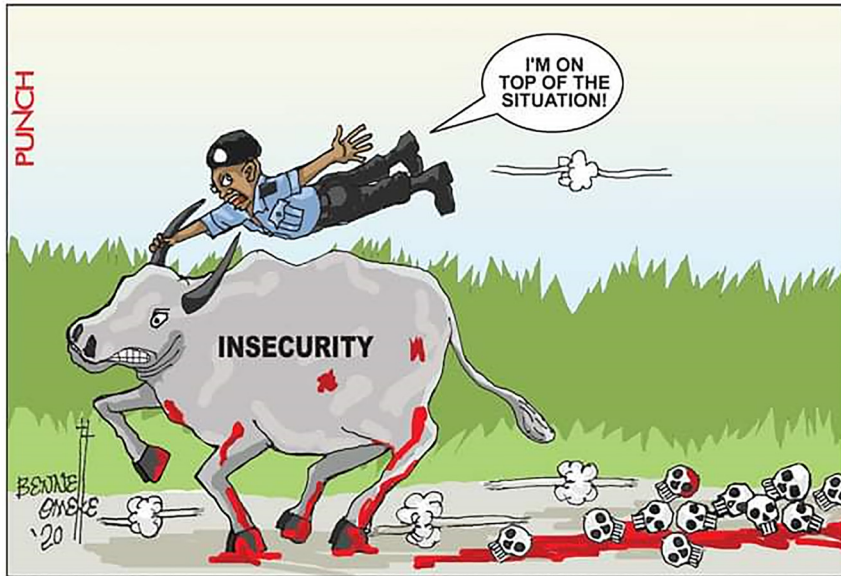


Figure 11: Farcical claims by the Nigeria Police. (*Punch*, 29 October, 2020).

attitude. The cartoon mocks and ridicules the Nigeria Police, which has a reputation for making claims that they are in control of the country's security situation. However, the reality of the situation in Nigeria is far from secure, with frequent cases of terrorism and kidnappings that leave citizens feeling vulnerable. The explicit content of the utterance does not match up with the information that is conveyed through the visual image of the cartoon, creating a clash that gives rise to the utterance's humour. The humour in the figure is foregrounded by the use of implicit irony. The Nigeria Police frequently declares their control over the country's security situation; however, this claim is increasingly becoming irrelevant in light of the widespread insecurity that the country is facing. The visual image of the angry cow, surrounded by the bloodshed and destruction caused by violence, echoes the current state of insecurity in Nigeria.

The claim by the Nigeria Police that they are "on top of the situation" is incongruous, considering the fact that the situation is in fact "on top of them." The incongruity between the police's claim to be on top of the situation and the reality of the country's insecurity is what makes the utterance so absurd and humorous. This type of humour is often used to draw attention to the discrepancy between what is being said and what is actually happening (Yus 2016), and in this case, it serves to highlight the incompetence and inadequacy of the Nigeria Police. The use of humour in this

context is a subtle form of criticism towards the Nigeria Police, allowing the cartoonist to express his feelings towards the situation in Nigeria. By making light of the police's false claims, the cartoonist is able to bring attention to the country's ongoing security problems and challenge the narrative put forth by the authorities. Through humour, Figure 11 highlights the need for greater attention to be paid to the issue of insecurity in Nigeria.

The attention placed on the thought echoes in the content of the sarcastic expression “You boys are giving me a bad name” and the attitude held towards it, rather its propositional content, are a crucial aspect in generating a humorous effect in Figure 12. The use of sarcasm in this utterance creates a high degree of contrast between the meaning of the utterance and the contextual information surrounding it. This contrast serves to amplify the humorous effect, as the readers are able to appreciate the difference between what is being said and what is actually meant. The imagined thought echoed in the propositional content of the ironic utterance “You boys are giving me a bad name” bears a striking resemblance to a thought attributable to Diezani Allison-Madueke, a former minister of petroleum, who has had several corruption allegations levied against her, among which is the 13-count money laundering charges involving \$39.7 million and ₦3.32 billion that were allegedly the proceeds of illegal activities (*Daily Trust*, 22 August, 2022). Despite these allegations, she condemned the depreciation in societal values in a video uploaded online on Sunday, 9 August, 2020, citing the example of the internet fraudsters, known as

*Diezani laments decay in societal values
in Nigeria -News*

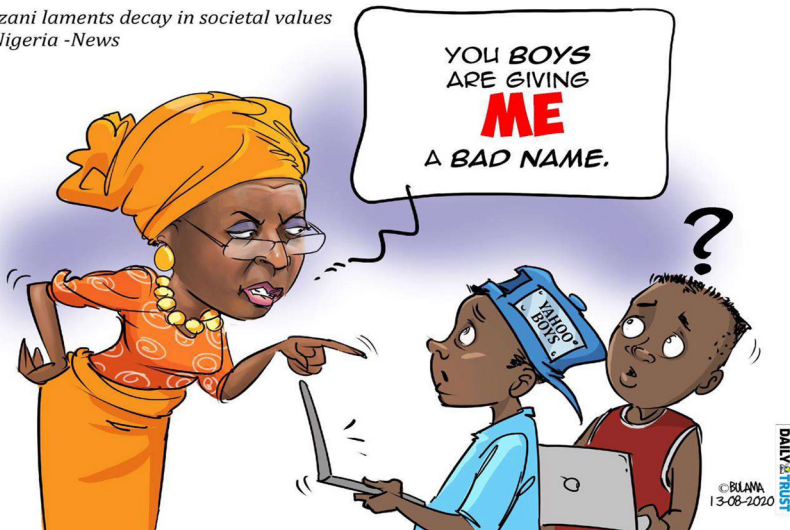


Figure 12: Denigrating of Diezani Allison-Madueke's hypocrisy. (*Daily Trust*, 13 August, 2020).

“Yahoo Yahoo boys” as the source of reinforcement for the negative societal norms in the country. This contextual information serves as the source of the echo for the sarcastic utterance, “You boys are giving me a bad name.” The cartoonist exploits the resemblance in the content of the utterance to express a dissociative attitude of disparagement towards the former minister. The utterance, “You boys are giving me a bad name,” is incompatible with the reality of things, which only strengthens its humorous tendencies. The irony in the utterance is used to criticise the former minister’s actions and to present her as hypocritical.

The readers who are able to recognise the incongruity between what is being said and what is actually happening can appreciate the amplification of the humorous effect of the sarcastic utterance better (Maghsoudi and Ghandi 2020). The use of sarcasm in the utterance is not only a means of generating humour but also serves to communicate a deeper message about the disappointment or frustration with corrupt practices in Nigerian society, especially among the political office holders. The sarcastic tone conveys the message in a way that readers are able to appreciate the sentiment through the thought echoes in the content of the utterance.

3 Discussion of findings

Humour is deployed in Nigerian newspaper cartoons to reflect three discourse issues – misgovernance, corruption, and insecurity. This finding aligns with Akinola’s (2018) argument that linguistic humour techniques are influenced by socio-political contexts, as humour has the capacity to provoke amusement by satirising the socio-economic and political challenges in society. The discourse issues are projected by the cartoonists through the use of six linguistic techniques of humour: exaggerations, humorous metaphors, distortion of formulaic expressions, neologisms, innovative collocations, and sarcasm. These techniques are consistent with those identified by Attardo and Raskin (1994), but with some modifications to cater to the uniqueness of Nigerian newspaper political cartoons.

The linguistic techniques of humour deployed in the cartoons are foregrounded by such linguistic pointers as graphology, creative application of morphological processes, varied syntactic structures, stylistic deviations, and violations of collocational preferences. Additionally, the techniques are realised through script oppositions, such as normal/abnormal, possible/impossible, and actual/non-actual, as well as linguistic knowledge resources, which are responsible for information distribution along the cartoons’ texts and visuals. The finding that humour is driven by the use of linguistic techniques aligns with Schwarz’s (2010) argument that the deployment of linguistic features in humorous texts facilitates the conveyance of

humour to the audience. This assertion is supported by Ogoanah and Ojo (2018), who contend that linguistic techniques in humorous texts enhance amusement.

4 Conclusions

This study has explored the linguistic techniques employed in Nigerian newspaper political cartoons to humorously criticise political figures and events. Utilising Attardo and Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humour, it identified six key semiotic humour techniques – exaggeration, humorous metaphor, distortion of formulaic expressions, neologism, innovative collocation, and sarcasm. These techniques project three discourse issues – misgovernance, corruption, and insecurity. While previous research focused on ideological aspects, this study fills a gap by exploring the linguistic dimensions of humour in political cartoons. Thus, the projected assertion, “silence is the best answer for a bully” represents the characterisation of the members of the political class (in Nigeria) as bullies. The masses, therefore, use the avenue of cartooning in Newspapers to lampoon the political class. By shedding light on these techniques, this paper has provided an understanding of how humour is employed to comment on societal issues, contributing to the broader discourse on political satire in Nigerian media.

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Bionotes

Ayo Osisanwo

University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria
 Leuphana Universität, Lüneburg, Germany
ayosidelexus@yahoo.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5365-0926>

Ayo Osisanwo, *PhD.*, is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and a Senior Researcher at the Institute of English Studies, Leuphana Universität, Lüneburg, Germany. He is a Postdoctoral Fellow of the African Humanities Programme (AHP) of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), New York, USA; a 2020 Grantee, Remote-mentorship, African Humanities Program (AHP) of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), Department of Linguistics, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; and a Fellow of the Georg Forster Fellowship for Experienced Researchers, Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Germany.

Lekan Atoloye

University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria
lekanatoloye@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5337-2772>

Lekan Atoloye holds a PhD in Pragmatics of Humour from the Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan. His research interests include syntax, genre studies, educational linguistics, stylistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics.