Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 12 (61) No. 2 – 2019
https://doi.org/10.31926/but.pcs.2019.61.12.9

Gendered concepts in Nigerian stand-up comedy

Ibukun FILANI[1]

This essay examines the manner in which Nigerian stand-up comedians evoke gendered concepts in their routines. Specifically, it analyses how gender is manifested and enacted in linguistic expressions, which literally do not have gender undertones. Three strategies for instantiating such gendered conceptualization are identified, privatization of meaning through lexical contextual adjustment, creating ad hoc conceptual coherence in the monologues and foregrounding pragmatic presuppositions on gender. The paper indicates that, to analyse gender stereotyping in humour, one does not necessarily need to focus on the targets.

Key-words: *Stereotyping, humour, lexical pragmatic adjustment, ad hoc concepts and pragmatic presupposition*

1. Introduction

Several studies have highlighted and explored the performativity of gender in humorous discourses (e.g. Gilbert 2004, Lockyer 2011). Regardless of the theoretical perspectives of these studies, it is important to note that the performativity of gender in a comedy discourse cannot be divorced from the macro sociocultural context in which the text is situated or generated. Therefore, the macro context serves as the locus for the affordances that make gender stereotyping and construction possible. Such acts are further transferred to the comedy micro context where humour and language become fields where gender construction is further enshrined. Linguists like Mills (1995), Oha (1998), Christie (2000) and Eckert and McConnell (2003) have shown that language, discourses and text are gendered. In this paper, I take further the analysis of gendered language use by analysing humorous utterances of Nigerian stand-up comedians (abbreviated as NSC).

This study is a part of an on-going research on discourse construction of gender in NSC. My present aim is to present and experiment a part of the theoretical orientations for the analysis of gender and sexuality constructions in

[1] Central Europe University, Hungary, Filanii@ceu.edu

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

Nigerian comedy contexts. Many Nigerian comedies focus on gender related subjects and stereotypes. In fact, much of their humour is based on construction of gender differences and identities. However, scholarly investigation into this aspect of Nigerian comedy is rather rare. A large percentage of linguistic investigation of NSC has been limited to formal linguistic concerns like pragmatic/linguistic strategies (Adetunji 2013), sociolinguistic analysis of language use (Raheem 2018), discourse and pragmatic theoretic conceptualizations of humour performance and the joke texts (Filani 2015a, 2015b). In my current project, I diverge from the mainstream formal approach to Nigerian humour in order to underscore its sociocultural dimensions with which it (re)defines and/or reinforce sociocultural values and beliefs. Specifically, in this paper, I examine the semantics of concepts in the jokes of Nigerian stand-up comedians in relation to gender identities in the wider Nigerian sociocultural context.

What makes investigating gender in Nigerian humorous discourse interesting is that the comedy texts could be used to portray feminist or masculine identity regardless of whether the initiator of the text is a (fe)male comedian. I must, however, note that Nigerian stand-up comedy space is androcentric in that there are more male comedians than female comedians. According to Adetunji (2013), female comedians "are not up to one-fifth of the total number of Nigerian stand-up comedians". This very much agrees with the conceptualization of stand-up comedy as male-dominated, not only in terms of number but also in terms of joke-texts and performative features which are perceived as traditionally male (see Lockyer 2011). In my view, the gender imbalance is not unconnected with the wider traditional patriarchal systems that disparage women as minority and offer them fewer opportunities. In a sub-Saharan African context like Nigeria, such patriarchal system seems to be upheld in the comedy genre.

According to Attardo (2011), humour is the technical term that is used to refer to anything that is perceived to be funny and amusing. Based on how the term humour is approached, studies on humour can be categorized into two groups: the first one consists of studies that are concerned with theorizing humour in the data analysed. These studies answer the question what makes humour. The second set of studies goes beyond accounting for humour and emphasizes the purpose to which humour is used. In these studies, humour is a means to an end. Mulkay's (1988) distinction of pure humour from applied humour reflects this distinction. In pure humour, the "serious" implications of jokes are rejected and denied while in applied humour, the humorous text is considered as a vehicle for serious meanings (Tsakona and Popa 2011). The perspective adopted in this study is that of applied humour since the stand-up humour is construed as an artefact which points to the reality works present in

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

the macro context of its production. Therefore, the jokes and utterances of the comedians are not just meant to make their audience laugh, but to point them to the social identity mappings in the country.

2. The stand-up humour

Although stand-up comedy is often considered as nothing more than a light-hearted entertainment, its joke contents and performative strategies suggest that there is more to it. According to Waisanen (2011 p.140), it is "an invitation to view the world in certain ways and is therefore an intensely political act." Stand-up comedy, like other genre of humour, tells us about sociocultural issues identified in them. As Laineste (2008) opines, jokes' targets and content are dependent on the complex interaction of social, economic and cultural factors which operate in the environment where they are generated. Along this line, different theorizations of stand-up have been offered, for examples, "cultural affirmation and subversion" (Mintz 1985, 74) and "inherently rhetorical discourse" (Greenbaum 1999, 33). A linguistic investigation of stand-up comedy texts will help in pointing out how the mechanism of language and discourse structure is used in projecting the producers' ideology and philosophy. My research is centred on how language is used to achieve these ends in the Nigerian stand-up context.

My investigation is based on the thesis that humour, as a tool, can be used to perform gender (Chiaro and Baccolini 2014, Ruiz-Gurillo 2019). Ruiz-Gurillo (2019) contends that while many studies have analysed the nexus between gender and conversational humour (e.g. Holmes 2006), performance humour has received less attention from pragmatics, and other aspects of linguistics. This observation is also applicable to performance humour in Nigeria. Ruiz-Gurillo (2019) states that performance humour can be used to (de)construct normative gender identities and articulate alternative forms of sexuality. She further opines that doing gender through humour implies that jokes are being used to maintain or subvert gender boundaries and stereotypes inherent in the empowered masculine system. This could be seen wherever comedians touch on common topics like family, marriage, dating, sex, cooking, or doing house chores.

Compared with its counterpart in the UK and USA, NSC is relatively new in that it began in the mid-1990s. Nigerian stand-up performance is fashioned after stand-up performances in the USA and UK. It is typified by a comedian performing humorous monologues for a seated audience. However, the delineating practices are being blurred as many comedians now innovate diverse performative and theatrical strategies and reach their audiences through social media platforms like

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Also, there are instances of duet performances. The samples analysed in this paper were purposively selected from stand-up comedians who had appeared on *The Night of a Thousand Laughs,* a comedy roadshow, and the oldest and most popular source of stand-up in Nigeria. The aim in this essay is to demonstrate the workability of a linguistic-based approach that focuses on how words and the concepts they encode are used in achieving the humorous intentions of the stand-up comedians. Nigerian stand-up comedians perform in Nigerian Pidgin; however, for the purpose of analysis, I have presented only the translated forms of the excerpts. This has not affected the words and concepts analysed because Nigerian Pidgin is primarily based on English vocabulary. Therefore, the lexical items analysed were presented in English. For the purpose of illustration, the routines of four comedians Basketmouth, Okey Bakasi, Funny Bone and Helen Paul were targeted. The recorded version of the performance in VCDs and on YouTube served as the sources for the videos that were transcribed and translated.

3. Theoretical considerations

Generally, script-based semantics has dominated the linguistic investigations of humour (e.g. Attardo 1994). The script-based approach views jokes as texts bearing two opposing scripts which are brought together by a trigger. The trigger makes the switch from one script to another possible. While commenting on Raskin's (1985) semantic script-based theory of humour, Attardo (2001) asserts that scripts are related to and evoked by lexical items, therefore, it is the lexical items in the joke that suggest the scripts. The script-based approach focuses on the overall semantic interpretation of the joke, however, an analytical framework which focuses on lexical choices of the humourist will be able to show how the conceptual coherence of the joke text contributes to the intension of the text producer and how it references social issues. Van Dijk (1985, 105) defines conceptual coherence as relations between individual concepts. Meanings are conceptual representations and are established from the language users' scripts (van Dijk 1985).

Conceptual semantics proposes that semantic description is different from experiential knowledge of the world, therefore, it considers meaning as a combination of linguistic knowledge and extra linguistic knowledge. It is a modular view of meaning in which conceptual structure, which houses different modes of cognition, "acts as an interface between the formal structures of language and other, non-linguistic modes of knowledge" (Geeraerts 2010, 138). Conceptual structures, therefore, contains not only the sub-categorization frames of words,

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

but also other "modes of cognition like perceptual knowledge" (Geeraerts 2010, 138) and extra linguistic factors that are subjected to contextual modification (Geeraerts 2010, 137-142). Conceptual semantics, therefore, recognizes the impreciseness of the meanings of lexical items. Because of the impreciseness of the meaning of lexical items, Jackendoff (2002) argues that concepts have no direct on-to-one correlation with lexical items. As shown by Kecskes (2013), it is possible to associate several concepts and/or meaning to a lexical item and vice versa. A concept may be identified with several expressions and a single expression may be used to refer to several concepts. This implies that speakers have many options with which they explicate their thoughts and express their intentions. What this means is that that the language space is opened-up for comedians to play with as they can wilfully associate any concept with any lexical item.

Meaning construction is central to any discourse. The pursuit of meaning and/or conceptualization of meanings through language choices drives the discourse. In the context of joke performance, the conceptualization of meanings is germane to how the comedian evokes humour. Jokes are culture and audience dependent. It is therefore expected that the comedian's conceptualization should be the same with the audience conceptualization and their shared culture. However, the comedians may evoke linguistic strategies and conceptual meanings which are not the same with that of the audience and which may not necessarily be obtainable in the shared culture. This is made possible because of the "indeterminacies and fuzzy boundaries of word meanings" (Geeraerts 2010, 141) and it amounts, in the linguistic/discourse sense, to "creative distortions" (Mintz 1985, 79). Because of this, stand-ups could create new situational meanings, absurd textual/conceptual coherence and evoke new concepts from existing lexical items. What a conceptual based approach to joke proposes is that the concepts foregrounded by the humourists, and which the audience can identify and interpret, enhance the humorousness of the routines.

An important implication of conceptual semantics for humour is the role of extra linguistic factors in the communication of humour. In his sociocognitive approach (SCA) to pragmatics, Kecskes (2013) identifies actual situational context (emergent common ground) and prior experience-based context (core-common ground). The first has to do with how language is used in the ongoing interaction while the second specifies that language users depend on their prior experience-knowledge of language and sociocultural knowledge/ experience, which is presumed to be mutual but is not necessarily so. Therefore, the prior experience could be private or public. It is generally expected that stand-ups should evoke the shared public knowledge in their monologues. However, they may favour the use of their own private experience. Likewise, audience members could be

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

egocentric and depend on their private context in interpreting the monologues. The comedic communication, therefore, relies on both the prior context and the actual situational context, that is, not only evoking the prior public experience, but jointly depending on the actual situational context. For instance, the speaker has the same prior knowledge of the linguistic meaning of words with the audience, however, s/he may choose to neglect denotations of words and use them differently (connotatively and stylistically) in the monologues. The conceptualization of meanings and the lexical items that encode them may be innovated by the comedian in the actual situational context. Kecskes argues that both the prior context and actual situational (emerging) context should be considered in the analysis: "both core common ground (assumed shared knowledge, a priori mental representation) and emergent common ground (emergent participant resource, a post facto emergence through use) converge to construct a socio-cultural background for communication" (Kecskes 2013, 154).

4. On gender

Many of the studies on gender and language use in linguistics have been influenced by the works of theorists like Robin Lakoff and Judith Butler (e.g. Mills 1995, Christie 2000, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). Specifically, these theorists argue that language and discourses are sexist (Mills 1995, Oha 1998, Christie 2000), and that gender is socially constructed though performative acts in language (Butler 1988). While not denying the stances of these studies in the present study and following Meyerhoff (1996), I take gender identity as a sociolinguistic variable, one of the many identities possessed by the participants-of-the-joke. This view is fed by the social identity theory which posits that an individual's various group identities are central to the development of self and they form the basis for their communicative behaviour. While the several identities of the comedians would determine the jokes they would perform and laugh at, they would resort to their gender identities in instantiating and interpreting gendered jokes. In gendered jokes, gender identity is more salient and foregrounded than any other forms of identities. As a variable for joke performance, I construe gender identity as being set-up by the joke to be performed. In other words, gender identity and gender construction are foregrounded in the stand-up humorous utterances based on the joke; therefore, it is just one of the many strategies the comedians could use to evoke humorous effects. This implies that gender identity is not always foregrounded in the performance, and that a gender bias joke is not necessarily known through the target of the joke. This perspective questions whether the

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

comedian is performing or foregrounding her or his gender identity. The answer lies in how humour has been perceived. If the stand-up performance is viewed as applied humour, then it can be concluded that the projection of gender in the jokes represents what the comedians identify with.

5. Analysis

By gendered concepts, I do not mean that there are lexical items, concepts, or linguistic units that are inherently or denotatively gendered and which are adopted by the comedians for the purpose of eliciting laughter. Rather, what the term "gendered concept" stands for in this paper is that comedians use lexical items, concepts or linguistic units that, prior to the humour performance, are not denotatively gendered and do not indicate the social category of gender. This stance does not take the proposition that language is gendered, rather, it suggests that gender is being performed in the context of stand-up comedy humour through linguistic and discourse strategies adopted by the comedians. These strategies inherently involve a deliberate pursuit of concepts or conceptualizations on the part of the comedians.

5.1. Privatization of concepts through lexical contextual adjustment

In interactions, participants have two sources of information- the collective and private, and while they make their contributions, they could either use the collective information or the private one. Common ground theorists argue that for the interaction to be successful, participants should draw from the public source of information, or at least make what is taken from the private source communal. In NSC, it is common for the comedian to adopt the reverse order. Rather than dwelling on collective/public conceptualizations, they would rather adopt the strategy of privatization. Following Kecskes (2013), privatization is a strategy through which a participant individualizes the collective. It is making what initially has a common ground status to have a subjective individualized status. It entails taking assumptions, beliefs and propositions from the collective cultural model/norm and using them in an individualized manner in concrete interactional events.

Language and culture are systems of shared beliefs, norms, values and patterns. Words and the meaning they encode are based on conventions. It is expected that participants should reflect the shared pattern of the semantics of language units in their discourses. However, because words are fuzzy-edged and the concepts they encode are not the same in all situational use, it is possible for

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

comedians to use them in the individualized manner. In the stand-up context, the comedians take words and concepts from the shared linguistic and extralinguistic contexts, and then privatize them in the situational context of the performance. This happens whenever a comedian takes a word and gives it a new meaning and it is common whenever stand-up comedians are focusing on gendered practices and identities. Privatization of concepts is achieved via established linguistic meaning making strategies and/or interpretation strategies such as *ad hoc* concept creation and extending the meaning of already existing lexical items (loosening or broadening). Excerpts 1 and 2 below exemplify this.

(1) [Basketmouth]
Now in the 80s, there were no GSM, no phones
So, if you tell your wife that honey, I am going to work,
You are going to work. Whenever you come back is when you come back
If you say you are in a board meeting all day, you are in a board meeting all day
Try it today, honey I was in a board meeting that's why I didn't pick your call;
She would say show me; then you would see men in the hotel
Looking for board meeting room in the hotel.
Manager, did you have any board meeting? Oh God. Call your staff
Call your staff, make them to wear white so that we would have a little snapchat. Jesus Christ.
Telecommunication has messed things so bad.

Excerpt 1 is taken from a routine in which the comedian, Basketmouth, makes jokes out of his marital relationship. The monologue could be easily understood, however, interpreting it necessarily includes considering how the comedian uses the terms *GSM*, *Phones, Snapchat* and *Telecommunication*. These lexical items belong to the semantic field of modern-day information and communication technology; therefore, they denote gadgets and means of communication. Another extralinguistic proposition that is derived by both the comedian and audience from their experience with the use of these gadgets is that they facilitate and make communication faster. The concept being indicated by these words is *modern means/ gadget of communication.* However, if Basketmouth kept to these meanings as the encoded concept in these lexical items as the frame for using them in his routine, his intention to elicit humorous effects in the audience would not be achieved. Therefore, he constructs a new concept and encodes it into the terms. His newly constructed concept now acts as the meaning for the terms in his humorous monologue.

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

It is important to comment on what guides the construction of the new concepts. His anecdote on his marital relationship motivates the choice of the individualized concept - *gadgets that mess things up and causes lots of problems between couples*. He begins the monologue with marital relationship in the 1980s before the invention of GSM and smart phones. Then, the husband, due to lack of verifiable means could lie about his movements and the wife would have to accept the husband's assertions about his movements and whereabouts. This trend could not continue because, with telecommunications, wives could verify or monitor the movements and whereabouts of their spouses as seen in the case and anecdote of Basketmouth. In this Basketmouth's routine, *GSM, phones* and *telecommunication* acquire a privatized concept that is motivated by the way the comedian represents his wife- a woman who controls her husband.

Basketmouth's use of a privatized concept entails a pragmatic strategy/ process which is lexical pragmatic adjustment. Allott and Textor (2012, 185) define lexical pragmatic adjustment "as the formation of an *ad hoc* concept that is narrower or broader in extension (or both) than the lexicalized concept involved." *Ad hoc* concept formation is the adjustment of meaning of a linguistic unit based on contextual information; such meaning must be inferentially derived (Carston 2010). In the present case, telecommunication and other terms are broadened to have a meaning the audience members would not have thought of.

Privatizing through lexical pragmatic adjustment in Basketmouth's routine is not an impulsive act, rather it is a well-thought strategy that is motivated by the kind of humorous story he was performing. Since the goal of the anecdote is to portray his wife, and by extension women in relationships, as burdensome and nagging, he has to extend the meaning of *telecommunications* to include *gadgets that are used in monitoring a partner's movement.*

(2) [Funny Bone]
I do tell people, some kind natural things, as God was creating it,
He had men in mind. Some things are masculine in nature.
Women are not supposed to have it, e.g. snoring.
If you see a girl snoring, slap her. It is highly...
How can you snore like that? And on top that, women's snoring has backup
You would hear (*made a sound like snoring then whistled*). What! Snoring!
Second thing, Potbelly. A woman is not supposed to have potbelly.
Potbelly is a celebration of man's foolishness.

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

That is why girls tuck in their belly from Nupe to Maitama[2] (*gesticulates sucking-in the stomach and walks around the stage*)
You will die!
Now some things are also feminine. Men are not supposed to have it.
To eye someone is a gift God gave to women. Men are not supposed to do it.

Although there is also lexical contextual adjustment of concepts in Excerpt 2, the privatization of concept in it is different from that Excerpt 1 in few ways. While there is no overt or explicit deployment of gender categorization in Excerpt 1, there is a direct and explicit use of stereotypes on gender behaviour in Excerpt 2. While gender categorization is only employed in talking about marital relationship in Excerpt 1, in Excerpt 2, it goes beyond being married and it is projected into a general feature regardless of social status or marital relationship. The implication of these differences is that Excerpt 1 demands more cognitive task from the audience than Excerpt 2 since there is no explicit reference to gender stereotyping in 1.

Three concepts in Excerpt 2 are significant for the present analysis: *Snoring, Potbelly* and *eyeing*. These human body features are biological and have nothing to do with human sex or gender. However, in the routine, the comedian has endowed them with gendered meanings based on gender stereotyping existing in the macro context of the performance and through the process of broadening the meaning of the expressions. The words *Snoring* and *potbelly* denotatively mean noisy breathing during sleep and round and large stomach that sticks out. Also, *eyeing* means, in the Nigerian English context, to give a warning through a stern look[3]. However, in privatizing the meanings of *snoring* and *potbelly*, the comedian describes them as inherently and exclusively masculine biological features. Also, *eyeing* is seen as something that is exclusively feminine. This routine sets up a problem that the audience should realize and they should also avoid- female members of the audience must avoid snoring and having potbelly while the males must not gesticulate eyeing. Audience inference will show that the concepts are endowed with sexist meanings that are based on sociocultural knowledge of what the woman body should look like and what men should use their body for. Here, there is an implicit sexual objectification of both woman and man bodies by the

[2] Although Nupe is the name of an ethnic group, the comedian has used it here to indicate a location. Maitama is a district in Abuja, the country's capital city and the location of the comedy show.

[3] Eyeing in Nigerian English is transliterated from Nigerian languages. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is no Standard British Word that captures it. To eye entails rolling the eyes while moving the eyelids up and down. This facial gesture is interpreted as giving a stern warning through looks.

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

comedian. While the sexual objectification theory claims that "women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to be valued" (Szymanski *et al.* 2011, 7), the comedian has extended this to include the male body.

5.2. *Ad hoc* conceptual coherence in the monologues

Coherence refers to the content-based or semantic connections of a text. According to Baker and Ellece (2011, 16), it "refers to the ways a text is made semantically meaningful." In the Hallidayan sense, the term is used to underscore the meaning ties of words and sentences in a text. For a narrative genre like stand-up comedy to be felicitous, there must be "content-based connections" in the utterances of the comedian. Also, all the communicative acts of the comedian must address the same pragmatic presupposition (Mey 2001, 153-154).

In NSC, *ad hoc* conceptual coherence follows from lexical pragmatic adjustment. The implicature derived from lexical pragmatic adjustment is usually sustained by the comedian throughout the narration of an anecdote, and sometimes, the monologue. This amounts to the comedian expanding the success derived from instantiating the new concept. Generally, *ad hoc* concept formation conjures from the audience a "surprise effect" (Giora 1991) since the lexical item has not been thought to connote such a concept. Rhetorically, therefore, it feeds incongruity. Also, when concepts are instantiated by the comedians, the audience are always looking forward to seeing how the comedians will use them. The concepts create a frame for the audience for interpreting the rest of the monologue. The comedian expands the effect of lexical pragmatic adjustment by creating *ad hoc* coherence of the lexical item/concept with other linguistic units in their monologues.

This is seen in Basketmouth's monologue which is the source of Excerpt 1. Having instantiated the newly encoded concept for telecommunication gadgets, he goes further to exemplify how every conversation with his wife always ends up with the woman saying *Honey give me your phone, open your phone for me.* Also, in the routine of Okey Bakasi in which he jokes about women, he describes women as the *most powerful people God made* and then explicitly encodes the concept *very difficult to control.* After this, the comedian goes further to illustrate what it means to be *the most powerful people God made* and the encoded concept, *very difficult to control.* To start with, he mentions Jesus Christ who selected only men as his disciples not because there were no women, but because he selected *people whom he could control*. Unlike James and John who immediately followed Jesus, had Jesus called any woman, the woman would have asked, *Who are you? Follow you to where?* Just as in the Basketmouth performance, there is consistent content-

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

based connection in the utterances of Okey Bakasi as well as pragmatic presuppositions that keep leading the audience to the notions *Women are powerful* and *women are difficult to control*. A similar pattern is also seen in Helen Paul's use of the word *wisdom* while focusing on the social bias in dating that prevent the females from asking out the males.

(3) [Helen Paul]
Women, be using wisdom.
As I am, I said it now, I have branded myself.
Because I am small,
people don't look at me two times but now people take a second look at me.
This place now is packaged, (*touching her breast*)
let me show you (*brings out the clothes with which she padded her brassier*).
Total package.
We like to package so that boys will not be sieving us away.
I even packaged this place too (*touching her buttocks and bringing out the clothes with which she padded her buttocks*).
Total packaging.

In Excerpt 3, the lexical item *wisdom* is what she pragmatically encodes with the concepts *packaging* and *branding.* In this routine, wisdom is not just knowledge or insight, rather it is an act which all ladies must employ in order to enhance their attractiveness. Thus, in her routine, *wisdom* connotes *packaging* and *branding.* It should be noted that these two terms too have a singular concept encoded in them by Helen Paul, which is also derived contextually in the joke through the process of lexical pragmatic adjustment. Ordinarily, packaging and branding are registers of marketing that denote the preparation and promotion of goods and services. However, in the comedienne's routine, they have been broadened to mean *methods or means by which a lady can enhance her physical appearance.* Specifically, they mean not just being fashionable but improving appearance through any means which she demonstrates by removing her wig and the clothes with which she had padded her brassiere and pants to make her breast and buttocks look bigger. Although this excerpt could be interpreted in diverse ways, the focus here is on how the comedian has defined the term *wisdom* to meaning *packaging* and *branding* (enhancing physical appearance), and how she has strategically connected all her communicative acts on the stage to indicate what she meant. In the pragmatic view (e.g. Mey 2001), the acts and the linguistic utterances of Helen Paul suggest the same pragmatic presupposition and they connect meaning wise. This has been termed *ad hoc*

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

conceptual coherence because, ordinarily, there is no same semantic relationship between these terms, however, in the context of the monologues the comedians have created a meaning connectedness between them. Furthermore, Helen Paul's use of *packaging* and *branding* agrees very much with feminists' theory of the objectification of the female body (Mills 1995, Szymanski *et al.* 2011). Helen Paul objectifies her breast and buttocks as objects of male sexual desire by demonstrating packaging. By doing this, she fragmented and depersonalized her body features to be enjoyed by men.

5.2. Foregrounding pragmatic presuppositions and sociocultural positioning on gender

A consistent pattern found in these routines on gender categorization in which lexical items are embedded with gendered meanings is the foregrounding of pragmatic presuppositions on gender and sociocultural mappings of gender construction. The routines are discourses in which the speakers are projecting their background beliefs on gender on one hand and expressing what they believe is common knowledge on the other. Because the textual information, the encoded denotations in the lexical choices in the routines, does not necessarily bring up presuppositions on gender categorization, the comedians adopt the pragmatic strategies of contextual lexical adjustment that involves *ad hoc* concept formation. As shown in the analysis above, it is in this manner that the comedians foreground gender categorization.

Using pragmatic presupposition implies that stand-up comedy performance is based on the comedian's manipulation of shared cultural beliefs. In the present analysis, such beliefs are assumptions that are based on being a male or a female and on how a people should act because of their gender. According to Yus (2004, 324),

> much of the enjoyment in the audience comes from the collective realization that certain assumptions made manifest by the comedian are in fact mutually manifest to the audience, 'cultural' in a broad sense, which adds to an overall improvement of the audience's encyclopedic knowledge of how their social environment is organized and on the rules concerning social behavior.

Furthermore, the audience find the monologues humorous because the comedians use their routines to foreground, reinforce, challenge or manipulates such knowledge (Yus 2004; 2016; Sunday and Filani 2018). What is seen in the present

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

analysis on Nigerian stand-up comedians' adoption of gendered concepts is the constant use of Nigerian cultural representations on gender categorization, with the foregrounding and strengthening of such representations.

6. Conclusion

This essay has examined the role that concept formation plays in stand-up humour performance. Specifically, the paper focuses on the way Nigerian stand-up comedians implicitly embed gendered meanings into their lexical choices. It is argued that such a strategy is made possible because of the open-endedness nature of words: as much as words have encoded semantic concepts and contextual variation in the use of such concepts, there is the possibility of privatizing, broadening or loosening the scope of the concepts. As creative distorters who play on and with language (use), stand-up comics manipulate contextual variation of concepts in their routines. This paper, which focuses on gendered concepts, has shown how this is carried out in the Nigerian stand-up situation. It is argued that the lexical choices of the comedians are not in themselves gendered, however, since they are open ended, the comedians extend their meanings to reflect the gender categorization existing in the macro sociocultural context of the performance. By focusing on how Nigerian stand-up comedians pursue and instantiate concepts in their jokes, the paper has shown that analyzing gender stereotyping in jokes does not necessarily need to include focusing on the targets of the jokes as shown in some studies (e.g. Cendra *et al.* 2019).

References

Adetunji, Akin. 2013. "The Interactional Context of Humour in Nigerian Stand-Up Comedy". *Pragmatics* 23(1): 1-22.

Allot, Nicholas and Mark Textor. 2012. "Lexical Pragmatic Adjustment and the Nature of *Ad hoc* Concepts". *International Review of Pragmatics* 4: 185-208.

Attardo, Salvatore. 1994. *Linguistic Theories of Humour.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Attardo, Salvatore. 2011. "Humour". In *Discursive Pragmatics,* ed. by Jan Zienkowski, Jan-Ola Östman, Jef Verschueren, 135-155. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Baker, Paul and Sibonile Ellece. 2011. *Key terms in discourse analysis.* London: Continuum.

Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative acts and gender constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory". *Theatre Journal* 40(4): 519-531.

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

Carston, Robyn. 2010. “Lexical pragmatics, ad hoc concepts and metaphor: a relevance theory perspective”. *Italian Journal of Linguistics* 22(1): 153-180.

Cendra, Anastasia N., Teresia D. Triutami, and Barli Bram. 2019. “Gender stereotypes depicted in online sexist jokes”. *European Journal of Humour Research* 7(2): 44-66.

Chiaro, Delia and Raffaella Bacolini. 2014. “Humor: A many gendered thing”. In *Gender and humour. interdisciplinary and international perspectives,* ed. by Delia Chiaro, and Raffaella Bacolini, 1-9. London: Routledge.

Christie, Christine. 2000. *Gender and language: Towards a feminist pragmatics.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Eckert, Penelope and Sally McConnell-Ginet. 2003. *Language and gender.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Filani, Ibukun. 2015a. “Discourse Types in Stand-Up Performances: An Example of Nigerian Stand-Up Comedy”. *European Journal of Humour Research* 3(1): 41-60.

Filani, Ibukun. 2015b. “Stand-Up Comedy as an Activity Type”. *Israeli Journal of Humour Research* 4(1): 73-97.

Geeraerts, Dirk. 2010. *Theories of Lexical Semantics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gilbert, Joanne R. 2004. *Performing Marginality: Humour, Gender, and Cultural Critique.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Giora, Rachel. 1991. “On the Cognitive Aspects of the Joke”. *Journal of Pragmatics* 16: 465-485.

Greenbaum, Andrea. 1999. “Stand-Up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument: An Investigation of Comic Culture”. *Humour: International Journal of Humour Research* 12(1): 33-46.

Holmes, Janet. 2006. “Sharing a Laugh: Pragmatic Aspects of Humour and Gender in the Workplace”. *Journal of* Pragmatics 36: 26-50.

Jackendoff, Ray. 2002. *Foundations of Language: Brain, Meaning, Grammar Evolution.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kecskes, Istvan. 2013. *Intercultural Pragmatics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Laineste, Liisi. 2008. “Politics of Joking: Ethnic Jokes and Their Targets in Estonia (1890s–2007). *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 40: 117–146.

Lockyer, Sharon. 2011. “From Toothpick to Dropping Vaginas: Gender and Sexuality in Joan Rivers' Stand-Up Comedy Performance”. *Comedy Studies* 2(2): 113-123.

Mey, Jacob L. 2001. *Pragmatics: An Introduction* (2nd ed.). Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

Meyerhoff, Miriam. 1996. “Dealing with Gender Identity as a Sociolinguistic Variable”. In *Rethinking Language and Gender Research: Theory and Practice,* ed. by Victoria L. Bergvall, Janet M. Bing, Alice F. Freed, 202-227. London and New York: Longman.

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)

Mills, Sara. 1995. *Feminist Stylistics.* London: Routledge.

Mintz, Lawrence. 1985. "Stand-Up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation". *American Quaterly* 37(1); 71-80.

Mulkay, Michel. 1988. *On Humour: Its Nature and its Place in Modern Society.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Oha, Obododimma. 1998. "The Semantics of Female Devaluation in Igbo Proverbs". *African Study Monographs* 19(2): 87-102.

Raheem, Saheed Oke. 2018. "A Sociolinguistic Study of Socio-Political Activism and Non-Violent Resistance in Stand-Up Comedy Performances in Nigeria". *Africology: The Journal of Pan-African Studies* 12(6): 75-92.

Raskin, Victor. 1985. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour.* Dordrecht: D Reidel.

Ruiz-Gurillo, Luiza. 2019. "Performing Gender through Stand-Up Comedy in Spanish". *European Journal of Humour Research* 7(2): 67-86.

Sunday, Adesina B. and Ibukun Filani. 2018. "Playing with Culture: Nigerian Stand-Up Comedians Joking with Cultural Beliefs and Representations." *Humour: International Journal of Humour Research* 32(1): 97-124.

Szymanski, Dawn M., Lauren Moffitt, and Erika R. Carr. 2011. "Sexual Objectification of Women: Advances to Theory and Research". *The Counseling Psychologist* 39(1): 6-38.

Tsakona, Villy and Diana Popa. 2011. "Humour in Politics and the Politics of Humour: An Introduction". In *Sudies in Political Humour,* ed. by Villy Tsakona and Diana Popa, 1-30. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Van Dijk, Teun. 1985. "Semantic Discourse Analysis". In *Handbook of Discourse Analysis. Volume 2: Dimensions of Discourse*, ed. by Teun A. van Dijk, 103-136. London: Academic Press.

Waisanen, Don. 2011. "Jokes Inviting more than Laughter...Joan Rivers' Political-Rhetorical World View". *Comedy Studies* 2(2): 139-150.

Yus, Francisco. 2004. "Pragmatics of humorous strategies in *El club de la comedia*." In *Current Trends in the Pragmatics of Spanish*, ed. by Rosina Márquez Reiter, M. Placencia, and María Elena Placencia, 320-344. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Yus, Francisco. 2016. *Humour and relevance.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

BDD-A31263 © 2019 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:06 UTC)