

Humour Analysis of Comments on COVID-19 Results on Facebook in Nigeria

Funke Josephine Oni
Christopher Eziufa Nwabudike
Federal University Dutsin-Ma

Abstract

Humour is part of human communication and existence. As such, scholars have examined humour from linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives. These studies have investigated the therapeutic effect of humour, the ideological role humour plays in politics, among others. This study examines humour from the perspective of sport-based metaphors in comments of some Nigerians on the results released by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) on Facebook. It adopted the incongruity theory and conceptual metaphor theory to describe the cognitive implications of the humour in the remarks which are responses to the results displayed by the NCDC. Fifteen comments were purposively selected and analysed. The findings show that the comical comments on NCDC results of COVID-19 fall into two discursive directions of sport-based metaphors, namely, COVID-19 results as contest and states as clubs. By representing the results of COVID-19 as contest and states as clubs, the authenticity of the NCDC daily reports on COVID-19 infection in Nigeria is downplayed. The enactment of these sport-based metaphors is, therefore, rooted in the text producers' distrust for the Nigerian government which the agency represents.

Keywords: NCDC results on COVID-19, Facebook, incongruity theory, conceptual metaphor theory, sport-based metaphor

Introduction

People all over the world have been affected by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), the fifth pandemic after the flu pandemic of 1918. The first report and subsequent outbreak can be traced to a cluster of novel human pneumonia cases in Wuhan City, China, since late December 2019. The earliest date of symptom onset was December 1, 2019. The symptomatology of these patients, which includes fever, malaise, dry cough, and dyspnea, was diagnosed as viral pneumonia. The disease was

initially called Wuhan pneumonia by the press because of the place and pneumonia symptoms. Whole-genome sequencing results indicated that the causative agent is a novel coronavirus. This virus, therefore, is the seventh member of the coronavirus family to infect humans (Huang et al., 2020).

On January 12, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) temporarily termed the new virus 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) and then on February 12, 2020 officially named this infectious disease coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) later officially labelled the virus as SARS-CoV-2 based on phylogeny, taxonomy and established practice. Human-to-human transmission of COVID-19 occurring within Hong Kong was subsequently shown in clinical data. Since COVID-19 first emerged in China, it has evolved and rapidly spread to other countries the world over as a global menace. On March 11, 2020, the WHO finally made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic, following 1918 Spanish flu (H1N1), 1957 Asian flu (H2N2), 1968 Hong Kong flu (H3N2), and 2009 Pandemic flu (H1N1), which caused an estimated 50 million, 1.5 million, 1 million, and 300,000 human deaths, respectively (Huang et al., 2020).

Though a very recent concept, COVID-19 has furnished the subject matter of many scholarly research efforts both internationally and locally. Kim et al. (2020) aver that the COVID-19 has affected the world population in many ways, resulting in its own specialised discourse and that this discourse has also led to a rethinking of multifarious research methods. Official announcements, parliamentary proceedings and COVID-19-related corpora were examined and a comparative textual analysis between the Malaysian and British governments was provided. At the micro level, selected corpora with lexical, semantic, and discourse foci and personal posts of short narratives and photos were analysed to encapsulate meanings from human life and experience. The main takeaway from the study was the application of a wide range of methods for different focus and perspectives that may be customised to the researchers' unique context.

Working on "Providing Multilingual Logistics Communication in COVID-19 Disaster Relief", Jie & Yuqin (2020) state that translation is an important means of enabling access to information in an emergency response as volunteer translators have increasingly been using social

media platforms to self-organise and carry out urgent translation tasks that effectively complement official disaster relief efforts. They argue that the role of Crowd sourced translations and the capacity of volunteer translators in reducing the impact of disasters remain underestimated and consequently understudied. Using semi-structured interviews with five volunteer translators and online observation of their translation practices, the investigators studied the role of a volunteer driven crowd sourced translation effort in facilitating the donation and procurement of medical supplies between Wuhan and the world. By addressing the real challenges of urgent crisis communication in Wuhan in the early stages of the pandemic, this study drew attention to the need to integrate information and communication technologies with multilingual resources for disaster relief. In addition, it called for the inclusion of multilingual logistics in national emergency preparation, response and recovery plans.

Gegentüül (2020) work is on “Fighting COVID-19 with Mongolian Fiddle Stories”. The article examines the recontextualisation of traditional Mongolian verbal art *khuuriin ülger* ('fiddle story') by Mongolian folk singers in the context of the spread of COVID-19 in Inner Mongolia, China. Drawing on the concept of intertextuality, the researcher analysed the verbal and visual signs in 94 videos of Mongolian fiddle stories and argued that the minority Mongols participated in the dominant global and national discourses while at the same time creating a sense of Mongolian-ness by marrying Mongolian verbal art with public health messages related to COVID-19. The study also found that the multivocal COVID-19 Mongolian fiddle stories were a medium to articulate the very heteroglot sense of the world in which minority Mongols dwell and to construct and reaffirm their multi-layered identities.

Diaspora Micro-influencers and COVID-19 Communication on Social Media: The Case of Chinese-speaking YouTube Vloggers is the preoccupation of Leticia-Tian and Sumin (2020), as they observe that diaspora vloggers - migrants who produced video blogs in the language of their home countries for a transnational diaspora community - have been a largely overlooked group in the studies of social media. The work focuses on the distinctive role of Chinese diaspora vloggers during an unprecedented global experience - the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the study point to the emergence of a new form of migrant identity in the age of social media and highlighted the importance of understanding such identities in delivering public health information in global emergencies

such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In their study, Ingrid et al. (2020) posit that multilingual crisis communication emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic as global public health communication was characterised by the large-scale exclusion of linguistic minorities from timely high quality information resulting from the dominance of English-centric global mass communication, the longstanding devaluation of minoritised languages and the failure to consider the importance of multilingual repertoires for building trust and resilient communities. The study concluded that, in order to learn lessons from COVID-19 and be better prepared for future crises, sociolinguistics needed to include local knowledge and grassroots practices as objects of investigation as well as diversify its knowledge base and the academic voices to produce that knowledge base and needs to re-enter dialogue with policy makers and activists.

Also, Oluwateniola et al. (2021) have done a sociolinguistic study that explores lexical innovations and variation in the lexemes of Nigerian English formed during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to them, the emergence and spread of the virus have drastically changed the societal norm to becoming what is now called the new normal and that the Nigerian linguistic terrain is not spared from the crisis caused by the virus as some new words peculiar to COVID-19 have been introduced into the day to day use of Nigerian English (NE) in some sectors of the society, such as education, social media, health, religion, and markets. They opine that there have also been lexical innovations as well as variations in the use of these vocabularies. Using the variationist model, these researchers investigated some COVID-19 vocabularies and how factors such as region, class, and situational contexts bring about linguistic variations in daily use. The study showed that NE speakers use diverse morphological processes to create new lexemes based on the COVID-19 context. It also produced a COVID-19 vocabulary corpus that revealed Nigerian speakers' linguistic and innovative ability of the English.

Investigation into the analysis of humour has been an object of study even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Some scholars have investigated the therapeutic effect of humour. For example, Wilkins & Eisenbraun (2009) examine the implications of humour for nurse practitioners working in hospice settings, long-term care facilities, nursing homes, and hospitals and, thus, argue that irrespective of the theory of humour that is deployed, humour has physiological benefit. In other words, the laughter

evoked by humour has physiological advantage. Also, Dossey & Keegan (2008) explain that nurses can help relieve the stress of their patients by helping them to find humorous perspective in their problems. The physiological impact of humour is underscored by Koestler's (1989, p.31)) study where humour as “the only domain of creative activity where a stimulus on a high level of complexity produces a massive and sharply defined response on the level of physiological reflexes”. From the angle of politics, Marín-Arrese (2008) explores humour in political cartooning in Spain during the 1970s from the perspective of conceptual integration or 'blending' and concludes that the use of humour in political cartoons may be viewed as a form of challenge of existing ideological and political structures.

The comical and humorous effect of COVID-19 in human communication is a novel area of study. Asiru & Bello's (2021) study focuses on linguistic and literary analyses of selected cartoons on the novel COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The study analyses the humorous and satirical depiction of the pandemic, the state of the Nigerian health sector, and the country's major actors in the fight against the scourge, using selected cartoons from the Nigerian context. The cartoons were randomly selected from the Facebook pages of popular Nigerian cartoonists. The study used two theories in interpreting the cartoons - Suls's (1983) Incongruity Resolution (IR) model and Structuralism. The study observed that the cartoons were not only independent texts or images but were also products of the Nigerian social condition. It also revealed that the cartoons exposed the realities in the country and refused to be relegated to simply satirical images of issues and events in the country's history. The analysis shows that cartoons are an important part of the discourse on the pandemic. The study also reveals that the cartoonists deployed both verbal and non-verbal incongruity to present comical images that showed the beliefs of Nigerians about the pandemic and the country's readiness to flatten the curve of the virus contraction.

In the same vein, Inyabri et al. (2021) investigate humour as an instrument for the expression of youths' perception on digital data. Their study adopted multimodal critical discourse analysis and performance theory. They argue that digital humour and its responses to the COVID-19 issue allow young people to engage a conservative system.

The aim of this paper is to examine humour from the perspective of sport-based metaphors in comments of some Nigerians on the results

periodically released by the NCDC on Facebook. This paper is inspired by the investigators' interest in the sport-based metaphors, specifically the game of football, and how they unfold the opinion of the text producers on the issue of COVID-19 results released from time to time by NCDC.

The research is significant because it provides a perspective of Nigerians' reaction to government's report on the phenomenal deadly disease - the COVID-19. Secondly, the study avails the readers the therapeutic effect inherent in humour and the sweet relief it offers especially to troubled minds. Also, the results of the work can propel further inquiries into the use of humour in other linguistic contexts.

Fifteen comments that focused on humour related to sport-based metaphors were purposively selected from the results of NCDC (<http://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng>) update on COVID-19 on Facebook. These comments were analysed using the incongruity theory and conceptual metaphor theory.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted the incongruity theory and Contextual metaphor theory. The incongruity theory is one of the theories of humour. However, three major theories have been traditionally identified in the literature of humour, namely, the superiority theory, the relief theory and the incongruity theory. The superiority theory opines that the comical is perceived as inferior and that laughter is an expression of the sudden realisation of our superiority; the relief theory points to the liberating effect of laughter while the incongruity theory states the object of amusement consists in some form of incongruity (Kulka, 2007). Wilkins & Eisenbraun (2009, p.349) aver that “underlying each of these theories are the physiological benefits of laughter”.

In relation to the incongruity theory, Wilkins and Eisenbraun (2009, p.351) argue that the incongruity theory focuses “on contradictions between expectations and experiences”. According to them, “people laugh at things that surprise them or at things that violate an accepted pattern...” (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009, p.352). They further state that “the incongruity theory emphasizes cognition; individuals must have rationally come to understand typical patterns of reality before they can notice differences (Wilkins and Eisenbraun, 2009, p.352). The cognitive view of the incongruity theory is further re-echoed by Krikmann (2006, p.27) who argues that

Incongruity theories are essentially cognitive, i.e. they are based on some objective characteristics of a humorous text or other act (situation, event, picture, etc.). It is assumed that every such act involves two different planes of content ... These two are mutually incompatible, but also include a certain common part which makes the shift from one to another possible.

The view above identifies the cognitive interface of a humorous text or acts like situation, event, picture, etc. Also, a humorous text or other act involves two different planes of content which, even though are mutually incompatible, have a common part that allows the shifting from one content to another possible.

Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) is one of the contemporary theories of metaphor. Some others include cognitive blending theory, frame semantics, mental space theory, space discourse theory, and a host of others. Metaphor has been viewed mainly from two angles: the classical and the contemporary. The classical perspective views metaphor as a matter of language where metaphoric expressions abound in novel poetic language and not in day-to-day language. Lakoff (1992, p.202) corroborates this view by stating that classical theorists view metaphors as “a novel or poetic linguistic expression where one or more words for a concept are used outside of its normal conventional meaning to express a similar concept.” The other is the contemporary view which sees metaphoric expressions as those that exist in everyday language. According to Goatly (2011, p.1), “... metaphor is not something that can be easily confined, but is an indispensable basis of language...” These views reflect the non-literal uses of metaphor in linguistic expressions (Musolff, 2016). Studies in metaphor have been moved “into the centre of theories of meaning (i.e. semantics and pragmatics) and applied linguistics, which deals with the acquisition, use and impact of metaphor in all kinds of social contexts” (Musolff, 2016, p.3).

Also, Lakoff (1992) affirms that the locus of metaphor resides in the way one mental domain is conceptualised in terms of another. He further states that the mappings from a source domain to a target domain “are not arbitrary but grounded in ... everyday experience and knowledge” (Lakoff, 1993, p.245). Consequently, the cognitive undertone of the

contemporary view aligns with that of the incongruity theory; this is responsible for the combination of the two theories.

Dimensions of Sport-based Metaphors in COVID-19 Results on Facebook in Nigeria

The relevant comical comments on NCDC results of COVID-19 under study are discussed from two discursive directions of sport-based metaphors, namely, COVID-19 results as contest and states as clubs.

COVID-19 Results as Contest

COVID-19 results are conceptualised as contest and competition through the deployment of lexical items from the semantic field of sport, and, in particular, of football. Football is an important game that unites Nigerians irrespective of political affiliation, tribe, and creed. It makes Nigerians to forget their differences especially when Nigeria plays international matches. Apart from this, there are interstate matches by different clubs that represent the various states in the country. Either way, football is a binding force in the country. It is against this backdrop that the comments on the results of COVID-19 by NCDC on Facebook is conceptualised within the mental space of battleground where contests take place. Consequently, the higher the number of those who tested positive in a state, the more powerful that state becomes. Herein lies the quest for greater scores as illustrated in the samples below.

Sample 1: Congratulations to rivers state for toping the league table today.

Sample 2: Lagos is now in the 2nd position wonderful. But Edo you people should be calming down o how una take reach 4th now now? Anyway congratulations to rivers state as they top the table today. Celebrate grace somebody. I thought Lagos was going to carry...

Sample 3: Congratulations Rivers United for coming top today Lagos United tried all it could but luck was not on its side.

Sample 4: At last, Rivers has topped Lagos State. Exactly what they have been trying to do. Oya! Akwa ibom state,na your turn.

It is usually a thing of joy when a particular state topples another in a game, and in particular, the sport of football in Nigeria. This is responsible for the comment in Sample 1. Probably, the text producer is from Rivers State, and as such, the state is celebrated for topping the league table for that day. In a league, sports teams all play each other to earn points and find which team is best. The comical import of Sample 1 is rooted in the perception of some Nigerians that COVID-19 is a scam. There is a long standing distrust of government by many Nigerians. It is this distrust that is reechoed through the humorous effect of the euphoria exhibited in the comment (Congratulations to rivers state for toping the league table today). In reality, it is not a thing of joy or something that calls for celebration when the number of people that tested positive for a disease in a state outnumbers another. Therefore, the metaphorisation of the COVID-19 result as indexed by the relationship between the target (COVID-19 result) and the source domain (sport) further corroborates the incongruous import that unveils the comical effect of Sample 1.

The applause is re-echoed by Samples 2 and 3. Rivers State is celebrated for having the highest case of COVID-19 infections from the update by NCDC for that particular day. So, the mapping of results from football to that of the NCDC results shows the relationship that is drawn between these two domains that are not identical but are seen as one in the views and opinions of the writers of those comments. Instead of being sad that Rivers State has the highest case of COVID-19 infections for that day, it is seen as something to jubilate over. In other words, the highest figure of COVID-19 infections by Rivers State is to be celebrated. Not only did the humorous effects of the comments reveal Nigerians' inclination to football, they also show the mindset of many Nigerians who see COVID-19 as a hoax.

On the other hand, Samples 2 and 3 express some kind of surprise and disappointment concerning the relegation of Lagos State to a second position. This is associated with the fact that Lagos State is the epicenter of the infection and, as such, it is expected to have more people infected with COVID-19. So, the surprise and disappointed represents people's encyclopaedic knowledge about those surprises that usually accompany football matches where an indomitable team may lose out in a contest. The latter part of Sample 3 underscores this point -that even though Lagos United tried all it could, luck was not on its side. In Samples 4, Akwa Ibom State is encouraged to leave its relegated position. The text producer of

Sample 4 is likened to a spectator whose work is to cheer players on the field. In football, there are just two teams playing per time. This is not the case here. Rather, there are more than two teams playing at the same time. This suggests that the 'spectator' is willing to support any winner (state) irrespective of where such is from. The comical implication that results from this comment is targeted at trivialising the virus since many Nigerians do not still understand the non-severity of the virus on the populace.

The humour resulting from the comments on NCDC results is also aimed at criticising government's action and stance at the peak of the pandemic. Lockdown was imposed by different governments in various countries of the world and to cushion the effect of the lockdown on people and businesses, governments gave out relief materials to their citizens. However, in Nigeria, the relief materials did not get to many people. It is this shared information that led to the expression:

Sample 5: Up Benue United. How i wish we e top the league. Despite their relief materials don't get to our end. But we need more cases on papers. Fact remains that our isolation centers are empty. Where are the covid 19 patients?

One of the benefits offered by digital technology is a form of 'liberty' social media have given to citizens in expressing their views publicly without fear of intimidation because, at times, it is difficult to detect the identity of the social media users. In relation to Facebook, sometimes, the users employ pseudo names and addresses that are unverifiable. Consequently, the boundless mode of expression, made possible by digital technology, enables the text producer to express displeasure over their exclusion in the distribution of relief materials. In spite of the displeasure, it is the wish of the text producer that Benue United tops the league even though the isolation centres are empty. The implication of this afterthought underscores the mistrust an ordinary citizen of Nigeria has about Nigerian government. The notion espoused in the view represented in Sample 5 shows the lack of confidence in NCDC (an agency of the government). In other words, the authenticity of the results put forward by NCDC is questioned as further revealed by the rhetorical question – where

are the COVID-19 patients? This lack of trust is shown in the next expression:

Sample 6: Why not reduce some from Lagos and add to Kogi before they go relegation next season

Here, NCDC is seen as a body that awards scores arbitrarily. It reveals the unrestrained power of the umpire (NCDC) in awarding scores (results) to states. This is responsible for the request – reducing some of the results of Lagos and adding such to those of Kogi before the latter goes into relegation. The fear that Kogi could go into relegation may not be unconnected with the claim of Yahaya Bello, the governor of the state, that nobody is infected with the virus in his state. So, NCDC is represented as the body that has the power to decide who or what team participates in a match or not. Samples 7, 8 and 9 resonate this perspective in the expressions:

Sample 7: God will judge you for sitting Borno State for bench.....bench bench all the time. If Borno is not participating how can we see the impact of what we spend on our players. Whyyy?

Sample 8: Come, na my town wey supposed dey on top this meme, after all the efforts we made to maintain the highest number...last last una no put am for list sef

Sample 9: Una dey forget Nasarawa and Kogi state, why? We have number of Sisi Korona and you guys are not doing anything about it pls take note.

The expression in Sample 7 shows the displeasure of the text producer because Borno State is prevented from participating in the game. The tone of discontentment is better understood when placed within the register of football. In football, the bench area is an out of bounds area near the sidelines where the benches are set up for a football game and it is usually occupied by players who are not in the game at that present moment. This implies that Borno has consistently been benched as indicated in the repetitive use of 'bench'. Even though NCDC is not mentioned in the comment, the pronominal reference 'you' refers to the agency of government in charge of COVID-19 in Nigeria which is the

NCDC. Indirectly, this agency of government is accused of not allowing Borno to play in the match which has affected its performance in the game for that day.

The passionate stance of the expression may not be unconnected with the position Borno State occupies in Nigeria. It is the state that birthed the Boko Haram, a terrorist group, which has led to destruction of lives and property. Not only that, the government of Nigeria has greatly spent and has continued to spend huge resources that could have been channelled into meaningful projects to ensure that this insurgency becomes a thing of the past. The text producer of Sample 7 therefore questions the rationale for denying the state's participation as indicated in the lexical item, 'bench'. Consequently, the mapping from the source domain of football to the target domain of disease (COVID-19 infection) foregrounds the problem of insurgency and the huge resources that have been channelled towards resolving the problem as embedded in the tone of the expression. Also, the personal pronoun (we), in the sample, shows a collective responsibility at resolving the problem of insurgency that originated from Borno State.

States as Clubs

Nigeria is a country that comprises different states. Presently, it consists of 36 states and the federal capital territory. There are different football clubs associated with the different states in the country. These clubs serve as avenues for competition among the various states. It is this notion that is transferred into the daily report of NCDC on COVID-19 infection in the different states of the federation as states are captured as Clubs as seen in some of the comments on NCDC update.

States are identified with the following names: Rivers United, Lagos United, Benue United, Port Harcourt United, and Plateau United as exemplified below:

Sample 10: Port Harcourt United well done

These names sound like real club names but in reality they are mental creation of the text producers. Some states are not identified by club names; instead, they are clubs themselves: Kogi, Edo, Borno State, Rivers, Lagos, Akwa Ibom State as illustrated below:

Sample 11: At this rate Rivers will will topple FCT in about 2 weeks

Sample 12: Two states with zero cases are borno and kano. So other states with zero cases like, Ondo, kastina, kebbi, taraba,jigawa and kogi are from Senegal country right? Who swear for UAR na

Sample 13: Una dey forget Nasarawa and Kogi state why? We have number of Sisi Korona and you guys are not doing anything about it pls take note

Sample 14: Lagos have retain their position

Sample 15: I thank God say my state no qualify for this competition.

The different names of the clubs that signify the various states evoke some kind of sarcasm. The sarcasm is targeted at treating the COVID-19 update with contempt. Many Nigerians believe COVID-19 is a hoax because, to them, they have not seen people coming down with the virus. Also, some believe it is a disease associated with the rich in the society. Some others see it as a disease limited to those in advanced countries. All these and many more are responsible for the contemptuous manners with which the daily report of COVID-19 infection in Nigeria is handled as exemplified by the comments on NCDC result on Facebook. Consequently, the domain of sport, most especially football, provides the writers of the comments the opportunity to express their views in relation to COVID-19.

Conclusion

The findings show that the comments on NCDC update on COVID-19 results on Facebook align with sport-based metaphors. These comments project COVID-19 results as contest among states. In addition, the states are seen as clubs (football clubs). Consequently, the deployment of these metaphors is rooted in the inability of the text producers (those that commented) to match the results of the NCDC update and the reality which stems from the shared assumption that many Nigerians do not believe in the existence of COVID-19 in Nigeria. The comments, therefore, represent a kind of absurdity between the results and the pattern of reality of the text producers.

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