



COMMUNICATIVE ERRORS AS INCIDENTAL HUMOUR IN SELECTED STATEMENTS OF PUBLIC SPEAKERS

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Abstract:

This paper explored some communicative errors in the statements of former Nigeria First Lady Dame Patience Jonathan (2010-2015). The paper examined specific communicative errors that resulted in incidental humour. The study was based on a corpus of six statements on web-sites presenting humorous bits of information. Each expression was identified and contextualized using the framework of error analysis and incongruity theory of humour. The main results of the study were that the selected expression deviated from the proficient speaker's usage of lexemes, tenses and concord of subject and verb. These deviation provoked dissonance or discrepancies which triggered accidental humour that helped to douse the initial tension associated with kidnap of the secondary school girls in Chibok, Nigeria. It concluded that humour is the trojan horse of communicative errors.

Keywords: communicative errors, incidental humour, Dame Patience Jonathan, incongruity theory, error analysis

1. Introduction

Dame Patience Faka Jonathan, the wife of the former Nigeria President, Goodluck Jonathan (2010-2015), was born in Port-Harcourt, River State, Southern Nigeria on 25th October, 1957. She had her primary education from 1971 to 1976 and secondary education from 1976 to 1980. She went to Rivers State College of Arts and Science for Nigeria Certificate in Education (N C E) Mathematics & Biology in 1989. She worked as

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primary school teacher in Okrika, her native country home for some years before she established a Micro-finance Bank. She had contacts with the grassroots women which she used maximally to advance her husband to limelight.

Dame patience Jonathan was always in the news for some obvious reasons .One of which was her grammatical expressions which were always considered to be filled with blunders. This attracted criticism from the media and the public as many did not expect such errors from such a highly placed person. However, this paper sees errors as positive in language learning unlike the repulsive attitude of the public, errors are considered as inherent parts of Second language (SL) learning situation. They are unavoidable especially as SL learners grow from linguistic adolescence to linguistic adulthood. It makes sense to say from the outset that errors as used here refer to purely linguistic deviations from the standard of the proficient speaker – hearer, which is the result of imperfect knowledge of the code, a transitional form of the language similar to the speakers’ mother tongue and imperfect learning process.

Two main sources of errors are interference from the native language – also referred to as Interlingua factors and developmental factors (Touchie, 1986). Errors of interference occur owing totally to the fact that the mother Tongue (MT) or first Language (L1) influences the target language (L2). The influence is most often noticed at the level of phonology. Intralingua errors such as overgeneralization, simplification among others are the outcome of the difficulty which comes the way of learners of a new system of language.

Errors constitute interest of studies for scholars across the globe (Corder 1967: Corder 1971; Touche 1986; Botha 1987; and Zydatiss 1996). In Nigeria, the engagement with errors is legendary. This is understandable since researchers have consistently shown that learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) have not attained the degree of proficiency that will enable them use the language with minimal errors (Odigbo and Alagbe 2016). According to Adegbite (2008), records of poor performance and usage are given at all levels of education and strata of communication in the society. Even the writing and utterances of the so-called educated elites are not without errors. Some of which violate elementary rules of grammar. It is against this background that researchers have preoccupied themselves with the different sources, patterns and causes of errors (Odigbo and Alagbe 2016).

While the communicative errors have engaged the lips and pens of scholars, the focus has not been so much on the potential of errors to set up a situation conducive for humour, rather the focus has been on the linguistic analysis of error. Likewise, the connection between error and humour is recognized in literature (e.g Chiaro 2010), but specific studies that examine the kinds of errors capable of evoking humour are less

numerous. Hence, this study is significant as it brings to the fore, the capacity (of errors) to trigger humour, the trojan horse of human communication.

This paper benefits from the incongruity theory of humour and Error Analysis (EA). Morreall (1987), Morrison (2012) and Ibraheem (2006) can be regarded as some of the authors associated with the incongruity theory of humour. This theory posits that humour results from the fact that there is a conflict between what the recipient of the joke expects to happen and what ultimately happens. Ibrahim and Abbas (2016) have this to say:

*“Philosophers who support the incongruity
Theory believed that humour and laughter
Are derived from a surprise, or a sudden
Shock... when two incompatible things clash, and the points where we mix the
Two incongruous planes and the “jokes” spark, and
We laugh.”*

It follows therefore that ‘surprise’ or a sudden shock is an essential ingredient for humour. Errors of various kinds like misordering, wrong word choice, wrong verb tense, wrong combination of subject and verb – are potential sources of sudden shock or surprise, which will eventually elicit laughter.

Errors analysis and the appropriate correcting technique are credited to Corder and Colleagues in the 1970’s. Prior to Coder’s legendary article of 1967 entitled ‘The significance of learners’ errors’, errors were considered flaws which were not to be tolerated. In this article, Corder contended that errors are *“important in and of themselves”*.

Humour is an essential ingredient of discourse whether written or spoken. Even political speeches become amusing and entertaining through humour. A person who lacks a sense of humour is in danger of being isolated. He or she might be labeled *“a bore”* a literating work devoid of humour soon becomes shrouded in dust from lack of patronage.

Humour is *“the ability to smile and laugh, and to make others do so... humour takes many forms ranging from the causal level of the joke told to friends to the sophistication of a Shakespearean comedy”* (Walker, 1998,p3 as cited in Ibrahim and Abbas,2015). It is evident from this definition that humour is geared towards the realization of mirth; it is at variance with sadness or gloom, which is anti-human.

Three broad categories of homour have been recognized in literature: jokes, (Snyder, 2011,p51) spontaneous conversational humour (intentionally created by

individuals in the course of social interaction, and incidental humour (Morrison, 2012,p.25), which is the focus of this paper.

According to Ibraheem and Abbas (2015), Nilsem and Nisen (2000) divided incidental humour into physical and linguistic forms. On the one hand, incidental physical humour entails such minor incidents and pratfalls as a shipping person on a banana peel or spilling juice on someone's shirt. On the other hand, incidental linguistic humour takes its root from errors in logic, mispronunciation or misspelling.

Humour serves many different functions. From a strictly psychological stance, Martin (2007) categorized these functions into three: (1) tension relief and coping (2) uses of humour for social communication and influence and (3) cognitive and social benefits of the positive emotion of mirth.

Noted by many theorists over the years, tension relief is a defining feature of all humour (Martin 2007). According to martin, many of the threats to wellbeing experienced by humans come from other people. By making fun of the incompetence stupidity, laziness or other failings of the people who frustrate, irritate and among them and thwart their advancement towards their goals, individual are able to minimize the feelings of distress that these antagonist might cause and derive some pleasure at their expense. It follows therefore that humour is a medium through which pent-up negative emotions are deflated.

As a tool for social communication and influence, Martin has this to say:

"This is the paradox of humour (in social communication)

If one's goal is to strengthen relationships

Smooth over conflicts, and build cohesiveness,

Humour can be useful for those purposes.....if

One's goal is to ostracize, humiliate, or

Manipulate someone or to build up one's own

Status at the expense of others, humour

Can be useful for those purposes as well" (Martin, 2007).

Evident in the tent above is the fact that in social communication, humour can be a double edged sword or a soldiers sabre capable of performing the dual functions of wounding and healing.

On the cognitive and social function of the positive emotion of mirth, the end result of humour, experiments and studies have shown that while emotions such as fear and anger cause individuals to focus their alteration on threats in the environment, mobilize their energies and motivate them to take action to deal with these threat (Levenson, 1994), when people are experiencing positive emotions (resulting from

humour), they demonstrate improvements in a variety of cognitive abilities. For example, they exhibit greater cognitive flexibility enabling them to engage in more creative problem solving, more efficient organization and integration of memory, more effective thinking, planning and judgment and higher level of social responsibility and prosocial behaviours such as helpfulness and generosity (Alice Isen 2003 as cited in Martin, (2007). In sum, the roles of humour are enormous touching virtual every facet of human life. It is therefore worth studying.

2. Method

This study is a qualitative analysis of a number of communicative expressions of the former First lady, Dame Patience Jonathan. Six (6) expressions by the first Lady were selected from internet materials posted on some websites. The selection was done with the express purpose of demonstrating how errors set up a situation conducive to humour. Since language is meaningful in the cultural context, the analysis is done against the situation of use.

2.1 Data Analysis and Discussion

This section is intended to explore the immortal expressions of Dame Patience Jonathan. This engagement is done in specific steps. First, expression which instantiates error of logic is identified. Second, it is contextualized. Third, the error is classified and remediated and last, the incongruity theory is applied to bring out the humorous elements

2.2 Text 1: *“Ojukwu is a great man; he died but his **manhood** lives on.”*

2.2.1 Contextualizing the text

The first Lady was on a condolence visit to sympathize or empathize, as the case might be, with the Ojukwu’s family on the demise of the former Biafran leader. The situation demanded that she utter expressions that would serve as a soothing balm, or breathe fresh life into the family of the bereaved whose loss would have created a painful vacuum. Hence, she resorted to her mental lexicon for a literally carefully worded expression that she perhaps thought would direct attention to the deceased fame, ‘manhood’ that would remain immortal or ‘live on’.

2.2.2 Error Analysis

The error here resulted from word choice and verb tense. It becomes apparent that the first lady is oblivious of the fact that ‘*manhood*’ has a reflected sexual connotation in the

Nigeria cultural milieu. Again, wrong application of tense can be noticed as the speaker did not apply the correct tense to the verb in the sentence. The choice of 'is' shows that the speaker was unaware of the rules of different tense application. The sentence below would have been as harmless as a dove:

"Ojukwu was a great man; he is dead but his legacy lives on."

2.2.3 Applying the incongruity theory

In accordance with the incongruity theory of humour, humour arises as a result of a deviation from what is expected and what actually occurs. The introduction of "*Ojukwu is a great man*" and the part that reads "... *he died*" evoke a certain expectation as to how it will turn out. The mind is prepared for a soothing balm or a succor. Balm that gives fresh heart to the bereaved family. But the revelation of the punch line, 'manhood' that has a reflected meaning, a sexual connotation in the Nigerian cultural milieu makes our expectation to varnish and provokes therefore a discrepancy which triggers laughter.

2.3 Text 2: "...My fellow Widows"

2.3.1 Contextual Background

The first lady gave expression to this vocative while addressing a gathering of widows.

2.3.2 Analysis of Error

The error here is selectional. The first lady made a wrong choice when she chose the epithet fellow. Perhaps the choice was an innocent attempt to make the widows literally see her empathy, or to construct self as one preoccupied with their plight and poised to effect some change. An expression such as the one below would have been appropriate:

"My fellow women"

2.3.3 Applying the incongruity theory

The lexical item 'fellow' necessitates the choice of another group noun to which the first lady belongs. This was the expectation conjured up in the mind of the audience. Again, the revelation of the key final element dashed the expectation of the audience, creating a situation conducive to humour. The first lady could not have been in the same group as the widows as her uttered the immortal vocative. Thus, the audience became pleasantly shocked, erupting in rapturous laughter.

2.4 Text 3: *“It is not easy to carry second in an international competition like this one.”*

2.4.1 Contextual background

Dame Patience Jonathan made this statement while addressing journalists on the achievements of the falconets in the FIFA under 17 female World cup competition. The falconets had come second having come a long way. Perhaps sensing disappointments in the air, the first lady deemed it fit to give exhort and dispel the disappointments that was gathering momentum.

2.4.2 Analysis of Error

Words in English Keep Company (of course, like humans) and learning a word might necessitate learning some other words that go side by side with. The verb ‘carry’ does not select the ordinal adjective ‘second’. Thus, (30 breaks selectional rule through the wrong choice. Below is a well-informed equivalent:

“It is not easy to come second in an international competition such as this”

2.4.3 Applying the incongruity theory

Humour in the text above is triggered by the wrong choice of the verb ‘carry’ which the public see as incompatible with the positional adjective. ‘second’. They had anticipated a string such as *“come second take the second position”* but were shocked or pleasantly surprised to hear *“carry second”*. The result was an air rending laughter.

2.5 Test 4

“Nigeria is a great continent.”

2.5.1 Background

The first lady set out to comment on the greatness of her fatherland.

2.5.2 Analysis of Error

This is a lexico-semantic error resulting from wrong word choice. The lexical item ‘continent’ is a term exclusively reserved for *“each of the main continuous land masses on the earth’s surface, generally regarded as seven in number, including their islands, continental shelves etc.”* Nigeria is not one, Nigeria is a country. This expression would not have attracted the attention of the public if it had been rendered thus:

“Nigeria is a great country”

2.5.3 Applying the incongruity theory

Only the unfufored hears would have remained cool, calm and cofleted when the sentence above found its way out of the mouth of the first lady. Humour is triggered here by the wrong, unexpected and shocking choice of “*continent*”. To describe “*Nigeria*” which is only a subset of West African Continent. The accidental humour would not after arisen if the right choice of ‘country’ had been made. The perceived oddity, a result of wrong word choice, shocked the audience and stage was set for a ‘jaw tearing’ laughter.

2.6 Text 5

“On behalf of 20million, I donate my family”

2.6.1 Background

(5) is syntactically and semantically all formed. ‘*donate*’ requires a non-personal object (i.e selects an expression which does not denote a person). Since ‘*family*’ refers to people, selectional rule is apparently flouted. Similarly, “*on behalf of*” demands a personal prepositional complement, that is, must take an object that refer to people. Since “*20 million*” does not refer to people, we have another wrong choice of lexeme. This perhaps might serve as a striking example for leech’s “*collocative clash*” cited in Bamiro (2013).

2.6.2 Analysis of the humour using incongruity theory

“*On behalf of*” immediately creates an expectation of a personal prepositional complement. Likewise, ‘*donate*’ prepares the mind for a non-personal object. But the collocative clash brought about by the wrong choice of words dispels the expectation and provokes a discrepancy which in turn culminates in laughter. Wrong choice of words set the stage and the sudden shock or surprise leads to humour.

2.7 Test 6

“My husband Dr Goodluck Jonathan and Sambo is a good people”

2.7.1 Background

The former First lady made this statement on NTA Network News

2.7.2 Analysis of Error

Two rules of concord have been violated here:

First, subject – verb concord, and second noun head determiner concord. A double or multiple subject takes a plural verb, e.g “*Peter and John are close friends*”. Thus, since a

double subject is what we have 'are' is the verb that is in agreement with the subject. Again, since the headword 'people' in the complement noun phrase is a non-crust, 'a' is redundant. Put differently, what is required is a zero determiner. The well-formed equivalent is given below:

"My husband, Dr Goodluck Jonathan and Sambo are good people."

2.7.3 Applying the incongruity theory of humour

The listening public expected a plural verb and a zero determiner. The expectation is dispelled with the realization that a singular verb and a redundant determiner had been chosen instead. This therefore provoked an accidental humour.

3. Conclusion

The present paper has analyzed errors as sources of humour as evident in the expression of the former First lady, Dame Patience Jonathan. The analysis vis-a-vis the incongruity theory of humour. The researcher has come up with the following findings: The selected expressions parade different kinds of errors including wrong choice of tense and subject – verb errors. These errors were responsible for setting the stage for the accidental humour that had consistently punctuated her speeches.

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