

# The language of Nigerian stand-up comedy

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## Abstract

*Nigeria is complexly multilingual. Arising from this, Nigerian stand-up comedians employ various linguistic strategies to communicate with their audiences. This research investigates the peculiarities of language use in Nigerian stand-up comedy by analysing patterns of code choices in the comic performances of four comedians. Because the stand-up comedy industry is predominant in Southern Nigeria, the comedians chosen for this study represent the three geopolitical zones of southern Nigeria. The data analysis indicates that (1) although Nigerian stand-up comedians primarily use Nigerian Pidgin (NP), they also employ language alternation and code-switch between NP, English, and various indigenous languages. (2) NP is mainly used in the oral medium. Consequently, features of orality: repetition, parallel structures, anaphora, lexical cushioning, semantic extension, metaphoric imagery, sentence fragments, and rhetorical devices are other dominant features of Nigerian stand-up comedy.*

*Keywords: language alternation, stand-up comedy, Nigerian Pidgin, code-switching, orality.*

## 1. Introduction

Stand-up comedy is a genre of popular culture expressed through language and embodied actions. It has become quite pervasive in Nigeria since the mid-1990s when it entered the country's entertainment scene producing outstanding performers and artistic productions that have kept the populace laughing. The primary peculiarity of Nigerian stand-up is its use of the highly comedic Nigerian Pidgin (henceforth referred to as NP) and code selection, including code-switching and language alternation. Adetuyi et al. (2018, p. 1) suggest that NP's high comic value in Nigerian stand-up comedy projects from the ambience of relaxation, informality, and camaraderie it creates between the comic and the audience. The preceding suggests that NP, essentially detached from the sociolinguistic rigours of formality associated with Standard Nigerian English, has unofficially appropriated the more significant chunk of the domain of stand-up comedy (cf. Wilkinson 1986). Raheem (2018, p. 80) and Filani (2018, p. 5) observe

that NP is overwhelmingly the preferred language with which Nigerian stand-up comedians ply their trade. Thus, the language (NP) can aptly be described as “the official language” of Nigerian stand-up comedy (2018, p. 80). Raheem observes that the language unifies Nigerians from different backgrounds because it is ethnically neutral.

Consequently, the audience connects with the comedian because NP is the favoured language of informal inter-ethnic communication, especially in southern Nigeria. In contrast with its low esteem in the past, the language has acquired trappings of prestige as its utility value has been entrenched by its use in news broadcasts, religious sermons, and in the print media (Emama, 2017, p. 2). Researchers on Nigerian stand-up comedy note that comedians are mostly university graduates and are competent users of standard Nigerian English. However, they ply their comic acts in the acrolectal sociolect of NP, which they code-mix with English (Filani, 2016; Raheem, 2018). NP, an indi-exogenous language, is used in informal communication while English, an exogenous language, is used for formal communication (Oyeleye, 2005, p. 2). The preceding indicates that the preference for NP in Nigerian stand-up comedy is primarily driven by the sociolinguistic need to establish in-group identity and cultural affinity between the comedian and the audience. By telling their jokes in NP, stand-up comedians communicate with their audience as equals; conversely, if the comedians ply their comedic acts in English, they communicate with the audience as superiors.

This research analyses stand-up comedians' use of NP, code selection: code-switching and language alternation, and rhetorical devices to foreground how incongruities and absurdities are created in Nigeria's socio-economic and political landscape to elicit laughter. This study also identifies orality as central to the ability of the comedian to create humour through comic acts. Orality is critical because NP is primarily used in the oral medium. Features of orality in the study include repetition, parallel structures, anaphora, lexical cushioning, semantic extension, metaphoric imagery, and sentence fragments. In this paper, the study of the language of Nigerian stand-up comedy is undertaken under three broad subsections. These are NP, code selection, and rhetorical devices.

## **2. Use of NP**

In Nigeria, NP is not monolithic. NP is classified based on lects measured in terms of variations in patterns of NP speech using the cline of the influence of the speaker's level of education. Some argue that NP is chaotic and not definable using a lect-based classification (Deuber, 2006). However, the sociolinguistic literature supports the use of education-mediated variations in NP. For instance, Agbo & Plag (2020, p. 151, 164) assert “that the use of variants” in the NP/ English continuum “is not randomly distributed over speakers” and that “particular clusters of speakers use particular constellations of variants.” They conclude by stating that:

The continuum represents the variable use of language, ranging from the basilectal (the variety that most diverged from the standard language) to the acrolectal (the standard, prestigious variety), with the mesolectal (intermediate varieties) between the basilectal and the acrolectal. The implicational hierarchy implies that there is no random use of forms from the two extreme poles; rather, speakers use forms that are more related than forms that are wide apart. Speakers are thus customarily associated with one lect but can also navigate to neighbouring lects to varying degrees.

It is an established sociolinguistic fact that education and social class are key variables that affect choices in language use and that they are accurate biometrics of identity (Faraclas, 2008; Coupland, 2007; Balogun, 2013; Mowarin & Emama, 2020; Braimoh, 2022). NP has three sociolects: the basilectal, mesolectal, and acrolectal. Those in rural areas with limited formal

education use the basilectal sociolect. Users of the mesolectal variety usually have average education and mostly live in urban areas. This sociolect is the most pervasive. In speech communities like Warri and Sapele, the vast majority of the users of NP use the mesolectal sociolect. This sociolect is at the core of the emergence of the language as a Creole (Bakker, 2009, p. 132). The third is the acrolectal sociolect. The educated are the primary users of this sociolect. It is the closest sociolect to Standard English. A peculiar feature of this sociolect is that its speakers frequently code-switch between NP and standard Nigerian English. Competence in NP varies among stand-up comedians. Therefore, some comedians use the three sociolects while some mainly use the acrolectal sociolect, as shown in the analysis on the use of NP below.

## **2.1. Akpororo (2019)<sup>1</sup>**

This is the only joke that is performed almost entirely in NP. The context-in-the-joke is the futile efforts made by two individuals to buy chicken on 24th Dec. 2019 for their families' Christmas Day celebration. The first buys two eggs instead of two chickens, and the other requests a deformed or poisoned chicken instead of a healthy one. In this joke, humour is centred on the incongruous reasons proffered to rationalise their choices. Humour is generated based on the absurd rationalisation and tacit awareness that economic challenges prompted their choices.

The joke begins with an eliciting act “area! area! Warri people, una dey here?” (Area. Are people from Warri here?). The comedian uses this strategy to capture the attention of the audience. The audience responds by saying: Hey! Hey! (Yes! Yes! We are here). Filani (2016, p. 89) defines eliciting acts as “requests and interrogative structures directed to the audience in a performance.” This is also similar to Okpewho’s (1992, p. 259) “call and response.” The call and the response are necessary to arouse the “audience interest and emotions” and “to create an aesthetic experience” through a “careful and brilliant use of language” (Sekoni, 1992, p. 87). Akpororo’s deployment of the eliciting act energises and stimulates the interest of the audience. The context-in-the-joke and the incongruity in the joke are mainly in NP, as shown in the extract below:

NP: For Okoko, one woman gada money gada money e no fit buy fawol. E just buy two egg (laughter). People ask am wetin im wan take egg do. She say no bi fowl dey inside? (*Frowns. Laughter*). No stress me o!

English: At Okoko town, a woman who could not afford to buy chicken bought two eggs instead. When queried, she asserts that each egg is equivalent to a chicken since, biologically, a chicken is hatched from an egg. What elicits laughter from the audience is the reason the woman gives for buying eggs instead of chickens. She ignores the primary reason for her inability to buy chicken (poverty). She elicits laughter by equating two eggs with two chickens, even though an egg and a chicken are physically different in size and monetary value.

The same incongruity is at play in the case of the male customer who demands a sick chicken or one that is injured from an accident instead of a healthy one, as the extract below shows:

NP: One man gada money go market. He ask how dem dey sell chikin. Dem say na N12, 500. He kom ask: “you get the one wey motor jam or the one wey dem poison”? Dem ask am why? He say: ‘na dat one my family dey like’. (Laughter.)

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<sup>1</sup> [https://youtube/WB\\_sb-bQ9f8](https://youtube/WB_sb-bQ9f8)

English: One man saves money and goes to the market to buy chicken. He asks the seller for the price of the chicken. He is told that the cost is 12 500 Naira. He asks the seller if he has an injured or poisoned chicken. He asserts that his family prefers such types instead of healthy ones.

The decision to buy an injured or poisoned chicken is incongruous due to its harmful effect on his family's health. The man was economical with the truth when he asserts:

“Na that one my family dey like”. (It is that type of chicken my family likes.)

The comedian's narration is in the mesolectal sociolect. The lady's use of 'fawol' instead of chicken foregrounds her use of mesolectal sociolect. The male customer also uses the mesolectal sociolect when he used 'wey motor jam' instead of 'wey get accident' in the question: What is imperative to him is that his family eats chicken on Christmas day, even though the entire family might fall ill or even die after eating the meal prepared with unhealthy chicken.

You get the one wey motor jam or wey dem poison? (Do you have one that has had an accident or poisoned?)

A peculiar aesthetic function of the mesolectal sociolect employed by Akpororo in this joke is that this sociolect is more inclusive regarding audience participation in the jokes. Because of its lexical complexity, the acrolectal or educated sociolect excludes those with primary education and the uneducated speakers of NP from understanding the joke's content.

## **2.2. “Tboss open bobby” (Akpororo, 2017)<sup>2</sup>**

The performance begins with an eliciting act by the comedian. In it, he requests the audience to help him locate TBoss, a famous Nigerian reality TV star, in NP thus:

“T Boss where she dey”? (Comedian strains to search for TBoss in the audience. Members of the audience also look for her. (The camera zooms on her.)

The eliciting act plays an invaluable role in Nigerian stand-up comedy. Okpewho (1992, p. 12) refers to it as “call and response.” It creates a nexus between the comedian, who is also an oral artist and the audience by arousing the interest and emotions of the audience. The comedian employs an appraisal act to highlight the context-of-the-joke. This act requires the audience to recall a scene in the 2017 edition of the Big Brother Naija TV reality when TBoss exposed her gold - chain-adorned breasts. Using NP, the comedian says:

NP: You know sey wetin you carry na bad bobby you come put chain on top of the bobby. You know sey men no dey take eye see bobbi.

English: You know that you (Tboss) have voluptuous and tempting breasts that you further accentuate by adorning them with gold-chain ornaments.

The incongruity of the joke is that the participant-in-the-joke was so excited by the sight of TBoss' voluptuous breasts that he did not feel any pain when his leg was fractured in a motor accident. The participant-of-the-joke, the comedian, and the participant-in-the-joke both use the mesolectal and basilectal sociolects in their utterances above. This fact is foregrounded through the use of 'bobby' instead of 'breast.' An acrolectal speaker of NP would utter 'breast' instead of bobby. The use of the lexical item 'bad' instead of 'fine well well' (enchanting) is also a lexico-semantic feature that contextualises the comedian's utterances above.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://youtube/B-Gu0ljyhR0>

The fact that the comedian engages in code-switching and language alternation through his use of English foregrounds the comedian as adept in using NP since he can seamlessly oscillate between the three sociolects of NP. Akpororo's use of the three sociolects of NP in his jokes contradicts the sweeping generalisations by Nigerian scholars that Nigerian stand-up comedic acts mainly use the acrolectal or educated sociolect of NP (Balogun, 2013; Mowarin & Emama, 2020; Agbo & Plag, 2020; Braimaoh, 2022).

### **2.3. "Na head," Tatafo (Helen Paul, 2017)<sup>3</sup>**

In Tatafo's joke, "Na head" (It is destiny), the comedian uses an aspect of shared cultural semiotics underpinned by the belief that destiny plays a vital role in determining the material success of human beings when she remarks:

NP: You people that say "I go give birth abroad." Tinubu was not born abroad but dem dey beg am to come abroad. Fashola was not born abroad. Omo! E dey go abroad anyhow.

English: people that say, "I will give birth abroad," Tinubu was not born abroad, but he receives regular invitations to visit foreign countries. Fashola was not born abroad, but he travels abroad regularly.

With Tinubu and Fashola as illustrative examples, Tatafo states that giving birth in a Western country does not guarantee that the child will become materially successful if he/she is not destined to succeed. She primarily uses NP to illustrate the success of Funke Akindele, the comedian; Efe, who won the 2017 Big Brother Naija reality show; and Jumoke, the bread seller, who became a model, as shown below.

NP: Efe for Big Brother house no speak English, but everybody follow am. Turn to your neighbour say: na head. (Most of the audience place their hands on their head and utter 'na head.') Funke Akindele read law read read. God call am phew (she gesticulates with her hand) 'Go do comedy.'

English: Efe of Big Brother Naija fame was not good at speaking English, but he had many followers. Turn to your neighbour say: "it is destiny." Funke Akindele read law, but God called her and instructed her: "Go and do comedy (stand-up comedy)."

NP: Jumoke wey dey sell bread and T.Y Bello dey snap picture. 'Kpakam' Picture. Pay Porte carry am. She enter advert and come be model. Some of us don dey the industry so tay (She poses like a model) Do like this. Slim down. No sponsor.

English: Jumoke, the bread seller, was photographed by T.Y Bello. She became a model when her picture went viral. Some of us have been into modelling for years. They have tried several postures and become thin because of the profession's demands. However, they have yet to make any breakthroughs as models.

Tatafo primarily employs the acrolectal sociolect. In the case of Efe's success, the comedian associates speaking NP, the favourite language of informal, cross-ethnic communication, with success. A peculiar feature of the extract above is God's command to Funke Akindele in NP. In the extract on Jumoke, the bread seller, Tatafo dramatises the incredible transformation of Jumoke from a bread seller to a model in NP. She attributes this feat to destiny. She contrasts Jumoke's effortless success with the abysmal failure of trained models. She concludes that the former is triumphant and the latter unsuccessful because of destiny. The futility of the latter is encapsulated in the three paratactic sentences below.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://youtube/U85PIXcHLao>

Do like this. Slim down. No sponsor.

#### **2.4. “My mother” (Woli Arole, 2018)<sup>4</sup>**

This joke is a manifest case of language mixing since NP, Yoruba and English are used by participant-of-the-joke and a participant-in-the-joke. The comedian plays a dual role in this joke. The incongruity in the joke is hinged on a mother’s unexpected acquiescence that her son can remain in London — she initially resisted the idea of his permanent stay — after he sent her a thousand Pounds on the first day he arrived in London. Her volte-face arose from her mistaken belief that the son would continue to send £1,000 daily. Meanwhile, she did not bother to know the source of the £1,000 sent to her, as shown in the extract below:

NP: My mother said, “I don’t want you to waste time in this London. I give you three days. Three days” (pitch to denote command). When I got to London, one of my fans gave me £1,000. I send am to my mother dat day wey I land.

English: My mother said: “I don’t want you to waste time in London. I give you three days. I expect you to return to Nigeria after three days. When I got to London, one of my fans gave me £1, 000 which I sent to my mother the same day.

If Woli Arole’s mother had known that the money her son sent to her was a gift from a friend, she would not have insisted that her son should remain permanently in London. The few NP utterances are however in the acrolectal sociolect. An example is:

I send am to my mother that day wey I land. (I sent it (money) to my mother the day I arrived.)

At the level of lexico-semantics, the words ‘mother’ instead of ‘mama’ or ‘marle’ is associated with the acrolectal sociolect. It is not unlikely that the comedian mainly used the acrolectal sociolect because he is competent in only that sociolect.

#### **2.5. “World class hospital” (Acapella, 2018)<sup>5</sup>**

In this joke, Acapella employs the appraisal act to highlight the senseless act of a government official who built a “world-class hospital” but refused to be admitted there for treatment when he was involved in an accident two weeks after the hospital was commissioned, as shown in the extract below.

NP: These government officials, anytime I catch any of them... (A pause. The comedian raises his right hand pugnaciously at the imaginary politician. Laughter.) One build hospital for Akwa Ibom. He say na world-class hospital. Two weeks later, he get accident. Dem fly am go abroad. Dem no dey treat accident for the hospital?

English: (the comedian demonstrates the beating he will give the politician who built the “world-class” hospital if he encounters him). One politician claims he built a world-class hospital. Two weeks later, he was involved in an accident. He was flown abroad for treatment. Are accident victims not treated at the hospital?

The NP utterances in this joke are typically in the acrolectal sociolect, which is exemplified through the use of the English words ‘fly’ and ‘abroad,’ which have alternative lexical items like ‘carry am’ (carry him) and ‘obodo oyibo’ (white man’s country) in the basilectal and mesolectal sociolects. The lexicosemantic dynamism of NP is a product of the convergence of

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<sup>4</sup> <https://youtube/ObF5TzMT5VIE>

<sup>5</sup> <https://youtube/ObF5TzMT5VIE>

the influences of English and substrate languages. The lexicon of NP has witnessed ‘modifications and remodifications’ by drawing on the rich lexical pool of ‘indigenous languages as well as the contact language (English)’ (Balogun, 2013, p. 1). The use of ‘obodo oyibo’, an Igbo phrase, is evidence of borrowings from the substrate languages. Although English is the primary lexifier, NP borrows words from the aboriginal languages, especially those in southern Nigeria. Words like ‘ikebe’ (buttocks/Edoid), ‘japa’ (emigrate/Yoruboid), ‘aboki’ (friend/uncivilised/Hausa), ‘molue’ (bus/Yoruboid), ‘omoge’ (lady/Yoruboid) are examples of borrowings entrenched in the lexicon of NP. They are intelligible across all varieties of NP. The joke’s incongruity is the government official’s refusal to be admitted into the hospital for treatment. Filani (2016, p. 183) states that the appraisal act “is used by the stand-up comedian to examine actions or inactions of participants-in-the-joke and the social situations from which they have derived their jokes.” The examination, which is a satire, is meant to ridicule or lampoon the government official and hold him accountable for corruption. It is also a call for social change. Satirical exegesis is a motif in many poetic and folk narratives. Abrams and Harpham (2005, p. 284-285) describe satire as “the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn or indignation” and say that “satire derides; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside the work itself.” Highet (1992, p. 26) corroborates Abrams and Harpham’s description of satire and avers that “satire wounds and destroys individuals or groups to benefit society as a whole.” “World Class Hospital” falls within the jocular category as it intended to elicit laughter.

### **3. Code selection**

Code selection is a crucial linguistic device in Nigerian stand-up comedy. It involves the change of language code by the comedian and participants-in-the-joke. The two subtypes of code selection are code-switching and language alternation. Bullock and Toribio (2012, p. 1) define code-switching as “The ability on the part of bilinguals to alternate effortlessly between their two languages.” Code-switching is subdivided into code-mixing, which involves the insertion of a lexical item or a phrase from one language to another, and code-switching, which involves the alternate use of the two languages in a sentence. Myer-Scotton (1993) calls the dominant language in a code-switched sentence the matrix language (ML) and the subordinate language the embedded language (EL) in her matrix language frame (MLF) theory on code-switching. Code-switching sometimes denotes a change in the voice of participants-in-the-joke, like in the case of reported speech. Some code-switched languages in the jokes are NP – English, English – NP and Yoruba – English. On the other hand, language alternation involves using separate languages in two or more sentences.

In Akpororo’s “24th Dec. 2019” joke, the comedian uses NP – English code-mixing to reiterate his assertion that the year 2020 will be a prosperous one thus:

This year 2020, ego sweet. Na me tell una the truth. (This year, 2020, will be prosperous. I assure you)

In the code-mixed sentence, “Na me tell una the truth,” the matrix language (ML) is NP while the embedded language (EL) is English. The code-mixed structure is the noun phrase (NP) “the truth” which is functioning as the extensive complement of the sentence. The code-mixed structure above is also used as an inclusive device by the comedian in terms of audience participation since the highly educated audience with a modicum knowledge of NP will have adequate cognition of the message that the comedian is decimating in the utterance above.

In “TBoss open Bobby,” Akpororo uses code-mixing and language alternation to highlight the therapeutic qualities of TBoss breasts, as shown in the extract below.

NP: He no feel am. T Boss your breast na healer. You heal people for a living. Na as Big Brother finish as he try stand na im he see sey im leg don broke. Na im he hala ‘my leg o!’ Na im dem tell am Na since yesterday dem jam your leg. Idiot!

English: As he was watching the television, his attention was riveted on Tboss’ breasts; his leg was on the road. A passing vehicle crushed it, but he did not feel any pain. The adrenaline generated by the sight of T Boss’ breast desensitises him to pain. A day later, he felt the pain and could not stand up. He was then told that his leg had been broken since the previous day.

Examples of code-mixing and language alternation are extrapolated from the extract above and analysed below.

TBoss your breast na *healer*. (TBoss your breast heals people) (Code mixing.)

You heal people for a living. (Language alternation.)

In the code-mixed sentence, the matrix language is NP, while the embedded language is English since the English noun phrase ‘healer’ is inserted into the NP sentence. Apart from the code-mixing, he replaces ‘bobi’ with ‘breast’ to foreground his change of sociolect from basilectal to acrolectal. In the case of language alternation, Akpororo switched to the use of English (You heal people for a living), most probably for the intelligibility of some members of his audience who have a modicum knowledge of NP, on the one hand, and to highlight the therapeutic powers of TBoss’ breast on the other hand. However, the healing power of TBoss’s breast is transient since after the excited viewer finished watching the scene, he felt pains in his broken leg and could not stand up, making him shout: “My leg o.”

There are also code-switching and language selection instances in Tatafo's joke, “Na head.” A Yoruba – English code-mixing is employed by the comedian to highlight the erroneous presumption that children born abroad are more intelligent than those born locally.

Regarding the case of code-switching in the sentence above, Yoruba is the matrix language, and English is the embedded language. Since the matrix sentence determines the syntactic structure, ‘intelligence’ is extra posed to the initial position of the code-switched sentence to fit into the Yoruba syntactic structure.

She highlights the incongruity in the joke with language alternation from NP to English thus:

Local is the way, the truth, and the light.

The comedian employs the language alternation above to contradict the assumption that anybody born in the West has greater opportunities to become wealthy compared to those in Nigeria. She emphasises the importance of destiny by engaging in language alternation in three languages since members of the audience will be competent in at least one of the three languages to understand her, as shown below:

English: It is destiny. It is head.

NP: Na head. (It is destiny).

Yoruba: Ori ni. (It is destiny).



Tatafo foregrounds the importance of success and the role of destiny in achieving it. She mentions the names of two Nigerian politicians (Tinubu and Fashola) who, in her opinion, were made affluent by destiny. She projects this using code-switching thus:

Tinubu was not born abroad but *dem dey beg am to come abroad*.  
Fashola was not born abroad, *omo, he dey go abroad anyhow buy suit for abroad*.

Tatafo's use of code-switched sentence structures to highlight the successes of Tinubu and Fashola foregrounds the comedian's use of the acrolectal sociolect in her jokes since NP – English code-switching is of the peculiar syntactic features of NP's acrolectal sociolect. The matrix clause of each of the two sentences is in English, while the embedded clause is in NP. This is because the main clause is in English, and the embedded clause is in NP.

To create verisimilitude in her characters, Jumoke, the illiterate bread seller who became a model because TY Bello took a snapshot of her, communicates in Yoruba in her interaction with the photographer. Jumoke presumes that TY Bello wants to use her for a money ritual, as shown below:

Se efe fi mi se ogunowo? (Do you want to use me for a money ritual?)

When Jumoke was to be photographed, she saw it as an impediment to her bread-selling business, and she urged the photographer:

Ya foto ni kia kia. (Take the photograph quickly.)

So, the comedian's use of code selection foregrounds meaning in the context of the joke.

There are also many instances of code selection in Woli Arole's 'My mother,' as shown below. Woli Arole realistically portrays his mother's personality by using the appropriate code (Yoruba) to highlight her lack of education and penchant for fervent Christian evangelism. The comedian also engages in code-mixing and language alternation since he speaks English and NP. Two examples of code-mixed utterances are:

My mother na *Aladura* C.A.C. (My mother is a member of incessant prayer C.A.C (church.)

O send one thousand pounds. (You sent one thousand pounds.)

A unique feature of Woli Arole's use of language in this joke is the predominance of three languages: English, NP and Yoruba, which he uses creatively to elicit mirth. The matrix language of the first sentence is NP because the subject and predicator or verb phrase of the sentence is NP, while the embedded language is Yoruba since the only Yoruba word *Aladura* is the noun phrase functioning as the extensive complement of the sentence. In the second code mixed sentence, the matrix language is English while the embedded language is Yoruba since it is only the subject of the sentence "O" (You), that is Yoruba.

Acapella's use of code selection in 'World Class Hospital' illuminates the context-of-the-joke. Acapella uses the rhetorical device of reported speech to foreground the politician's false assertion of the quality of the hospital in a code-switched utterance thus:

He sey na *world-class hospital*. (He said that it is a *world-class hospital*.)

The voice of the main participant-in-the-joke, the politician, highlights the hospital's high quality. The comedian employs code-mixing to highlight the newness of the hospital before the politician was involved in an accident, as shown below:

Two weeks later, he get accident. (Two weeks later, he was involved in an accident.)

The matrix language (ML) is NP, while the embedded language (EL) is English, which is mainly an extra-posed noun phrase functioning as an extensive complement. However, the content of the embedded language is of utmost significance in the utterance because a hospital, commissioned two weeks before the politician had an accident, ought to have brand new ‘world-class’ equipment and the requisite health personnel to treat the injured politician conveniently.

Language alternation is the leading cause of code selection in Acapella’s joke (stolen mace). As shown below, the comedian engages in language alternation as his utterances oscillate between NP and English.

English: I was amazed when I heard on the news that they stole the mace. (*Laughter*). How can they steal the mace? (*Comedian frowns*)

NP: Dem sey thieves come National Assembly come steal the mace. National Assembly na bus stop? (*Laughter*).

Interpretation: I was amazed when I heard that the mace was stolen in the news. How can they steal the mace? Is National Assembly a bus terminal?

In the extract above, two utterances, in NP and English, are uttered by the comedian. The comedian’s use of language alternation foregrounds him as a balanced NP – English bilingual. Hence, audience members with modicum knowledge of either language have adequate cognition of the content of his joke on ‘stolen mace.’

#### **4. Rhetorical devices**

In this study, rhetorical devices encompass rhetoric and figurative language. The stand-up comedians in this study employed different rhetorical devices to foreground the themes and incongruities of their jokes.

In “24<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2019,” Akpororo employs several rhetorical devices to foreground the economic challenges bedeviling Nigerians and the heartrending choices they are compelled to make because of poverty. The comedian employs clausal repetition to illuminate the vain effort made by the lady to raise money to buy chicken, as shown below.

For Okoko, one woman gather money gather money. E no fit buy fawol.  
(At Okoko, one woman/saved/money, saved/money but she could not buy chicken.)

The parallel structure “gathers money, gather money” and the negation in the verb phrase (no fit buy) foregrounds the vain effort of the lady.

Akpororo uses dialogue and voicing to create verisimilitude in the acts of the lady who bought two eggs and the man who requested an injured or poisoned chicken.

When people asked the woman who could not buy a chicken what she wanted to do with two eggs, she responded?

No be fawol dey inside?	No dey stress me o!
Is it not chicken that is inside?	Don’t disturb me. IMP

The lady's negative rhetorical question foregrounds the fact that it is 'Fawol' (Chicken) that is in the egg. The use of the emphatic marker 'o' and the exclamation mark (!) show that the lady is convinced that by buying two eggs, she has essentially bought two chickens since it is the egg that eventually hatches into a chick and grows to become a cock or hen. The contradiction in the joke is that an egg and a chicken have different taste, size, and, most importantly, nutritional load. The comedian's strategy underscores that most Nigerians make poverty-induced culinary choices and sometimes justify such choices using delusional logic.

Although ludicrous and dramatic, the conversation between the man and the chicken seller utilises aspects of shared socio-semiotic knowledge about endemic poverty in the Nigerian space. When told that chicken is N12, 500, the man asked:

You get the one wey motor jam or the one wey dem poison?  
(Do you have any that has had an accident or poisoned?)

When queried on the oddity of his preference, he replies:

Na dat one my family dey like. (That is what my family likes).

Although comic, the exchange, like the preceding one about chickens and eggs, depicts the stark realities of the risky, poverty-induced nutritional choices that many Nigerians make arising from the crunching level of deprivation in the country. The joke resonates with the audience because of shared experiences of Nigeria's socio-economic landscape.

The comedian also employs semantic extension or multi-functionality, one of the lexicosemantic processes employed by NP to increase its lexical inventory (see Mowarin, 2009, p. 57-66). Two instances of semantic extension are:

This year, 2020, E go *sweet*. (This year, 2020, will be prosperous.)

The lexical item *sweet* is polysemous. In English, 'sweet' denotes gastronomic satisfaction created mainly through tactile sense or imagery. Here, *sweet* is extended semantically to denote happiness and success regarding the year 2020. The imagery projected is visual sense. In addition, *sweet* is used to contrast 2020 with 2019, a 'bitter' year since it had been replete with hardship, suffering and poverty. The other example of multi-functionality is the use of 'Fawol' in:

Last year 24<sup>th</sup> people no fit buy *fawol*.

'Fowl' is a polysemous word that can mean 'chicken,' 'cock,' 'hen' or 'chick.' In the above context, 'fawol' does not denote chick, but it can be chicken, hen, old layer or cock. However, these fine distinctions should be present in NP lexical inventory.

Using parallel structures, the comedian employs the appraisal act to describe the attributes of TBoss's breast.

NP: You know sey wetin you carry bad.  
English: (You (TBoss) know your breasts are enchanting.)

NP: You come put chain on top of the bobby.  
English: (You (TBoss) accentuated your breasts by adorning them with a gold Chain)

The two parallel structures have an identical anaphoric subject (You). The comedian's use of anaphora projects the enchanting attributes of TBoss's breasts. When the viewer saw TBoss's

gold-chain adorned breast on the television screen, he exclaimed with an excited gaze and accent:

E don red see bobi (This is incredible! See breeaasst.)

Using visual imagery, the comedian highlights the euphoria created by TBoss's sensuous and voluptuous breasts. In the participant-in-the-joke's state of euphoria, a vehicle ran over his leg, which was broken, but he was numb to the pain due to the enchanting state of TBoss's breasts. Akpororo then employs metaphor to highlight the mystical and therapeutic powers of TBoss's breast thus:

Tboss, your breast na healer. (Your breast heals.)

In the metaphor "Your breast na healer," the source domain 'your breast' is mapped to the target domain, a balm, a mendicant 'healer' to highlight how the man became numb to his broken leg's pain due to the sight of TBoss's breasts. 'Healer' is also an English word code switched with NP in the sentence to enable the comedian's message about the healing powers of her breast to become more explicit.

Regarding lexico-semantics, the word 'bad' in "You know sey wetin you carry bad." means sensuous or enticing and does not mean unpleasant. It is a single word that performs an antipodal function. It acts as an oxymoron. The effectiveness of the joke relies heavily on the interpersonal metafunction that underpins it. The identity of TBoss provides the shared sociosemiotics the comedian exploits to maximise the effectiveness of the joke. Many Nigerians are avid viewers of the *Big Brother Naija reality show*. The identity of TBoss was shared knowledge as she was a prominent participant in the 2017 edition.

In Tatafo's joke (na head), she refutes the belief that those born in Western Countries have greater opportunities for material success, unlike those born in Nigeria. She highlights this by using phrasal parallelism of the complements of the sentence.

Local is *the way, the truth and the light*.

Using phrasal parallelism highlights the importance of being local rather than foreign. She also topicalises the adverbial clause of condition "if you go local" functioning as an adjunct by extra posing it to the initial position from its canonical, final position to highlight the importance of being local to success in:

If you go local, you can never be hungry.

She foregrounds the importance of success as premised on destiny by mentioning the name of two important politicians, Tinubu and Fashola, whom the white man flocks to for business opportunities. Tatafo also highlights the importance of destiny in Efe, who won the 2017 Big Brother Naija reality show with a cash prize of N30m. She links his success with his predilection for communicating mainly in NP, which is the language of the people thus:

Efe for Big Brother house no speak English, but everybody follow am. Orini. Na head.  
(Efe of *Big Brother* did not speak English but had many fans. It is destiny.)

Tatafo relies on interpersonal metafunction of language, which relies on shared cultural knowledge since she knows that her audience knows the two politicians, Tinubu and Fashola, and Efe, Jumoke and Funke Akindele since they are household names in Nigeria. Narrating a story that the audience already knows is tasking. In such a situation, for a gifted narrator, "mental

structures and pool of symbolism, allusions, historical places characters and deities become for him (narrator) sources of moves or function which he exploits to stimulate and surprise and enrich the imagination of his audience” (Akporobaro, 2001, p. 10). And as Sekoni (1992, p. 88) contends, for the narrator’s oral work that is not alien to the audience to be successful,

He needs a captivating voice and competence and must be skilful in language and gestures, careful and brilliant use of language and musical resources through which he harnesses the audience’s emotion and carries them through the end of the story. The narrator first awakens the audience’s emotions by creating a controversial event involving a character and then stabilises the audience’s emotions by balancing the character’s fortune, perhaps by telling the audience what transpired in the crisis. After this, the narrator depresses the audience’s feelings as the controversy is resolved. The narrator engages in these nuances to create a complete aesthetic experience.

Tatafo expertly incorporates oral narrative technique into her performance by employing the elicitation act to enlist the audience’s active participation, as shown below.

Turn to your neighbour and say: na head.

Filani (2016, p. 189) defines eliciting acts as “requests and interrogative structures directed to the audience in a performance.” Tatafo foregrounds the importance of destiny in the affairs of man. She posits that destiny determines material success rather than fruitlessly toiling at an occupation not sanctioned by the individual’s destiny. She states this using lexical reiteration, as shown below:

Funke Akindele *read law read read*. (Funke Akindele read law incessantly.)

Some of us don dey the industry *so tey*. (Some of us have been in the (modelling) industry for quite a while.)

So, Funke Akindele assiduously pursued an unproductive career in law (read law read read) until God ordered her to go to comedy: her destiny. Likewise, many women pursue a failed career in modelling for a long time ‘so tey’ because they are not destined to be models, unlike Jumoke, the bread seller who became a model with one snapshot.

Woli Arole used different rhetorical devices to illuminate the subject matter of his joke. Woli Arole’s mother’s resolve that her son should not spend more than three days in London is foregrounded by the comedian’s assertion that his mother is a devoted white garment church member known as *Aladura* with the lexical reiteration or lexical parallelism thus:

I give you three days.  
Three days.

The emphasis on three days and the fact that she is a devoted Christian reinforces her adamant determination to adhere to her order. However, when her son sends her £1,000 on the day he arrives in London, she quickly rescinds her decision. She requests her son to kneel wherever he is and prays for him. Arising from mercenary considerations, she instructs him never to return so that he will continue to send her money. The comedian employs antithesis to highlight the contrast in his mother’s sudden change of mind. Abrams and Harpham (2005, p. 14) state that “antithesis is a contrast or opposition in the meanings of contiguous phrases or clauses.” The antithesis is shown below:

I give you three days. Three days.  
O ni de mo. (You will not return.)

Woli Arole's mother's command: O ni de mo. (You will not return) is a conversational implicature. In it, she implies that her son will send pound sterling daily as long as he is in London. Mey (2006: 45) defines conversational implicature as "...something which is implied in conversation, that is, something which is left implicit in actual language usage."

Acapella highlights the ludicrous act of a government official who built a "world-class hospital" but refused to be admitted there for treatment when he was involved in an accident two weeks after the hospital was commissioned; instead, the politician was flown to London for treatment. Acapella lampoons the outrageous act of the politician with the rhetorical question:

Dem no dey treat accident for the hospital? (Are accident victims not treated at the hospital?)

Abrams and Harpham (2005, p. 315) define a rhetorical question as "a sentence in the grammatical form of a question which is not asked to request information or to invite a reply but to achieve a greater expressive force than a direct assertion."

To foreground the substandard quality of the new ultramodern hospital, the comedian topicalises an adverbial phrase of time. He extraposes the adverbial by moving it from its usual final position to the front of the clause.

Two weeks later, he get accident. (Two weeks later, he was involved in an accident.)

Yu (2014, p. 2594) asserts that "topicalisation is a process by which a constituent is made into the topic of a sentence by being moved into a more prominent position at the front of the sentence." The extraposed adverbial phrase is in English and is code-switched with NP to enable all members of the audience who are not competent speakers of NP to understand it. In addition, the *world-class hospital* uttered by the politician is verbal irony because the quality he ascribes to the hospital is at variance with reality. Abrams and Harpham (2005, p. 165) define verbal irony as: "(...) a statement in which the meaning that a speaker implies differs sharply from the meaning that is ostensibly expressed."

The irony of the politician's baffling act is that Nigerian politicians do not repose confidence in the amenities they provide to their constituents primarily because they compromise quality for pecuniary gain. Finally, the comedian's interrogative utterances and non-verbal cues constitute conversational acts to elicit audience participation. McNeil (2009, p. 303) states that non-verbal cues and gestures "have the property that stokes and synchronise with co-expressive speech."

In Acapella's 'stolen mace', the comedian lampoons the lax security at the National Assembly when he rhetorically says:

National Assembly na bus stop? (Is the National Assembly a bus terminal?)

The imagery of the bus stop in Nigeria as a wild, lawless and insecure place foregrounds the apparent insecurity of the National Assembly. Abrams and Harpham (2005, p. 151) state that imagery is used "to signify only specific descriptions of visible objects and scenes, especially if the description is vivid and particularised."

The legislator's speech in English foregrounds politicians as the elite who mainly use English, an elitist language. The comedian alternates between NP and English.

## 5. Conclusion

Some salient features of language use in Nigerian stand-up comedy — with the comedic acts of four comedians as a case study — are succinctly stated below. The common language of Nigerian stand-up comedy is NP. However, as participants-of-the-joke, the comedians engage in language alternation by speaking in NP, English and Yoruba, as Tatafo did. Some oscillate between NP and English in their verbal arts, as shown in Acapella, Woli Arole, and Akpororo jokes. The NP that the comedians use is not monolithic in terms of sociolects. While Acapella, Tatafo and Woli Arole speak mainly the acrolectal or educated sociolect of NP, Akpororo uses the basilectal, mesolectal and acrolectal sociolects in his jokes. Akpororo's NP is what Akande calls the Waffi (Warri) variety. He grew up in Warri/Sapele community, where NP is spoken as a pidgin Creole. Bakker (2009, p. 139) states that “a pidgin Creole is a restructured language which is the primary language of a speech community, or which has become the native language for some of its speakers.” In addition, the NP that some of the comedians speak is suffused with English code-switched grammatical structures.

In addition, the comedians' use of code selection in the utterances of participants-in-the-joke creates verisimilitude in the characters. Politicians and other influential personalities, the elite, speak English. The Yoruba illiterates speak an indigenous language, Yoruba, in Tatafo's and Woli Arole's jokes. The ordinary people in Akpororo jokes speak NP.

The use of focus marker in NP Na (it is), serial verb constructions, na im (COP+ 3SG POSS), which is the unique relativiser used for cleft constructions and semantic extensions as used by some of the comedians, especially Akpororo, gives the audience an insight into some of the unique features of NP syntax.

This paper undertook a detailed analysis of the use of language by Nigerian stand-up comedians. The study shows that NP is the predominant language used for comedic acts; however, the NP they speak is not homogenous or monolithic regarding sociolects. While Akpororo speaks the three sociolects, the other comedians use only the acrolectal sociolect. The comedians also engage in linguistic hybridisation while speaking NP by engaging in code-switching of NP with English and Yoruba and English, respectively. The syntactic structures of code-switched sentences conform to that of the matrix sentence. The comedians also engage in code selection to distinguish the participants' social status in the jokes. This language strategy creates verisimilitude in the participants-in-the-joke. Since stand-up comedy is mainly in the oral medium, in addition to the fact that NP is used mainly in the oral medium for communication, the comedians employ features of orature which include nonverbal cues and rhetorical strategies of orature like parallelism, imagery and metaphor and sentence fragments to foreground their comedic acts. As creative artists and polyglots, stand-up comedians also engage in the creative use of language, as shown in the study.

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