

Creative uses of language to invoke sex-related taboos in Churchill Raw comedy shows

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Abstract

Churchill Raw event facilitates creative self-expression of young comedians through the incorporation of a variety of sex-related taboo topics. Yet, the multicultural nature of the participants in the Nairobi-based event makes the communication of such topics particularly problematic, as they can also be deemed offensive. Drawing on theoretical and methodological principles from Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 2003), this article investigates how sex-related taboos are drawn into performances using euphemistic linguistic resources, such as puns, metaphors, metonymy, codeswitching and so on. As data we use 10 video recordings of comedians and 2 two-hour interviews with the key comedians. By focusing on situated uses of euphemistic language in the context of comedy in the African city of Nairobi, this article demonstrates that contrary to the general perception, young people observe sex-related taboos by using euphemistic language resources.

Keywords: humour, linguistic creativity, sex-related taboos, comedy shows.

1. Introduction

This article analyses the linguistic resources used to invoke sex-related taboo topics in a popular stand-up comedy event, *Churchill Raw* (henceforth CR). Performed in Nairobi and other urban centres in Kenya, CR is intended to entertain and provide an opportunity for young people to construct their identity as they voice their opinion on various issues (including their sexuality). Being the seat of government and owing to its strategic place as a centre of commerce, tourism, and production of media representation, the city brings together 43 local languages as well as English, Kiswahili, Sheng, English, Chinese, Hindi, and Arabic on the one hand, and diverse cultures, on the other hand. Most of these cultures restrict free expression of sex and related topics, while some do not. We argue that, though young comedians incorporate sex-related topics in their presentations, they observe taboo by resorting to euphemistic uses of language.

Euphemism has been studied using different approaches and data from different contexts to discover how it is conceptualised and relates to ideology, diseases, and religion (Fernández, 2008; Gomez, 2012; Orwenjo & Anudo, 2016, among others). Little research has been done

within the framework of Interactional Sociolinguistics (henceforth IS) and in the context of comedy shows. Gumperz (2003) proposes IS as a framework for investigating the situated uses of language. IS is designed to guide the investigation on how language is used to evoke contextual presuppositions necessary for interpretation and on the particular presuppositions underlying specific talk exchanges (Gumperz, 2003). IS is appropriate for our investigation for two reasons. First, instead of viewing reality as pre-given, it focuses on meaning as jointly produced in performance. Second, it assumes that interpretation relies on “local or context-specific background knowledge that takes the form of presuppositions that shift in the course of an encounter” Gumperz, 2003, p. 219).

We chose to focus my analysis on *CR* because it is one of the sites where young comedians perform and, thus, where we could find naturalistic data on euphemistic uses of language. In line with our aim to analyse context-based euphemistic uses of language, we collected 10 audio-recordings of performances. Made up of a complex collection of speech events and speech actions and taking place in a multicultural context, *CR* comedy shows are based on a delicate balance between inclusion and exclusion of sex-related topics. To account for the situated but shifting inference procedures, we carried out an in-depth analysis of data from *CR* taking into account the comedians communicative backgrounds (Gumperz, 2003).

The study on *CR* is relevant as it comes at a time when colonialism and modernisation have tended to erode the traditional African anchors of taboo (Mudhovozi et al., 2012, p. 121). One of the consequences, as Van der Walt (2003) argues, has been the introduction of secular views that partly advocate free expression of sex-related topics especially in the urban places that are also inhabited by people who originate(d) from rural areas and still retain (or have since severed) links with relations living in rural areas. For Van der Walt (2003), a culture transition, one that violates taboos, is the outcome of the encounter among these cultures. Thus, the contextual approach adopted in this research can provide insights into how language is used euphemistically in the context of comedy in urban places in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa.

1.1 Churchill Raw comedy shows

CR is a component of *Churchill live* recorded live at Carnivore grounds in Nairobi (for the general history of televised humour in Kenya, see Michieka & Muaka, 2015). Hosted by the famous comedian, Jasper Muthomi, popularly known as MC Jesse *CR* brings together many comedians aged between the ages of 20 and 35. Their level of education and their motivation to participate in humour-making vary greatly. Thus, while some comedians perform full-time, some have full-time jobs elsewhere. This implies that they draw their humour from a variety of topics. While it is common to trace echoes of the comedian’s socio-economic background in the performance, in a number of performances comedians draw their topics from presentations by fellow comedians. Both male and female comedians participate in *CR*; in fact, the number of female performers has been increasing over the years.

CR is introduced by MC Jesse, who comes onto the stage as music plays in the background. He normally begins with a characteristic dance that highlights his stomach that elicits laughter because it is big. He then salutes the participants and asks them to greet each other. After this, he performs or introduces a different performer. Presentations by individual performers last 5 to 12 minutes. The order in which performers come on stage, how long they perform, and what they talk about is not – at least for the audience – pre-given. Even for the individual performers the arrangement of topics to be performed is not pre-scripted.

Although *CR* is designed to entertain, it is also a context where talented comedians are socialized in the nuances of comic performance. Further, it is one of the sites that allow young people to incorporate a range of sex topics into their performance. In this way, the ability to

navigate through life challenges in the city and the capacity to innovatively combine these experiences to inoffensively amuse the audience is deemed as one of the ways of earning income as well as becoming an accomplished performer and a *Nairobi*an.

A general trend in humour research in Kenya focuses on the link between humour and identity, especially the implications of ethnic/racial humour on the Kenyan nationhood. For instance, whereas Michieka & Muaka (2016) investigate how comedians draw on ethnic stereotypes while avoiding conflict, Ndonye (2015) studies televised ethnic jokes as a critical determinant of ethnic relations among Kenyans. Kivuti (2017) looks at racial representation and its impact on the Kenyan cultural identity. The role of code-mixing in the construction of ethnic humour is explored by Ngina (2012) and Lumasia (2021). The two studies particularly investigate the relationship between stereotypes and incongruity, especially arising from the many languages at interplay. In her thesis, Muthoni (2015) takes a general perspective to humour, arguing that young people discursively construct humour while drawing on a raft of themes. These studies raise the need to examine how young people deal with other problematic topics, such as sex.

This research builds on previous research on *CR* shows. Unlike Michieka & Muaka (2016), who investigated pre-recorded data on ethnic humour from Kenya, Rwanda and Zambia, together with Boxer and Cortes-Conde (1997) we consider *CR* a context of situational humour. Boxer and Cortes-Conde (1997, p. 277) consider a conversational situation a “play frame created by the participants, with a backdrop of in-group knowledge, encompassing not only verbal features but also suprasegmental and non-verbal communication.” Therefore, humour is not pre-fabricated; rather it emerges from both “the situation itself” and the “appropriate cues that make it a laughing matter” (Boxer and Cortes-Conde, 1997, p. 277). We use empirical data to analyse how young people use a range of devices, including code-mixing (Ngina, 2012) to talk about sex topics.

1.2 Sex-related taboos and euphemisms

There has been renewed interest in studies on how young people use language to communicate taboo topics, especially those related to sex. This follows a general observation that the power of taboo has been diminishing among young people (Ndhlovu & Botha, 2017) and especially given the increasing number of platforms as a result of technological advancement (Rinaldi, 2020). Studies on euphemistic uses of language in the multicultural contexts exist (Frentiu, 2020; Yildiz, 2021, among others). However, there is a need for studies taking an IS perspective to investigate situated uses of euphemistic language strategies to contextualise taboo topics in a multilingual and multicultural urban contexts of stand-up comedy that can be viewed as less formal.

The word *taboo* comes from the Tongan word *tapu* which means ‘forbidden’ (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Taboo is a temporary decree towards objects that one is not expected to do, enter, see or touch (Allan & Burridge, 2006). They are things that are socially prohibited as they can “put the speaker at a moral [...] risk” or lead to “social ostracism or mere disapproval” (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 1). Under taboo are topics related to bodies and body fluids, and the organs and acts of sex among others (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Though ‘revolting’ (Burridge 2004, p. 199), sex as a taboo topic, is fascinating and, therefore, ‘pervasive in everyday life’. Like other taboo topics, it is unavoidable; it presents the language user with only two options: to either preserve it (via euphemistic uses of language) or violate it (via use of offensive language) (Fernández, 2008).

Sex-related taboos are considered socio-religious, and they relate with – and differentiate themselves from – taboos related to socio-economic and political situations (Husien & Kebede, 2017). Together with other socio-religious taboos, sex-related taboos regulate ‘moral

behaviour of members' of the community (Ndhlovu & Botha, 2017, p. 236) and ensure harmonious co-existence among community members in the visible world and between community members in the visible world and those in the invisible world (Husien & Kebede, 2017). They are cautionary and behaviour-driven (Ndhlovu & Botha, 2017). Cautionary speech-taboos regulate the choice of the topic, the person to say it, the time to say it and the manner in which it is said (Ndhlovu & Botha, 2017). Behaviour-driven taboos do not only 'reflect a people's beliefs and philosophy', they also shape behaviour (Ndhlovu & Botha, 2017, p. 236)

As sex-related taboos have links to a people's religion, they vary from one community to the other. For instance, among the Ndebele the context and the people involved in discussing sex are prescribed, and this takes place only in the marriage context (Ndhlovu & Botha, 2017). In addition, talk about sex between mother and daughter as well as father and son is prohibited. In many African societies, direct reference to sex-related topics is considered immoral and offensive (Ndhlovu & Botha, 2017). Van der Walt (2003) hints at differences in the realization of taboos in his argument that social restrictions were shame-oriented and based on 'tribes'. Varied ways of realizing taboos notwithstanding, taboos are considered sacred sanctions in Africa (Kikongo, 2002) designed to preserve and strengthen values and beliefs (Husien & Kebede, 2017). They, thus, contain great power to direct human actions and sayings" (Husien & Kebede, 2017, p. 63)

However, in urban and rural contexts today, not all cultures restrict reference to taboo topics. Van der Walt (2003) notes that the Western secular culture has no regard for sex-related taboos. The Western secular culture tends to advocate an individualistic and materialistic type of life, in which sex is reduced to a mere "tool to be used and discarded" (Van der Walt, 2003, p. 62). The encounter between the western secular culture and traditional African cultures, as a result of colonialism, has partly contributed to the loss of African traditional values (Udokang, 2014). This has resulted in – especially among the urban youth – the rise of a group of young people who speak Sheng language (Van der Walt, 2003, p. 54). I argue that contrary to this view, in the context of comedy shows young comedians in the urban centres preserve taboos by using euphemistic language resources.

CR brings together many communities that sanction talk on sex-related topics. For instance it is noted that topics such as genitalia, body fluids (i.e. menstrual flow, sperm, vaginal discharge), types of sex (including incest, forced sex i.e. rape), sexual desire and act cannot be talked about openly among the Luo (Wanjala, 2012), Agikuyu (Okechi, 2018) and among most Kenyan communities. Under taboo topics are also issues related to sexual advances, dating and pregnancy (Wanjala, 2012). The sanctions involve not only the topic but also the person speaking about it and to whom they speak. For instance, Wanjala (2012) argues that in the Luo community - and this applies to most Kenyan communities - girls are forbidden from speaking about sexual advances, dating and pregnancy with their parents. For Lumasia (2022) among the Maragoli of Western Kenya (and this applies to most communities in Kenya) only elders are allowed to directly refer to sex-related topics and they do not do so in the presence of youth. Embleton, et al. (2023) note that social cultural norms in most Kenyan and African communities anyone who makes direct reference to taboo topics risks being discriminated and judged.

Euphemism is the language user's strategy to "strip taboo of its most explicit or obscene overtones" (Fernández, 2008, p. 96). It is either positive or negative. Positive euphemism ornaments its object or event, while negative euphemism reduces the negative impact of an object or event (Orwenjo & Anudo, 2016). Designed to align behaviour to the norms of politeness (Fernández, 2010), euphemistic language is therefore a tactful conflict or offense-mitigation strategy in interpersonal interaction (Leech, 1983). Euphemism and politeness are interlinked via the notion of face (Goffman, 1974; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Fernández

(2005) explains that a polite behaviour is threat-minimizing to both the speaker's and the listener's own social image in contexts involving HIV/AIDS (Black, 2012; Batibo & Kopi, 2008) and sexual assault (Trinch, 2001)

Euphemistic language is associated with productivity or creativity at different language levels i.e. the lexical level (Fernández, 2008). Ogechi (2005, p.130) argues that by borrowing words from Kiswahili and Kikuyu language young people refer to sexual organs i.e. they use *kitabu* 'book' (from Kiswahili) to refer to the vagina; *madhudha* (borrowed from Kikuyu) to refer the 'buttocks'; and *ku-chill* and *ku-chew* (from Sheng) mean 'to cease making love' and 'to make love' respectively among others. Creativity involves the manipulation of forbidden concepts through modulation, alteration or substitution (Gomez, 2012). For Gomez (2012) creativity can go beyond lexical items to include other linguistic and non-linguistic elements. Further, other than speaker's perspective, the hearer's perspective is important in understanding how euphemism is creatively conceptualized (Gomez, 2012).

Research on euphemism has mainly dealt with conceptualisation of forbidden reality through the use of lexical items, and the relationship between the usage of sex-related euphemisms and gender, HIV/AIDS, and religion among other themes. Fernández (2008) identifies metaphorisation as an important source of euphemistic expressions and urges the use of a cognitive linguistics approach in the study of sex metaphors. Gomez (2012) argues for the expansion of the definition of the term euphemism to include not only lexical level conceptualisation but also conceptualisations that involve other linguistic and non-linguistic aspects. He also raises the need for studies to focus on the communicative context, and therefore, take the hearer's perspective into consideration. Agyekum (2002) argues for the introduction of euphemisms related to menstruation, pointing out that the offensive expressions, currently in use, project women as inferior in a male-dominated Akan community. Gathigia (2010) and Orwenjo & Anudo (2016) demonstrate that the conceptualisation of euphemism in the Agikuyu and Dholuo languages respectively is gendered. Studies have also shown how gendered sex-related taboos can be violated (Thompson, 2011). While discourses on HIV/AIDS have demonstrated the need to attenuate the sex-related taboo expressions whose usage has been rampant in Botswana after a period of sensitization on HIV/AIDS (Batibo & Kopi, 2008), sex-related euphemism has been critical in combating stigma associated with HIV/AIDS among the Zulu-speaking South Africans (Black, 2012).

We build on studies that have examined the conceptualisation of sex-related taboo topics (Fernández, 2008; Gomez, 2012; Orwenjo & Anudo, 2016). Unlike those studies, considering sex-related euphemisms as jointly constructed in the context of language use, we focus on the communicative context of comedy shows. Unlike studies that have focused on euphemism and gender, HIV/AIDS religion, we investigate the relationship between euphemistic uses of language in the multicultural context of humour.

1.3 Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS)

Propounded by John Gumperz (1982) interactional sociolinguistics is centred on 'linguistic and cultural diversity of today's communicative environments' (Gumperz, 2003, p. 218) that can be viewed as multicultural. It investigates discursive practices that actors use as they locally pursue their communicative ends. For instance, in the context of comedy, the actors' goal and aspiration is to humour the audience. The central argument is that during communication actors make interpretive assessments that rely on presuppositions or situated or context-bound (shared) background knowledge (Gumperz, 2003). We consider sex-related taboos aspects of shared presuppositions that guide the comedians during performance and the other participants as they interpret comedians' communicative actions. This is especially the

case since within IS the interpretive assessments that guide the process of inference bring together meaning-making processes on the one hand and the taken-for-granted background assumptions on the other hand.

The central question is what meaning making-processes or contextualisation cues actors use to signal contextual presuppositions and what contextual presuppositions are evoked in a particular context (Gumperz, 2003). The cues are surface features of the message form i.e. they may either be phonetic, syntactic, lexical, stylistic... or pre-patterned ritualistic expressions, discourse related features such as openings and closings, features of performance such as silence, laughter, backchannels and features related to language such as language alternation (Gumperz, 1982). For Gumperz (2003, p. 221), the cues are not only metaphors; rather they are ‘any verbal sign[s] which when processed in co-occurrence with symbolic grammatical and lexical signs, serve to construct the contextual ground for situated interpretation’.

Conventional as they are, contextualisation cues can vary in meaning and use from culture to culture (Gumperz, 1982). The IS model will enable us to both account for the situated uses of language, and demonstrate how comedians cue sex-taboos and how they make them less offensive in the highly multicultural environment of comedy.

2. Materials and methods

We analyse the use of linguistic resources to invoke euphemism in *CR*. The names of the presenters are mainly pseudonyms. Express permission was sought from the administration to record the presentations and the individual presenters were also requested to participate in the project.

Churchill Raw was chosen because it provides naturalistic data for analysis. Though video recordings of *CR* performances exist on YouTube, since our interest was on contextualised uses of language, we relied on data that had not been collected for any other purpose. The individual presenters were given a small recorder and requested to switch it on at the start of their presentations and switch it off on leaving the stage. Video versions of audio data were also collected. The 10 recordings were between 5 and 12 minutes each (about 1 hour 20 minutes in total). It was possible that the performers’ (comedians’ and participants’) awareness of being recorded may have triggered change in behaviour during performance. However, we noted that participants freely drew upon different discourses including those that had to do with personal views about sex.

We also interviewed three key participants in order to gain an insight into the contextual presuppositions governing the performance. We also relied on own knowledge as participants in the comedy show. Data was collected in 2019 over a couple of weeks.

The data was hermeneutically analysed using principles from IS that made the incorporation of extra-communicative knowledge about sex-related taboo possible. Though non-verbal aspects play a role of meta-messages (i.e. prefacing humorous sections of verbal interaction), we focused mainly on the verbal aspects and only included non-verbal aspects that communicated sex-related taboos. Finally, the hermeneutic method allowed for an iterative interpretation through which a part of the qualitative data was interpreted and reinterpreted against the background of the whole (Thompson, Pollio & Locander. 1994, p. 433).

We scanned the performances at the level of ‘organization: (a) content and (b) pronunciation and prosodic organization’ (Gumperz, 2003, p. 223). We identified discursive structures that revealed euphemistic uses of language and logged them according to the

linguistic resources that cued them. The discursive structures were then transcribed and analysed while checking the linguistic resources and how they were used.

3. Data presentation

We discuss data on how young comedians contextualise sex-related topics. We organised this section under the following themes: genitalia, sexual advances, and the act of sex. *Churchill Raw* incorporates a number of languages (English, Kiswahili, Sheng, among others), and in order to cater for people not familiar with these languages, we provided a free translation just below each line. Since comedians use Kiswahili with switches to Sheng and English, the stretches in Sheng are underlined, while those in English appear in bold. In the analysis we used pseudo-names: Peter and Mike for male comedians and Mary and Nelly for female comedians.

3.1. Indicating genitalia and other body parts

Most cultures - from where members of the audience of CR come - sanction direct reference to female and male genitalia. Aware of this, comedians use different language resources to refer to genitalia and other body parts. In example 1, using a number of metaphors, Peter describes his girlfriend, *kamsichana* ('a girl'), named Kirote.

- (1)
- 01 *Nilikuwa na kamsichana kairobi kangu*
I had a girl, my lover Kirote
- 02 *hutu tunyama tumeshikana*
she had these closely packed folds
- 03 *Hapa* (points around the neck)

Taken from Sheng, the noun *tunyama* 'pieces of meat' metaphorically refers to the vagina with the verb *tumeshikana* 'they have held each other' reveals the outer folds of skin in the female genitalia, the labia, metaphorically in terms of folds of skin on the neck, and the way the pieces of skin are attached together in terms of 'holding each other'. The diminutive *ka* and *tu* on the words *ka-kirote* and *tu-nyama* reveals beauty in terms of size; it is also used to indicate affection (Githinji, 1993a, p. 462). In this example instead of referring bluntly to the female genitalia as *kuma* 'vagina', which could be offensive, Peter uses metaphors. Instead of directly referring to the vagina, he describes it as skin folds around the neck.

Metaphors are also used to refer to the male genitalia as revealed in excerpt 2. In this specific example, Peter recounts his experiences as a visitor in India where he wore Indian baggy trousers for the first time.

- (2)
- 01 *Unaona hii.. (bending and swinging his right hand between his legs) hii ni ya nini*
Do you see this...what is it?
- 02 (laughter)
- 03 *sema pata*
say 'pata'

Peter swings his hand between his legs as an analogy for an extraordinarily large penis. He uses this analogy to contextualise the stereotypic association of Indian men with a small

penis. When the audience fails to come up with a term for it, he coins a term *pata*, an idiophonic reference to the sound produced when the penis in Indian baggy trousers strikes the thighs.

Other than metaphors, comedians also use diminutives and blending to refer to genitalia. This is shown in example 3, in which Peter refers to a female participant.

(3)

- 01 *Kanakaa* kusema gaai (licks his lips) ndio ile *kibokopotamus*
She looks like one to say ‘gaai! kibokopotamus is there’

The diminutive morphemes *ka* indicates Peter’s admiration for the woman. The exclamation *gaai* together with the licking of lips indicates the shock or surprise at seeing an extraordinarily ‘large and smooth penis’ as indicated by the analogy of the hippopotamus. In order to contextualise the penis and its size Peter coins a term by blending the Kiswahili word *kiboko* ‘hippopotamus’ and *-potamus* that is part of the English word *hippo* (*-potamus*).

The assignment of new meaning to the already existing words in English is also used to talk about body parts that are related to genitalia as shown in examples 4 and 5 where Peter talks about the appearance of the skin the a lady’s stomach after giving birth..

(4)

- 01 *So ako na tule tumark hapo kwa tumbo*
So she has those marks there on the stomach.
02 *juu ya kuzaa (pointing at the waist while laughing). By the way hizo si stretch marks*
the marks result from giving birth. By the way those are not stretch marks;
03 *zinaitangwa aah aa nini sonflower*
they are called, aaah aa, what? Sonflower.

Peter codeswitches between Sheng *tule tumark* ‘those marks and Kiswahili *hapo kwa tumbo* to describe stretch marks. In line 3 he attributes the meaning of stretch marks to the compound term ‘son flower’. The term “son” puns in relation to phonetic similarity between the words *son* and *sun*. By pointing at the waist while laughing Peter activates a sexual meaning for the term son flower, where son metaphorically refers to the penis, and the word ‘flower’ metaphorically refers to sperm.

Metaphorical reference to stretch marks is also evident in example 5, where Peter explains how a woman can describe them to her husband.

(5)

- 01 *mwambie they are not called stretch marks.*
Stretch marks, tell him
02 *These are tiger claws (winks)*

By winking as he utters the term tiger claws, Peter contextualises stretch marks as a consequence of an act of sex. He therefore assigns new meaning to a term which conventionally refers to a rode used in boring holes. Thus, in line 3, the term *tiger* metaphorically refers to the penis and *claw* metaphorically refers to an act of sex. Through daffynitions (Dynel, 2009, p. 1287) realized through metaphors and puns Peter contextualises taboo parts on the body of men and women.

In example 6 Mike uses codeswitching and puns to talk about male and female genitalia.

(6)

- 01 ***The most famous game ni relationship***
The most famous game is relationship.
02 ***ndio maana mkianza relationship***
That's why when you start a relationship,
03 ***nyinyi wote mko na goals (points at the waist)***
you all have goals

By pointing at the waist as he utters the word goal, Mike triggers a sexual meaning. Thus, with the term 'goals' Mike inoffensively refers to genitals: the vagina and the penis. The term 'goals' is, therefore, an instance of punning via polysemy; it also refers to a physical structure in the game of soccer. The term 'game' puns through polysemy; it refers to a type of play and in Sheng an activity of sex.

Codeswitching is also used together with the metaphor to contextualise the vagina in example 7

(7)

- 01 ***Bebz aki sink yangu (licking his lips) imeharibika***
'Darling, my sink is broken'

In line 01, the Sheng word *Bebz* introduces the lover. The English term *sink* is a pun: it can refer to a container used when washing hands and it can, as used here together with the licking of lips, refer to the vagina. Thus the verb *kuharibika* 'to be damaged' metaphorically indicates the need for sex. Thus, the act of sex is seen in terms of 'repairing a broken sink'.

In other examples Mike distorts the terms when referring to female body parts, as shown in example 8.

(8)

- 01 ***Amevaa buibui lakini taarab***
She is wearing her buibui but her 'taarab'
02 ***imesukuma buibui (points at his buttocks) eeh huyo atafanya waislamu***
has stretched her buibui. Eeh! she will cause the moslems
03 ***washindwe kufunga ramadan***
to fail to fast during Ramadan.
04 ***Kina abdala watasema aah tunafunga ramadhani ama maradhani (smiles)***
Abdala and others will say: 'we fast for ramadan or maradan'

In line 02 Mike identifies the lady using her dress type worn by Muslim women, *buibui* and *taarab*, a popular music genre that combines styles from East Africa, North Africa, Middle East and India and is mostly associated with the Kenyan coast. However, when used together with the word *imesukuma* 'has stretched', used with the gesture of pointing at buttocks the word *taarab* refers to 'distended buttocks'. The sexually attractive distended buttocks are said to be capable of distracting Muslims (Abdala and others from) observing their religious practice as shown by *huyo atafanya waislamu wakose kufunga ramadan* 'she will cause the Muslims to fail to fast during ramadan'. With *maradan* he distorts the alluded to term by rearranging the phonemes to coin a new word *maradan* that refers to an act of sex.

As shown in the 8 examples discussed above (which is true for many other instances in the data), it is evident that in order to manage sex taboos related to body parts in their talk, comedians use puns, distortions, metaphors, metonymy and coinage.

3.2. Expressing sexual advances

CR audience is made up of participants from cultures that forbid talk that involves sexual advances. Comedians also use euphemistic language resources to contextualise sexual advances. In 9 Peter makes reference to the way a lady in love talks.

(09)

- 01 *alikuwa ananiita naskia ha ha ha*
whenever she called me, I always felt ha ha ha.
- 02 *Thatha nimekuja kuona jethi, jethii (laughs)*
'I have come to see Jessy'. 'Jessy' a haa
- 03 *Nikuuliza ni nini theriouthly jethii*
I ask, 'what is it? Seriously, Jessy
- 04 *Wathanga mthetho*
stop jokes
- 05 *Wathanga mthetho wewe aki wewee*
stop jokes. Really,
- 06 *Thuthithumbuane'*
let's not disturb each other'.
- 07 *unaskia raha tu yani (laughs)*
You feel really good.

With laughter realized by *ha ha ha* (line 1) and the word *raha* 'pleasure', Peter contextualises sexual pleasure resulting from the woman's use of a lisp when talking to him. With *nimekuja kuona* 'I have come to see', Peter contextualises a sex date, and the act of sex is metaphorically understood in terms of 'being seen'. The words *mthetho* 'joke' and *tuthithumbuane* 'let's not disturb each other' metaphorically reveal a sexual relationship and demand for sex in terms of a 'game' and a disturbance respectively. The words *mthetho* and *tuthithumbuane* are distortions through the substitution of the phoneme /s/ with /th/ creating a lisp in the Kiswahili words *mchezo* and *tusisumbuane*.

An example of distortion via rearrangement of morphemes is given in 10, where a woman phones a motorbike rider, her boyfriend- Munyao.

(10)

- 01 *Munyao wa pikipiki*
Munyao with a motorbike.
- 02 *Halo munyao weba*
Hello Munyao. Where are you?
- 03 *Munyao wa kipikipi (laughs as he winks)*
Munyao with a motorbike

In the excerpt, with distortion *kipikipi* (of the word *pikipiki* 'motorbike') accompanied by laughter and winking (line 3), Peter contextualises illicit sexual relationship between a married woman and a young motorbike rider. By this he draws on the stereotype associated with people from the Akamba ethnic group: as people who articulate the word *pikipiki* as *kipikipi* and as people who are fond of sex. The word *pikipiki* 'motorbike' is also a metaphor for a man. Thus, a motorbike ride is metaphorically an act of sex.

In example 11, Peter invites a male participant to the podium and they contextualise a sexual relationship using feigned misunderstanding.

(11)

A: *I just said you are an amazing guy*

B: *No, the other one was much funnier (laughs)*

In this context, with ‘an amazing guy’ A expresses admiration for B. With ‘the other one was funnier’ accompanied by laughter B feigns misunderstanding, activating a homosexual relationship which he ironically considers ‘funnier’. Activation of the taboo topic of homosexuality via pretended misunderstanding is also demonstrated in example 12, where Peter invites a male participant to the dias.

(12)

A: *I have always looked up to you*

B: *And at least this is quite a good height for a lady*

Both A and B are male. A’s comment may be taken to mean B is taller, and as they talk A must ‘look up to’ B. However, B skews the meaning towards sexual attraction and, therefore, he activates a homosexual sexual relationship by ‘a good height for a lady’. The retorts in examples 11 and 12 activate the sex taboo associated with same sex associations. With ‘a quick and witty response’ the interlocutor feigns misunderstanding of the preceding turn, he/she therefore signals another meaning (Dynel, 2009, p. 1292).

Sexual taboo related to same sex is also contextualised when participants refuse to take up roles assigned to them, as in example 13.

(13)

01 A: *jifanye wewe ni dem uniambie unanipenda*

Pretend you are a lady and tell me you love me

02 B: *mimi si dem*

I am not a lady

03 A: *ni acting tu; I am straight bwana*

We are just acting; I am straight

In line 01, A and B are men. A instructs B, to take up the role of a lady in a sexual relationship (as shown by the use of the Sheng word *dem*). B declines to take up the role, saying he is not a lady. With ‘I am straight’, Peter metaphorically contextualises a sexual relationship between a man and a woman. .

Examples in the data, together with examples 9 to 13 show that using allusions and distortions, metaphors as well as retorts, the comedians contextualise different types of sexual relationships and sexual advances

3.3. Expressing the act of sex

Direct reference to the act of sex is sanctioned by most cultures to which the participants of CR belong. To express the act of sex in their performance, comedians use different euphemistic strategies. In example 14, Peter coins a new term and uses it metaphorically.

(14)

01 *nilikuwa nasikia kumfanyia elbulbu elbulbu (winks and laughs)*

I felt like doing (to her) elbulbu elbulbu

Preceding example (14) follows example 01 (see section 4.1) about peter's admiration of the folds of skin around his lover's neck that metaphorically represent the labia. Peter coins the term *elbuelbu* from the sound of the tongue as it is run across the folds of skin. In this context, the tongue represents the penis. Thus, *elbuelbu* refers to an act of sex. With *naskia* 'I feel like' sex desire is contextualised synaesthetically in terms of the sense of hearing and with *kumfanyia* 'to do for her', sex is metaphorically revealed in terms of 'doing'.

In 15 Peter uses metaphors to talk about sex.

(15)

- 01 *unanunua kale ka spray unakuja unaeka maji unampigia*
you buy that spray; you come put water and spray her
- 02 *Psiii (laughter) atakwambia wewe wacha **you are making me wet***
Pssiii she will say 'you leave, you are making me wet'
- 03 *Kumbe ni hiyo maji umemfanyia ndio psia psia*
When it is that water you have sprayed towards her that is psia psia
- 04 *Anakuambia wewe unaona sasa nguo zangu ziko **wet***
She tells you 'don't you see my clothes are wet'
- 05 ***Now you want me to be feeling slidy***
'Now you want me to be feeling slidy'
- 06 *Mkamba sijui atakwambia kuja basi kuja uchimbe **borehole** (laughter)*
A kamba lady I don't know will tell you come and dig the borehole

In a script, the act of sex is activated by laughter. In the excerpt, *kale ka spray* 'that spray refers to the penis and *maji* refers to the sperm. *Unampigia* 'you spray her' and *umemfanyia* 'you've pressed towards her' refer to ejaculation which is further described using the ideophone *psii* and *psia psia*. Peter switches to English in *you are making me wet* and *you want me to be feeling slidy* to refer to vaginal fluids during intercourse. The vagina is referred to using the English word 'borehole' and sex is therefore metaphorically an activity of 'digging'. The expression *making me wet* and *feeling slidy* are used in reference to vaginal fluids as metonymies of sexual arousal.

In 16 the act of sex is referred to using exaggeration drawn from ethnic stereotype.

(16)

- 01 *we murume we inakuja kulipua hii bomb saa ngapi (laughs and winks)*
you, friend at what time will you come to detonate this bomb?
- 02 *Kuja hapa tuone leo utachapa risasi ngapi*
Come here. Let's see how many bullets you will shoot today

In this excerpt, sex is contextualised by Peter's laughter and facial expressions. Behind is a script of an encounter between a man from the Meru community and a woman from the neighbouring Somali community. The stereotype is such that Somalis are associated with guns and shooting. With *kulipua* 'to detonate' the act of sex is metaphorically revealed in terms of war. Thus, the expressions *bomb* and *risasi* 'bullets' metaphorically refer to the vagina and the sperm respectively. In the expression *utachapa* 'you will shoot', ejaculation is viewed in terms of shooting and sperm is viewed in terms of *risasi* 'bullets'. Thus, the penis is a gun. Thus, instead of giving a woman the right to directly ask for sex Peter, exaggerates (MCarthy & Carter 2004: 152) by bringing together two contrasting realities in which the ethnic stereotype is highlighted and the act of sex downplayed

In 17 Mary uses the analogy of washing a blanket to describe an act of sex from the point of view of a woman as a way of making a man 'a husband'

(17)

- 01 *umuoshe hivi unaona venye mtu* (demonstrates)
properly. You make him the one. You wash him. Have you seen how a
05 *anaoshanga blanketi umkanyage vizuuri halafu unaita beste*
person washes a blanket. You step on him well, and then you call your
06 *wako pale anakushikia ile side mnamkamua mnamkamua vizuuri*(laughs)
Your friend there and ask her to hold that side for you. You milk him thoroughly,
07 *anakuwa the one*
till he becomes the one

Unamuosha ‘you wash him’ metaphorically refers being ‘wetted’ in vaginal fluids. Thus, the pronoun *-mu-* ‘him’ in the word *unamuosha* ‘you wash him’ metaphorically reveals the penis. With *unamkanyage* ‘you trample him’ refers to the act of sex. The expression *mnamkamua vizuuri* ‘you milk him thoroughly’ metaphorically refers to the vagina sucking sperm from the penis. The expression *unaita beshte wako pale anakushikia ile side* ‘you ask your friend to help hold the man on the other side’ reveals sexual promiscuity metaphorically in terms of ‘help to hold a man’. In many African communities it is taboo for a woman to talk about an act of sex in public.

In 18 Mike enacts his response to people’s concern about his/Mike’s habit of putting his coat on top of something as a way of talking about what sex.

(18)

- 01 *Watu wananiuliza ooh mbona bado nimeekelea koti juu*
People ask me: ‘ooh, why do I still have my coat on top of
02 *Hii siachangi in case hii shuka ikose kuu kufunika* (points at his waist)
this. I don’t leave it. Just in case this sheet fails to cover
03 **Behaviour** *zangu vizuri naishtaki kwa hii koti*
my behaviour well, I report them to this court

The works *koti* and *shuka* refer to a lady, while *kuwekelea* ‘to put on top of’ and *kufunika* ‘to cover’ refer to an act of sex. *Kufunika* ‘to cover’ also indicates sexual satisfaction. The male genitalia are indicated using *behaviour zangu* ‘my behaviour’. The word *koti* puns in that it can refer to ‘a piece of clothing’ as well as an institution of law (a law court). Mike switches to English using the word *behaviour* to refer to genitals.

When talking about sex position Mike further uses puns.

(19)

- 01 *Paka saa hii unapatana na mbwa tao*
till now you come across a dog in town.
02 *badala tu ikimbie na doggy style yake*
Instead of the dog running with its doggy style,
03 *Unapatana na mbwa inacatwalk na ni mbwa*
you find it catwalking . Yet it is a dog

With the expression *doggy style*, sex position is contextualised. Thus according to Mike, a woman in town is expected to engage in sex as shown in *badala ikimbie na doggy style* ‘instead of running with its doggy style’. On the contrary, the dog (now implying a woman) cat walks. The excerpt presents puns that are structural-semantic in nature (Giorgadze, 2018, p. 274). The expression *doggy style* has the literal sense (how a dog walks) and the deep sense

(a sex position that involves one person being penetrated from behind). The expression *inacatwalk* ‘it catwalks’ is also ambiguous as it refers literally to the way a cat walks and metaphorically to walking on a romp to display appearance.

In 20 Peter uses a number of metaphors as part of a script to describe an activity of sex.

(20)

01 *na unataka wakati wa ile maneno*

And you want to reach an agreement during the time for that issue

02 *msikizane unamgongaa saa ile anaosha viombo*

You knock her when she is washing utensils.

03 *Akiosha viombo unakaribia unakuja tu hivi*

When she is washing utensils you approach her just like this:

04 *Unamgonga na **title** ha*

You knock her with a title ha.

05 *Sa hio anaosha viombo gaai hiyo ni **50 by 100***

At that time as she washes she’ll say ‘gaai that is 50 by 100

06 *Kuja **darling** halafu vile anakuongelesha huko ndani*

Come darling’. Then the way she talks to you while inside:

08 *haya anza kujenga mali yako*

‘okay start building your property’

In the excerpt Mike describes an act of sex in terms of a business agreement. With *ile maneno* ‘those issues’, Mike makes a metaphorical reference to sex in terms of issues. *Mukitaka musikizane* ‘if you want to strike a deal’ Mike contextualises an act of sex as an agreement. Sex is described using a war metaphor in *unamgonga* ‘you hit her’. The penis and its size are metaphorically referred to using the *title* (deed) and the measurement of the plot i.e. *50 by 100*. The term *kuja* ‘come’ is an invitation to an act of sex; it also metaphorically reveals orgasm or ejaculation that takes place inside the vagina, *huko ndani* ‘in there’ in terms of a journey. The expression *kujenga mali yako* ‘to build your property’ metaphorically indicates the act of sex and siring children. Thus, the vagina is viewed metaphorically in terms of wealth or as something that needs to be bought and sold. The verb *anakuongelesha* ‘she speaks to you’ reveals sex in terms of ‘talk’.

In 21 Nelly as a wife complains about abusive marriage and infidelity.

(21)

01 ***My husband comes home at 3 am** kila siku 3am*

Daily at 3am

02 *nimepiga kelele **for the last 5 years***

I have complained

03 ***This time round and you know my husband***

04 *bwana yangu anafanyanga kazi*

my husband works

05 *Kwa serikali **8 to 5 am** hakunywangi fombe hata kidogo*

for the government he does not drink alcohol

With the expression *my husband comes home at 3am* Nelly contextualises lack of sexual fulfilment. With *anafanyanga kazi kwa serikali* ‘he works for the government’ Nelly reveals further unfaithfulness i.e. the husband does not belong to her alone but she belongs to the public or to the community. In this way sex is contextualised as ‘work for the government’ or

for the ‘community’. Thus, the verb *anafanyanga* ‘he always does’ contextualises infidelity as a habit and as action and the noun *kazi* ‘job’ reveals sex as work.

Examples 14 through to 20 reveal that comedians use a number of creative language forms to express taboo topics. Using coinage, puns, metaphors, code switching and devised scripts as ‘cues’ to express sex taboos related to an issue of sex i.e. the nature of sex, a woman complaining about lack of sex, sex positions, sexual infidelity, a woman publicly talking about how she plans to handle a man during sex and commercial sex.

One consequence of globalisation has been the erosion of traditional norms of interaction. Especially in urban places, young people have been said to violate norms of interaction including taboo. This argument relates to the current study in two ways. First, young comedians in *CR* draw on sex-related taboo topics during their presentation. In doing this, young comedians talk about sexual organs, sexual advances, and the act of sex. Second, contrary to the view that young people violate taboo (Van der Walt, 2003) and much in line with Jays’ (2000) argument that naturally people tend to shun dirty expressions, in *CR* young comedians choose to preserve taboo by resorting to creative language forms such as metaphors, puns, retorts, code switching, devised scripts among others.

Euphemistic uses of language can be looked at as ways of avoiding dysphemistic expressions and therefore as an attempt to avoid loss of face (Brown & Levinson, 1978). It is thus a way of being polite by downplaying what is potentially offensive and focusing the attention of the hearer on what is polite. Depending on the social context of the speaker, euphemistic language uses can reveal the speaker as polite and dignified (Dominguez & Benedito, 2005; Duda, 2011). In *CR*, sex and sex-related taboos as well as the euphemistic strategies used are humorous and they reveal young people as polite.

4. Conclusion

In this article, following an IS approach we have investigated the use of euphemistic language resources by the young stand-up comedians in Kenya to express sex-related taboos. This approach appropriately helps explain how young people in the context of comedy hint at sex-related taboos. Given that the contextual presuppositions affect the manipulative use of language, the IS model was a powerful tool that helped reveal language resources that guided situated interpretation. The IS theory was relevant in that sexual euphemisms can be ‘cued’ by language resources and analysed as norms that guide construction and interpretation of taboo topics. Contrary to the general view that the influence of taboo among young people is diminishing, especially in urban places, it has also been demonstrated that young people in one of the sites of interaction, *CR*, draw on taboo topics, related to genitalia, sexual advances, and the act of sex, and that they observe taboos by using euphemistic language resources. The findings of this article provide useful insights into the link between language and culture especially within the context of changing cultural values as a result of globalisation. This forms a basis for further research related to the encounter of languages and cultures and possible hybridity.

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