"Happy wives" and "sad husbands": a decrypting analysis of Covid-19 humorous expressions

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Abstract

The COVID-19 outbreak was declared a pandemic (a global health emergency) following its ravaging spread and increasing death toll that led to the unprecedented multi-sectoral crisis and collateral damage. These, and the 'delay' in the discovery of reliable therapeutic medicines combined to generate rising fears and tension across the globe. To cope with these realities, discourse participants devised humorous expressions to create laughter, ease tension and melt fears. The paper seeks to examine the contextual usage of such humorous expressions used in Nigeria, particularly in Calabar, that denotes the sociolinguistic milieu, and shared knowledge and experience of the interactants. The study adopts Relief and Encryption Theories of Humour because the theories account for the situational appropriateness of the humorous expressions as "coping devices" in coherence with the cognitive, linguistic, situational and social contexts. Data were generated by means of participant observation in on-site and virtual interactions on social media platforms. Findings show that COVID-19 pandemic has exerted irresistible pressure on language resources that stimulated the creation of humorous expressions as coping mechanisms for the consequential circumstance. Specifically, the humorous expressions such as "happy wives", "sad husbands", "side chicks are hungry" among others were regularly and contextually deployed for comic reliefs and cognitive recreations to stimulate laughter in crisis. Linguistically, the expressions are devised English structures and other constructs with codemixed elements derived from the registers of several discourse domains that reflect the Nigerian sociolinguistic environment. The structures are therefore modeled to demystify the pandemic and unify interactants in order to ease tension and cope with the realities of the preventive and survival protocols.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, happy wives - sad husbands, descriptive analysis, humorous expressions, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic created fear and panic arising from its ravaging spread, increased death toll, multi-sectoral crisis and collateral damage across the globe. The scary reality is heightened by the unexpected delay in the discovery of effective therapeutic medicines and vaccines. The pandemic, apart from exerting pressure on the linguistic resources towards the appropriation of expressive creations to communicate the strange experience, also availed interlocutors in the discourse context of the scourge with creative and humorous expressions which they coined as a coping strategy in the health emergency. Nigeria, like other affected nations of the world, is caught up with the health emergency and its attendant linguistic implications. Such creations were applied in Nigerians' discursive practices embedded in pragmatic functions among which were to melt fears, ease tension, create laughter and make people happy amid the crisis. Nigerians have been adjudged to be happy people. For instance, Helliwell, Layard & Sachs (2017), in their World Happiness Report, present Nigeria as the third happiest nation in Africa and ninety-fifth in the world. Nigeria, in the same report of 2018 is placed as the fifth in Africa and ninety-first in the world. On their behaviour during crisis, Sobowale (2020) attests to the fact that Nigerians have a way of creating humour and making themselves happy during crisis. Coronavirus offered yet another crisis-motivated 'opportunity to practise this psychic identity of Nigerians.

Humour is an age-long "established means of releasing stress and tension" (Akinola 2018: 6). From a general perspective, humour is viewed as "something that makes a person laugh or smile" (Ross 1998: 2), or "verbal or nonverbal speech act, often resulting in laughter" (Kim & Park 2017: 243). But more specifically, humorous expressions are classified as "utterances which are identified … on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discursive clues, as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some of the participants" (Holmes & Marra 2002: 67). These clues provide situated sociocultural peculiarities that evoke the implied meanings; making humour an implied, complex and multifaceted phenomenon. As universally conceived, humorous creations in Nigeria appear in "different forms of verbal and nonverbal expressions … with the potential to consciously or unconsciously evoke laughter from an audience" (Oluremi 2019: 68). The social context for the expression of humour could therefore be recreational or crisis-motivated.

Expectedly, coronavirus generated a multidimensional crisis which also stimulated the creation of humorous expressions which were used by Nigerians during the pandemic. They are therefore crisis-motivated cues which are common with Nigerians in challenging times. Crisis-motivated humour is described as "a genre of humour that is specifically meant to offer relief from tension, [and] help deal with difficult and challenging situations, and to soften the impact of difficulties experienced" (Akinola 2018: 14). Akinola's attestation particularly suits the description of the linguistic devices used for psychological motivations during the outbreak and management of coronavirus in Nigeria. Like Flamson & Barret (2013) maintain, humorous constructs are encrypted with pragmatic cues that denote implied meanings of such utterances. Therefore, humour described within this category requires the 'mixture' of some extralinguistic factors to 'unlock' meanings. The factors in this context include the collective experience, shared sociocultural background, common cognitive knowledge and same inferences by Nigerians. The central thrust of the study is an investigation into the peculiar humorous expressions generated and used during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using Calabar as a micro Nigerian city, the researchers rely on the shared sociocultural background as the 'key' for the decryption of the utterances intended to create laughter which were generated from on-site and virtual interactions to decrypt the implied meanings. It is believed that the study will provide insights into the sociocultural and sociolinguistic motivations that delineate and create the

differences in the linguistic choices in the communication of humorous expressions on the same event among social groups across the globe.

1.1. Studies on humour

There are insightful studies into the phenomenon of humour from its meaning, differentiation, conceptualisation and functions across cultures. Psychologically, humour is "a frame of mind, a manner of perceiving and experiencing life. It is a kind of outlook, a peculiar point of view, and one which has great therapeutic power" ((Mindless 1971: 21). In Ross' (1998) study on the relationship between humour and social attitudes, the phenomenon is viewed as (un)expressive cues that create a relief from pain, anxiety, fear and even anger. Humour is "anything that people say or do and is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh" (Abdumajeed & Hameed 2017: 42). Also, Charaudeau (2006), in an earlier study on the categories of humour, asserts that the phenomenon does not necessarily result in laughter (maybe smile), but humour and laughter often go together. It is also perceived as a product of interactional feature induced by fear and nervousness (Partington 2006). In another study, Tsakona (2015) who draws inference from the Greek debt crisis, is of the opinion that (political) humour stems from the activities of an oppressive government. Therefore, humour, as an induced amusement (in many instances) could be a cognitive recognition of an unpleasant social condition.

Scholars have also made inputs on the types and scope of humour which reveal prominent forms on the formal and informal, when compared with studies on the formal typology. This categorisation is based on the incongruous social experiences of the speaker(s) and hearer(s) of the humorous expressions (Chapman 1983; Holmes & Marra 2002; Dynel 2009, 2011; Nereus 2012; Vivona 2014; Akinola 2018). According to them, formal humour is the category prescribed in official events not primarily aimed at stimulating laughter from the audiences. Such events include all national events, official meetings and corporate briefs. They describe the informal typology as an organised platform with a conscious performer primarily aimed at entertaining the audience with motivations such as financial rewards. This is the type often practised in wedding ceremonies, birthdays, comedy shows and television comedy series, among others. The informal category as explicated, is evoked spontaneously for the purpose of teasing the hearer(s). This type is common among friends, couples, teachers to students in class and in a non-enlarged social gatherings. The aim, altogether, is to create a relief that would elicit laughter or smile, and provide release in rather challenging situations. They may be verbal or nonverbal in nature. On the verbal version, Coates restricts conversational humour to "humorous talk occurring in the informal conversations of friends" (2007: 29), but Dynel (2009) expands the scope to include spontaneously created verbal discourses intended to amuse the participants by employing playful frames. Across all cultures, humour is intended to create amusement among the discourse participants.

For the intended amusement to be achieved, participants in such communicative situations must have shared experience which regulate meaning orientation. On this, Holmes & Marra (2002) maintain that intention and interpretation in this regard depend on many clues, some of which are extralinguistic in nature. The notion of humour is therefore a linguistic pointer to the participants' shared sociocultural background and experience (Flamson & Barret 2008). These sociocultural motivations are conceived in the interpretational indicators that provide the clues from where 'other' meanings are derived. Humorous talks simultaneously perform numerous functions and are directed towards the achievement of multiple goals, which are often spontaneous and transient (Mindless 1971; Ross 1998; Meyer 2000; Hay 2000; Martin 2010; Dynel 2009, 2011, 2017; Leslie 2015; Akinola 2018; Oluremi 2019). Humour is believed to function as a coping strategy, it releases tension and fear, promotes peer interaction and solidarity, attains to psychological needs, possesses therapeutic power and enhances

relationships. By these submissions, it becomes a fact that humorous expressions, though communicated through heterogeneous linguistic codes targeted at diverse social contexts and groups, they are universal in nature in terms of the goals and functions they perform.

In Nigeria, there are a few studies on humorous expressions (accessible to the researchers) which explore different dimensions of the phenomenon. For instance, Nneji's (2013) examination of the pragmatic and semantic dimensions of humour in a widely used Nigerian social media platform - "Nairaland", affirms that such expressions are reflections on the shared sociocultural experience of citizens. Also, Filani's (2016) study on Nigerian stand-up comedy, states that comedians' choice of linguistic codes are deliberate discourse strategies to stimulate humorous reactions from the audience. Obadare's (2016) study is rather on humour, silence and civil society in Nigeria, but it provides a decrypted approach to the use of civil society in place of association. The other studies explore the political facet of humour in Nigeria, with the explications that humour in this dimension is created to satirise the political and economic realities of the nation (Akinola 2018; Oluremi 2019). What appears related to this study (although grossly inadequate) are mere media commentaries on Coronavirus which portray Nigeria as happy people (Ali 2020; Sobowale 2020). The studies on humour reviewed above, have no doubt provided scholarly insights into the relief phenomenon, however their thrusts are far removed from the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic particularly in Nigeria. The two commentaries on the subject are mere passive perceptions on the rather 'explosive' hilarious expressions deployed by Nigerians to communicate the preventive, management, coping protocols and sociocultural realities of the time the scourge ravages. This inadequacy created the research gap which the study strives to address. The focus of the study is on the (in)formal humorous expressions particularly collated to accommodate the verbal and nonverbal interactions on the Coronavirus discourse on on-site and virtual domains.

2. Theoretical foundation

The theoretical base of this study is an eclectic one. It takes the amalgamation of insightful postulations from Freud's Relief Theory of Humour and those from Flamson and Barret's Encryption Theory of Humour. Freud's (1991) Relief Theory of Humour (originally published in 1905) stems from the notion that laughter stimulates relief from tension which releases psychic energy. Freud proposes that laugh-producing situations save psychic energy to cope in the event of fear and emotions arising from in-built tension and incongruity. According to the theory, relief of physiological tension enhances sound health, depletes stress and decreases pain. Meyer (2000) criticises Freud's theory's central thrust on the physiological release of tension without an insightful explanation on the communicative effects of humour and goes further to provide some modifications. Meyer's (2000) modifications on the Relief Theory adds that the social functions of the relief of physiological tension and release of psychic energy stimulate the consciousness for the identification of the commonality and shared experience of the participants which 'clarify' and disambiguate the humorous constructs for mutual comprehension. In this scene, the interlocutors become the meaning 'enforcers' of the linguistic norms that delineate the social boundaries in terms of the situational context and social group. Therefore, the communicative effects of the release of psychic tension rest on the participants whose communal bearings set the social boundaries in meaning orientation.

The thrust of Flamson & Barret (2008) and Flamson & Bryant's (2013) Encryption Theory of Humour proposes that intentionally produced humour bears some underlying signals which suggest that the speaker and hearer (audience) share some implied information which is the 'key' that unlocks the encryption-decryption process. Therefore, "the necessary component of humorous production is the presence of multiple, divergent lines of inferences of speaker

meaning. Some of which are dependent on access to implicit information on the part of both the speaker and the audience" (Flamson & Bryant 2013: 54). The intended meaning can only be detected to, by the speaker and listening audience who are orientated with the 'key' to decrypt the utterance. The 'key' is the "background information needed to derive implicatures present in the utterance" (Flamson & Bryant 2013: 53). By this description, the decryption has a selective audience by which meaning is shared. That is to say that "audience members that do not share the cognitive knowledge with the speaker will derive more mundane inferences of speaker meaning unaware of the encrypted information that has been conveyed" (Flamson & Bryant 2013: 57). Through these insights, a humorous expression is seen to have the signification of contextual effects on the situational environment of the participants; that is the audience in the cognitive setting that retains the key. In humorous embellishments (verbal and nonverbal), the situational speaker and audience have the 'key' in the form of a propositional or presuppositional knowledge on the sociocultural norms and shared experiences. The speaker-hearer inferences are encrypted implicatures that require a conscious recourse to the covertly uncommunicated information decrypted by the collective knowledge of the participants' cognitive environment which suggests the contextual effects and their relevance to the audience.

According to Flamson & Bryant (2013), the hilarious colouration of the encrypted phenomenon cannot be detected by the superficial structure. That is, (as this study aims to establish), there could be no obvious relationship between the linguistic choices and meaning, but rather, that which exists between the external content and the disguised meaning, comprehensible by speaker-learner's prior knowledge. In this study, humour is seen as a context-dependent activity with pragmatic implicatures that direct meaning. The thrust of pragmatics is the notion of context which is "the condition that constrains the determination of the propositions of an utterance or the understanding of an event or discourse" (Odebunmi 2016: 13). The context of an interaction depends on "the respective status of the participants, their prior history and connections, the ambience (formal vs colloquial), the mode of delivery (such as tone of the voice), facial and other gestures (e.g. presence of a 'wink')" (Mey 2016: 236). What is often considered prominent in this circumstance is "the priority of socio-cultural and societal factors in meaning construction and comprehension" (Kecskes 2010: 1). Freud's (1991) Relief Theory of Humour and Encryption Theory of Humour (Flamson & Barret 2008; Flamson & Bryant 2013) are significant to the study because the evocation of psychological relief through humorous expressions is a signification of the decryption of the encrypted message by the 'key' embedded in the common experiences shared by the Nigerians.

3. Data and method

Data for the study were generated by means of participant observation in COVID-19 related communicative activities in Calabar, Nigeria. This is achieved through the active participation of the researchers in social media discourse on the subject for a period of ten months (March 2020 to December 2020) within which the pandemic was (is) ravaging in Nigeria. It is established that Nigerians are believed to often create laughter even in tragic situations (Sobowale 2020). They are also known to be the funniest people on the internet which is rekindled by the pandemic which prompted a lockdown across the country (Esomnofu 2020). The period, by every explanation is not a very good time for this model of research that (partly) depend on human contacts and interactions. This is particularly because the extracts of the data generated from the on-site dimension demanded the researchers' involvement in face-to-face conversational activities with the attendant risks. Amid this consciousness and government restriction orders, the investigation was carried out. In conducting the research, 80 expressions with humorous embellishments in the COVID-19 discourse were non-randomly extracted from

the oral interactions in public vehicles, hand washing points, along the streets, hospitals and social gatherings in government approved number. Others were culled from virtual conversations on the social media outlets - Facebook, Twitter, Telegram and WhatsApp. The frequency distribution in terms of the sources of data are as follows: oral interactions 33, Facebook 14, Twitter 12, Telegram 10 and WhatsApp 11 respectively. The collation of the acceptable corpora was made in view of their relevance to the thrust of the study and informed by the fact that the physical and virtual interactants are Nigerians, particularly Calabar residents with shared cognitive knowledge and experience.

4. Results and discussion

The oral and virtual versions were generated in similar circumstances in pragmatic humorous settings. The settings become the macrosocial contexts with the "features of setting/situation and interaction which relate to communicative events within which language is being produced, interpreted, and negotiated [determined by the] level of formality and participants' relationship" (Saville-Troike 2006: 103). The interactional features of the COVID-19 oral and virtual communication cues facilitate their differentiation into discourse domains this study adopts. The domains of humorous constructs are categorised into six headings in consideration of the preponderance of similar registers. Register, according to Richards & Schmidt (2012) is a speech variety used in a profession or people in the same occupation with distinctive words or phrases that differentiate them from others. Formal registers are often associated with academic discourse while the informal type is spontaneously used in casual interactions. The study adopts the latter and its humorous usage discussed in the domains of: family and relationship, sports and transportation, politics and economy, religion and superstition, education and health, and lifestyle and symptomatics, as represented in Tables 1 to VI.

4.1. Family and relationship

The first set of informal registers deployed for hilarious expressions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria are culled from family and relationships. The expressions are contained in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Showing informal registers of family and relationship

S/N	Humorous expression	Linguistic source and realisation	Decrypted meaning
1.	Happy wives and sad husbands.	English	This expresses the happiness of wives who got the desired attention from their (sad) husbands whose freedom have been tamed by COVID-19 stay-at-home order.
2.	Ashawo don turn lepa.	Codemixed elements of Yoruba and Nigerian Pidgin (henceforth NP)	Prostitutes have suddenly emaciated arising from lack of male patronage.

3. & 4.	Sidechicks are hungry and angry; bad market for runsgirls.	English	Unpleasant experience from girls who have transactional sexual relationships with (married) men who are 'forced' to remain at their homes.
5.	Humble husbands and their shakara wives.	Codemixed items of English and NP	Wives have taken pride in the circumstantial loyalty of their husbands.
6.	We are fully in charge.	English	Used to describe married women's mockery of their rival females (their husbands' mistresses) who had been contesting 'control' of their husbands.
7.	From restriction of touching to restriction of movement.	English	Worsening preventive protocol that restricts relationship and freedom of movement.
8. & 9.	I am fully quarantined; Isolation with full option.	English	Staying at home with your boy or girlfriend for contiuous sexual activities.
10.	If you are staying at home with a good wife, you are on airconditioned lockdown, but if you are with a nagging wife then you are on total and asthmatic lockdown.	English	The differences in the pleasurable effects, on the one hand and exacting effects, on the other, that COVID-19 has on husbands.
11.	When the desirable is not available, the available becomes the desirable.	English	Cheating opportunities for unfaithful spouses (girl and boyfriends) made possible by restriction of movement's order.
12.	Nose mask is doing more harm. Men are now taking strange women home.	English	The disguising nature of nose masks.
13.	Our meals are no longer tasteless.	English	Husbands now endure non-delicious meals for fear that their wives may call COVID-19 Task Force to report tastelessly as a symptom.
14.	E be like say Corona na Ebola senior bros.	NP	The severity of COVID-19 over Ebola disease.
15.	Government advised isolation not procreation.	English	Fear of possible geometric population increase arising

			from increased sexual activities during the lockdown.
16	COVID-19 has terminated the appointments of sidechicks.	English	Girls who saw their sexual relationships with married men as full employment have lost the means of livelihood.

Family (and) relationship ties are pivotal in the consequential well-being and happiness of people (Thomas, Liu & Umberson 2017). Nigerians value relationships and a happy family life and can uphold same even in unpleasant circumstances. Also, the Nigerian sociocultural practices value and celebrate patriarchy and are long "immersed in this sociocultural environment of a superior male status and a subordinate female one" (Uwen & Ekpe 2018: 73). The *happy*, *shakara* and *incharge* wives in Table I above are elements that connote a hyper-celebrative signification for women's subordinating status shown by the happy wives against their *sad* and circumstantially *humble* husbands which suggest superiority and offensiveness on the part of the men. As implicitly signified in Table I above, Husbands are *sad* and *humble* because their freedom has been curtailed by government restriction orders just as their wives are *happy*, *in charge* and doing *shakara* because the pandemic has eased the reclamation of their beloved husbands. The expressions expose the paradoxical moderation of the psychological and emotional effects of Coronavirus on *sad husbands* and *happy wives*, *airconditional* and *asthmatic lockdown* and the economic doom it spells for *sidechicks, runsgirls* and *ashawo* while uncovering infidelity on their partners who utilised the opportunity to make do with the *availabl*e but the *desirable*.

4.2. Sports and transportation

Sports and transportation are the next discourse domains where informal registers with humorous colouration were extracted. Expressions from these aspects of human endeavours lend lexical items with humorous intents in COVID-19 related discourse in Nigeria.

Table 2. Showing informal registers from sports and transportation

S/N	Humorous expression	Linguistic source and realisation	Decrypted meaning
17.	Corona strikes like Lionel Messi; its shots are always on target.	English	Nigerians' conviction that a number of COVID-19 patients (deaths) are (were) corrupt politicians and/or their allies.
18. & 19.	What is the premier league result? What are the premier league scores?	English	An enquiry on COVID-19 daily numerical updates as announced by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (henceforth NCDC).
20.	Lagos is on top of the league table while Kano is trailing behind.	English	A description of Lagos and Kano as leading epicenters in Nigeria.
21.	Kogi and Cross River states are on the bench; the two states are on the reserve list.	English	The public notion at the time the two states were yet to record confirmed cases of Coronavirus.

22. & 23.	Cross River State is the last man standing; it is the only state that defied injury in this COVID-19 tournament.	English	Public notion at the time Cross River State was yet to record any confirmed case of COVID-19.
24.	Up Corona!	English	The pandemic 'ability' to set social balance between the rich and the poor.
25.	Food prices are competing with Corona scores.	English	The rising prices of foodstuffs likened to the increasing cases of COVID-19.
26.	With the donation of N10b (ten billion naira) by the Federal Government to Lagos State, other governors will soon brighten their chances in the premier league table.	English	Corrupt governors will stop at nothing to increase their states' COVID-19 figures in order to attract same financial assistance from the Federal Government.
27. & 28.	Corona goals are on the increase, see results o; so, men were busy scoring goals during the lockdown.	English	The increasing pregnancies are believed to occur as a result of the prolonged lockdown where men spent longer time with their lovers.
29.	Corona is a fair player; it only plays friendly matches with innocent children.	English	A signification for the low infection and mortality rate of the virus with younger people.
30.	Let's Coronavirus end in the first leg because second leg is not always funny.	English	The fear of the severity of the second wave of the virus.
31.	The centre referee is good at updating scores.	English	NCDC's resilient in COVID-19 daily update.
32.	The seating arrangement is safe, but na your pocket.	Codemixed items of English and NP	The fewer passengers in commercial vehicles as a preventive protocol is expensive on commuters.
33.	Fat silence at motor parks, even the agberos have obeyed Corona.	Codemixed lexicons of English and Yoruba	Even the bus terminus' touts have fearfully complied with the lockdown orders.

Nigerians are ardent lovers of sports. On this, Victor (2019) affirms that Nigerians are undoubtedly passionate for sports especially football and curiously follow-up local and international competitions. Experience in Nigeria shows a people, especially the youth that are increasingly becoming football fanatics. Some can literally 'do anything' to watch matches and 'defend their clubs' in the event of arguments. By this practice, registers of football are used in the daily interactions among Nigerians during the pandemic. It is this discursive practice that manifests in the deployment of football registers in the COVID-19 humorous expressions. In the context of Coronavirus discourse, the registers manifest meanings that are shifted from the literal versions to the encrypted ones. For instance, *premier league result, strikes, premier league table, on the bench, defied injury, friendly matches* and other laughter-induced items in

Table II above, convey imports that are situationally detached from football game. This meaning displacement also applies to those drawn from the transportation domain which describes the unaffordable fare *na your pocket* and preventive protocol compliance by the daring touts known to be parasitic beneficiaries of park activities described as *even the agberos have obeyed Corona.*

4.3. Politics and economy

Other hilarious expressions are elements that gained entry into the COVID-19 interactions from political and economic discourse. The amusing embellishments in this category are also extracted from the on-site and virtual communicative activities of Nigerians within the context of this study as analysed in Tabe III below.

Table 3. Showing informal registers from politics and economy

S/N	Humorous expression	Linguistic source and realisation	Decrypted meaning
34.	Corona leaders are deadlier than the Coronavirus in Nigeria.	English	Effects of corrupt leaders and managers of the pandemic are seen as worse than that of the virus.
35.	Can we also wear nose mask to prevent corrupt leaders?	English	A rhetorical question arising from the citizens' inability to curb the increasing number of corrupt leaders.
36.	Hoard our palliatives, palliathieves will come greeting.	English	If political leaders hoard COVID-19 palliatives and refuse to distribute them, they will be discovered and carted away by 'thieves', hence the creative coinage palliathieves.
37.	Birds are at their nests for once, Coronavirus has severed the wings of flying politicians.	English	The inability of politicians to board aircraft arising from flight restrictions within Nigeria.
38.	Our politicians are no longer sick.	English	The portrayal of the frequent feigning of medical tourism by the politicians as conduit pipes for stealing the common wealth.
39.	Our politicians have refused to be admitted into the hospitals they built.	English	Infected politicians shun public hospitals which they starved of funds and facilities and prefer treatment at private hospitals.
40.	Foreign hospitals can now rest in peace.	English	The momentary cessation of Nigerian medical tourists arising from international flights' restrictions, hence the peaceful rest for such hospitals.

41.	The rich are afraid to go out.	English	The rich who have everything to stay at home are afraid to go out for fear of contracting Coronavirus.
42.	Coronavirus is fighting corruption better than the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC).	English	The rate at which corrupt leaders are contracting the virus is seen as an impartial karmic response.
43.	The only result politicians cannot rig in Nigeria is the Corona polling booth in their balcony.	English	Politicians' inability to falsify Coronavirus infections in their household.
44.	Coronavirus will one day disappear like the political Chinese doctors.	English	The sudden disappearance of a supposed team of Chinese paramedics rumoured to have been invited by the government for medical assistance.
45.	The youths have started paying Corona courtesy visits on the politicians.	English	The increasing wave of 'looting' and destruction of properties owned by politicians in the post #EndSARS protest.
46.	Nigerians were locked down before the lockdown.	English	The COVID-19 lockdown is the extension of hardship experienced by Nigerians.
47.	The plandemic is to meet the looting target.	English	The conviction that the increasing 'cooked' figures of confirmed cases is to attract financial donations which, it is believed, maybe certainly' looted.
48.	Our leaders are COVID-19 scavengers.	English	Leaders scampering for the stealing of every bit of COVID-19 donations.
49.	When the vaccine finally comes, our leaders should lead by example.	English	The prediction that the initial vaccine could be poisonous, so the leaders should take the lead in being vaccinated first.
50.	Hotels and brothels don dey grow bushes.	English and NP	Lack of patronage has taken a gloomy economic effect on the managers and users of hotels and brothels.
51.	This is a boom for casket dealers.	English	The prediction that increasing death tolls will brighten the fortunes of caskets dealers.

52.	The poor are afraid to stay at home.	English	The fear of dying at home of hunger.
53.	Isolation volunteers are waiting for COVID-19 Task Force.	English	Vulnerable Nigerians willing to be accommodated in isolation centres just to be fed by the government.

Politics, policies, and policymakers are inseparably glued and related. The interplay of the factors depending on policy choice results in economic boom or doom. The nation has been grappling with political and economic challenges which are jocularly signified in the daily interactions among Nigerians. Like what Akinola (2018) mentions as features of crisis-motivated humour, the linguistic choices from political and economic discourses in Table III above, are decrypted by the interactants in order to satirise the horrible political and economic experiences of Nigerians. On this, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news of 22 April 2020 aligns with the described situation as it reports that "rich Nigerians frequently jet off to the UK, Germany or the US at the slightest headache because Nigeria's State hospitals are poorly funded" (BBC 2020). The situationally decrypted hilarious expressions such as *Nigerians were locked down before the lockdown*, *the poor are afraid to stay at home* are viewed as sarcastic and satirical representations of Nigeria as a nation with economic depression arising from failed leadership orchestrated by the political class. The apprehensive psyches of the citizens are shown in the humorous utterances *our leaders are no longer sick, Coronavirus is fighting corruption better than EFCC, our leaders are COVID-19 scavengers*, among others. The implicatures portray the failed leaders as a parasitic gang as well a call for a karmic occurrence which COVID-19 thrives to undertake.

4.4. Religion and superstition

The religious and superstitious terminologies are also captured in the COVID-19 discourse in Nigeria. Such expressions with humorous colouration collated for the study are explicated in Table IV below.

Table 4. Showing informal registers from religion and superstition

S/N	Humorous expression	Linguistic source and realisation	Decrypted meaning
54.	Corona is from the royal house of Satan; thou shall not tempt.	English	This describes the contagious trend of Coronavirus and the need to abide by the preventive protocol.
55.	Even uncle Thomas would not have doubted COVID-19.	English	The apparently ravaging nature of the virus is enough to believe that it exists.
56.	When Corona sees the mark on my face, it will surely pass away.	English	This recontextualises how the Biblical Israelites were spared during the visit of the angel of death by the mark of the blood.

57.	Wetin concern me, corona na big man disease.	Codemixed items of English and NP.	The cynical belief that the Coronavirus-related death of high-profile Nigerians is an indication that the virus only affects the rich.
58.	Do you know somebody who knows somebody … who has Corona?	English	Public disbelieve that the number of confirmed cases is real.
59.	The government says Corona only spreads at night.	English	Citizens' response to government's restriction of movement at night.
60.	Corona no dey cross river.	NP	The belief that certain water spirits can prevent the spread of the virus.
61.	Drink ogogoro if you wish to live to tell the story.	Codemixed lexical items of English and Yoruba	The non-medical advisory to take locally distilled gin to prevent and/or cure Coronavirus disease.

Nigerians are highly religious people. Aremu (2013) on this subject, avers that Nigerian religious expressions are attributive to the sociocultural space of the participants who recontextualise situations from scriptural incidences. Nigerian English usage contains semantic modifications "meant to express religiosity and contextually devised to communicate the religious consciousness of interlocutors" (Uwen 2020:124). *Thomas, Satan*, and the symbolic *mark* in Table IV above, are "aspects of contextual (mis)appropriation of biblical incidences … [as] advance rejection of tragedy, exercise of faith and escapist stance" (Uwen 2020:107). The Biblical inferences in the context of usage are intended to create laughter in a rather unfortunate circumstance. Also, the ethnocultural composition of the Nigerian state hosts people who are deep-rooted in superstition. Superstition is an individual or societal conception borne out of fear, ignorance and on chances ordered from forces outside empirical validation. Affirming this, Olurundare (1998) avers that Nigerians hold tenaciously to superstitious beliefs that impede their conceptualisation of scientific knowledge which create learning impediment to school children and adults. Though coined humorously, expressions like *wetin concern me, corona na big man disease* and *Corona no dey cross river* in Table IV above, portray avoidable ignorance rooted in superstition.

4.5. Education and health

Other hilarious comments on COVID-19 discourse in Nigeria are culled from the educational and health discourse domains. The smiles-inducing creations derived from the informal registers of the Nigerian educational and health systems are explained in Table V below.

Table 5. Showing informal registers from education and health

S/N	Humorous expression	Linguistic source and realisation	Decrypted meaning
62.	The Corona seating arrangement saves invigilators' energy.	English	This describes the spacious seating arrangement for 2020 Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) to achieve physical distancing also curbed malpractice.
63.	Coronavirus has forced us to become very serious students in the dream.	English	Expression of the long boring holiday occasioned by the outbreak of the virus.
64.	Our government which swore by amadioha not to fund education now blames Corona.	Codemixed words from English and Igbo	The Nigerian government with proven antecedent of inadequate funding of education now has a flimsy reason to hold on to (COVID-19).
65.	COVID-19 plus ASUU strike equal to baby mamas and papas.	English	The combined delay for school resumption arising from COVID-19 and the Academics Staff Union of Universities' strike promotes promiscuity that will result in early parenting.
66.	Our few ventilators are made for Nigeria.	English	Suspected substandard ventilators in hospitals just like some other products used in Nigeria.
67.	Health workers don talk say them no go dey river side soap enter them eyes.	NP	Health workers' strike action to cause government to pay them COVID-19 hazard allowance.
68.	Some isolation centres can spread the virus.	English	The dilapidated nature of most isolation centres in Nigeria.

In Table V above, the education and health registers are used to construct expressions with humorous embellishments to portray the government's neglect of the educational system and health sector, and the social vices by students. Odia & Omofonmwan (2007) decry this situation in their submission that the Nigerian educational system is bisected with myriads of challenges and plagued with vices. For the health sector, Omoleke & Taleat (2017) attest that the Nigerian health care system is replete with undesirable inadequacies captured by *made for Nigeria* ventilators and isolation centres that *can spread the virus*. The terminologies are deployed to expose the rot in these rather vital but neglected sectors.

4.6. Lifestyle and symptomatics

Lifestyle in this context is used to represent the social behavioural orientation (of Nigerians) while symptomatics captures the physical symptoms of Coronavirus. This section centres on the linguistic choices derived from lifestyle and the symptoms of Coronavirus to create humour. Such witty but amusing constructs include those listed in Table VI below.

Table 6. Showing informal registers from lifestyle and symptomatics

S/N	Humorous expression	Linguistic source and realization	Decrypted meaning
69.	Social distancing requires the Pythagoras Theorem.	English	The unrealistic practice of social distancing in city slums and squatter settlements.
70.	My legs won't be for fancy anymore if I sight the carriers.	English	Intention to run from COVID-19 patients.
71.	Don't practice social distancing with money.	English	An advisory to explore avenue to create wealth during the pandemic.
72.	Corona sense is not common	English	Observing the preventive protocols saves lives.
73. & 74.	You can also wear nose mask to escape from your debtors; nose mask favours ugly people.	English	Some nose masks could actually be disguising.
75.	Isolation centre people don dey show say body no be wood.	Codemixed elements of English and NP	Allusion to reported sexual activities by patients in isolation centres.
76.	Coughing and sneezing are the easiest acts to evade arrest these days.	English	Citizens' gimmicks to evade troubles with security agents.
77.	Corona temperature is suspicious.	English	High temperature as a result of other related with other diseases.
78.	Eat, drink and forget your sorrows.	English	A consolation on the economic woes worsened by Coronavirus outbreak.
79.	Look before you leap, Coronavirus carriers may be closer than you think.	English	Assume that everyone is asymptomatic.
80.	The face can resume its friendship with the hands after the Corona era.	English	Do not touch your face with unwashed hands to avoid contracting the virus.

The entries in Table VI above were derived from social interactions bothering on the aspects of social behaviour and symptoms of COVID-19. The expressions denote the attitudinal reactions of Nigerians during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, …*Pythagoras Theorem* is a metaphorical analogy of a mathematical theory believed to be difficult to comprehend, used here to represent the difficulty in practising physical distancing in city slums and similar spots. *My legs are not for fancy…* expresses the perception for COVID-19 patients as life-threatening beings, hence they are ready to use their legs as safety devices. Other jokes represent the trivialisation of the preventive protocols and symptoms used to create comic relief among interactants immerged in same health crisis.

The 'interesting' aspect of the research is the disparity in meaning relation with the linguistic choices used as data for the analyses. A lexico-semantic assessment of the excerpts in the analyses and discussion above (see 4.1 to 4.6) reveal the asymmetric relationship between linguistic choices and meanings which have some implications in the microsocial contexts of their usage. The choices are strategies towards the achievement of the social, psychological and linguistic goals of the [pandemic] discourse (Reisigl & Wodak 2009). The defining tool for meaning orientation is the context "identified from the cognitive, linguistic, situational and social perspectives" (Odebunmi 2016:13). According to Odebunmi, the cognitive context in the discussion of this nature is usually concerned with the participants' state of mind, the linguistic deals with the texts and/or co-texts interrelatedness while the situational context defines the language use in a spatial setting. The social context is concerned with the identified constraints imposed on meaning and comprehension in the interactive activities. The linguistic imports of the amusing constructs range from single words, phrases to sentences which provide the superficial signals from where the intrinsic values are disambiguated. These strategies altogether help in comprehension. These "explicaticatural strategies of reference assignment, bridging and gap filling [all help to] account for the fleshing out of contextual meaning" (Ellah & Uwen 2020: 130). The comprehensible strategies are "pivotal to the functioning of individuals and institutions as they rely on [them] to make meanings out of the series of activities that advance the existence of man in the society" (Uwen & Ebam 2019: 163). The major attributes of the sampled conversational humours are the Nigerian environment and speaker-audience considerations which set the semantic boundaries. The use of these diverse linguistic mechanisms has sociolinguistic implications that present outcomes indicative of the use of English as L2 and the multilingual language practice in Nigeria. The expressions like *sidechicks (3), runsgirls (4)* and *plandemic* (47) are neologisms, *bad market (4), bros (14), palliathieves (36)* and *NCDC* (19) represent a direct translation, a clipped word, a blend and an acronymised item respectively, while *ashawo don turn lepa* (2) and *… swore by amadioha not to…* (64) are codemixed structures that show Nigerians as bi/multilinguals. In the aspect of deployment of literary devices, it is shown that some of the sentences are figuratively composed. Such figurative expressions in the data include the simile *Corona strikes like Lionel Messi*… (17); the personification *fat silence at the motor parks … (33)* and *Corona plays friendly matches … (29).* Also, *Can we also wear mask to prevent Corona leaders? (35)* is rhetorical, while *our politicians are no longer sick* (38) is a satirical declaration. Again, while … *locked down … lockdown* (46) and … *palliatives … palliathieves …* (36) are in the category of alliterations, … *our leaders would lead by example* (49) is sarcastic in nature, *hotels and brothels don dey grow bushes* (50) is hyperbolic and *our leaders … are scavengers (48)* is a metaphor. These, among several other examples are created to communicate the common experience to show the rich linguistic resources.

4.7. Frequency distribution of the domains of registers and the implications

Figures 1 and 2 below show the frequency (F) and percentage (%) distribution of the segregated six domains of informal registers used in the analyses (see 4.1 to 4.6) above.
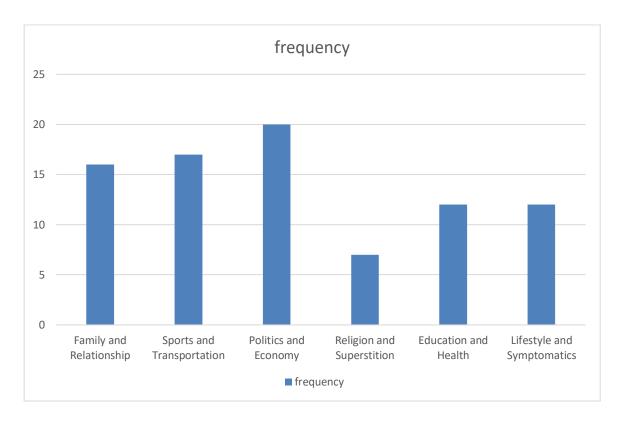

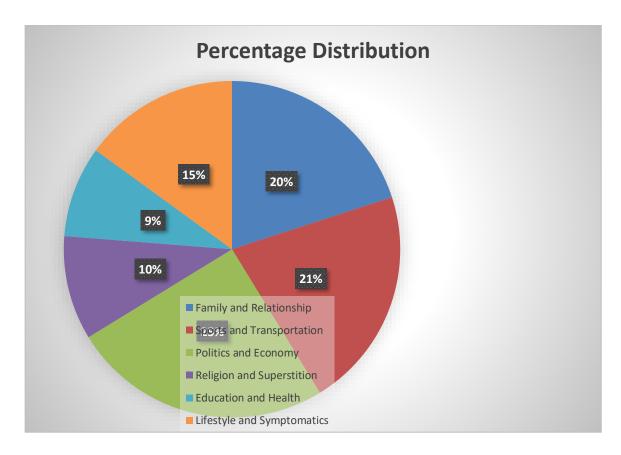Figure 1. Bar chart showing the frequency distribution.

Figure 2. Pie chart showing the percentage distribution.

Figures 1 and 2 above are diagrammatic representations of the frequency and percentage of the numerical distribution of slots into the six discourse domains (see 4.1 to 4.6) in bar chart and pie chart. In the representations above, the frequency of the humorous slot for domains of family and relationship, sports and transportation, politics and economy, religion and superstition, education and health, and lifestyle and symptomatics takes 16, 17, 20, 8, 7 and 12, respectively. In the same order, the percentage distribution is 20, 21.25, 25, 10, 8.75 and 15 percent allocated to each of the six domains. Accordingly, the frequency and percentage distributions reflect the increasing crisis in family and relationships, the love for sports, and the overwhelming political and economic challenges in Nigeria. The lower ratio for religion and superstition indicates the social restraint from jocular expressions in such domains, while that of education and health is a replication of the neglect of the sectors while there is an average deployment of humorous expressions to account for the domains of lifestyle and asymptomatics.

5. Conclusion

The paper has examined the decrypted significations in the explicated expressions with hilarious embellishments while succinctly utilising the interpretive technicalities in the Relief and Encryption theories of humour that guided the expanded registers of the adopted domains. The speaker and the audience (hearer, listener and reader) in the context of this study, are shown to have shared common sociocultural backgrounds. The expressions, 'loaded' with pragmatic cues implicitly communicate the deteriorating systems in Nigeria, and provide psychological stimulations that evoke laugher in a rather tragic and tensed situation occasioned by the Coronavirus pandemic. The coined linguistic devices convey messages that are indexical representations of a two-folded public perception - a people confronted with anti-people politics,

policies and policymakers mechanised by the leaders to produce a weakening system on the one hand, and a crisis-ridden people creating humour to laugh off a sudden but unpleasant experience, on the other.

The micro-level lexico-pragmatic evaluation of the extracts from the humorous interactions, showed their terminological dissimilarities with the decrypted meanings which called for concern to connect with the sociocultural environment which readily offers the 'key' and decryption force that unveils meanings within the virtual and on-site interactants. This common knowledge provides clues to the asymmetry in the relationship between linguistic choices and their connotations. The analysed choices with codemixed items, neologisms, clipped words, blends, borrowings, proverbs, direct translations and figurative constructs, among other lexical imports, all combined to express Nigeria English usage which are the sociolinguistic outcomes that blend with the heterogeneous and multilingual nature of Nigeria. The appreciation of the informal, conversational and spontaneously expressed and/or scripted humorous corpora, mainly rely on the hearer and/or reader's sociocognitive attachment to the interactants. Meaning interpretation is also supported by one's ability to align with the discursive strategy utilised to decrypt the multiplicity of shared sociocultural inferences and contextual affordances which bear the force towards the decryption of the meaning signals. This is achieved through the dependence on a complex context which combines indexes from the cognitive, linguistic, situational and social attributes for meaning orientation. The COVID-19 pandemic, as 'fearful' as it is, has stimulated the exploitation of linguistic resources by Nigerians. They use English, Nigerian Pidgin and codemixed expressions, devised in ironical, satirical and sarcastic formulations to create crisis-motivated humour to stimulate relief, hope, resilience and 'happiness' within a tensed environment and people. Although there were limitations arising from the realities of the time, the 'strict' preventive protocols and government stay-at-home orders which set limits to on-site interactions, and other possible human errors in the sources and process of data collection, they are however, so negligible to controvert the findings. It is also recommended that research be carried out in other encrypted humour in the form of cartoons and ideograms that describe the peculiarities in the Coronavirus experience in Nigeria, in order to provide further insights into an all-round humorous aspect of the pandemic in Nigeria.

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