

# Pragmatic and Discourse Functions in *Jenifa's Diary*

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## Abstract

Existing studies on comedies in Nigeria have focused mainly on stand-up comedy, with little attention devoted to situation comedies. This study, therefore, investigates the pragmatic acts that are used to reflect inherent societal issues revealed under the guise of humour in a Nigerian sitcom, *Jenifa's Diary*. Drawing excerpts purposively sampled from the first three seasons of the sitcom and subjecting them to the analytical tools of Jacob Mey's pragmatic acts and Meyer's functions of humour, the study shows the discourse functions of social and moral consciousness which address issues of incivility, domestic violence, poor etiquette, lying and indecent dressing. These discourse functions are achieved through the practs of warning, informing, enculturating and advising, and the communication functions named enforcement and differentiation. The study concludes that sitcoms are not just scripted to amuse viewers but also to address the state of the nations where they are set.

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## 1 Introduction

Situation comedy (sitcom) is one of the several types of television comedies; other forms being sketch shows, stand-up broadcasts, and adult-oriented animation programmes (Creeber 2001). Sitcom, usually, is comprised of reoccurring characters in a dramatic pattern wherein there is one or more thematic preoccupations that revolve round a general situation of language use, such as family, home or workplace. Sitcoms are instances of conversational humour which are dialogic in nature. Conversational humour relates to "a range of devices that aim to construct humorous effects in dialogic interaction, while being distinct from joke-telling" (Chovanec 2011: 125). Dynel (2009: 1286) defines conversational humour as "an umbrella for various verbal chunks created spontaneously or repeated verbatim for the sake of amusing the recipient, either directly contributing to the semantic content of the ongoing conversation or diverting its flow into a humorous mode/frame/key, in which speakers need not genuinely mean what their humorous verbalisations convey".

Beyond its primary purpose of amusement, sitcoms serve as veritable tools for addressing societal issues in any society. This is because they help to form habits and shape behavioural patterns and are used to make impact on the minds of the viewers. Esan (2005: 6) argues that sitcoms bring to the fore social challenges which may otherwise be invisible, but no less consequential when the cumulative impact on the society is considered which makes it factual that sitcoms are important in the consideration and maintenance of the collective consciousness that informs the individual and social aspirations. It has also been argued by Barlet

(2000) that humour in Africa is at the opposite pole to Western humour. Rather than developing cynicism and projection, it is a tragicomic self-derisiveness which restores emotion, and hence has a therapeutic value. Although some scholars (such as Lyon 2003) have argued that sitcoms cannot be considered a suitable outlet for the appraisal of serious societal issues given its primacy on humour, contrary stances have been posited that sitcoms have been facilitated by the use of a range of modes – including slapstick, satires and parodies which help to implicitly drive home their socially relevant thematic foci. Arguing for the relevance of sitcoms in addressing societal issues, Esan (2005) submits that, in some cases, it appears that the use of exaggeration or animations (and other innovative techniques of production) places situations inspired by grittier aspects of reality, on the edge of incredulity or fantasy, making more tolerable, the cataloguing of such within the frame of light entertainment. In other words, beneath humour lie issues of societal relevance in sitcoms.

Despite the usefulness of sitcoms in righting societal wrongs, it has not enjoyed scholarly attention among Nigerian scholars generally and those in applied linguistics, specifically. The known studies on sitcoms in Nigeria have been carried out from the communication (Onusi 2011; Azeez and Doghudje 2015) and sociological (Esan 1993; 2005) perspectives with very few studies focusing on language use in characters' interactions. Such studies within the ambit of applied linguistics have mainly considered the humorous potential of verbal and non-verbal behaviours in the series (Bamgbose 2019), identity construction in a Nigerian sitcom (Olaogun 2017) and discursive patterns in a Nigerian sitcom (Palmer 2019), glossing over the potentiality of sitcoms in addressing the Nigerian reality. This paper, therefore, analyses the pragmatic and rhetorical strategies of implicit communication and messaging in *Jenifa's Diary*, with a view to deciphering how societal issues are discursively addressed in the sitcom. *Jenifa's Diary* is a popular sitcom in Nigeria which features the celebrated and renowned film artistes and musicians in the country. To achieve the aim of this work, the researchers will answer the following research questions in this study:

- i. What are the societal issues addressed in the selected series of *Jenifa's Diary*?
- ii. What pragmatic acts convey the identified societal issues in *Jenifa's Diary*?
- iii. What communication functions/strategies are found in the selected series in *Jenifa's Diary*?

## 2 Literature Review

A number of studies have been conducted on sitcoms from different theoretical and analytical perspectives. Such studies have been within the ambit of communication (Onusi, 2011; Azeez and Doghudje 2015); humour (Bamgbose 2019), social impact of sitcoms (Esan 1993; 2005), identity construction in a Nigerian sitcom and discursive patterns in a Nigerian sitcom (Palmer 2019).

Esan (2005) discusses the relevance of sitcoms in family affair. The paper examines a sample of situation comedies to determine how consistent they are with the declared population and development goals. It also examines the place and space allocated to the family and also the structure within the family and the challenges and aspirations confronting the family. Making reference to the sitcom *Fuji House of Commotion* the paper discusses how sitcoms exhibit concepts of family, sexuality, class relations, and even gender or generational role assign-

ments. The researcher concludes that the genre of sitcom has taken on social and political norms, helping viewers to question, endorse, reject, or rework acceptable standards. This work, however, does not specifically address the social reality of Nigeria and is not anchored on any linguistic or pragmatic theory. Azeez and Doghudje (2015) consider comedy as a discursive exchange for social change, focusing on the social themes of *Papa Ajasco* and its interpretation by Nigerian audience. This study investigates the discursive process through which *Papa Ajasco* comedy series condemn some social behaviour and signify them as bad or inappropriate in funny but strong terms. The study seeks to understand how randomly selected audience of 50 members, who regularly view *Papa Ajasco* series on television, interpret the discursive exchange and jokes in the comedy. The study finds that *Papa Ajasco* series indeed appeal to a majority of Nigerians with its unique capacity to provide high spirit that relaxes their minds and provide them with escape valves with which they relieve tensions of work and life. Also, the series, in melodramatic forms, condemns some social vices and behaviours that are deeply rooted as ways of life in Nigeria. This work is quite similar to the present study but does not approach the study from a linguistic cum pragmatic perspective and does not also focus on characters' interactions and their pragmatic import; thereby making it different from this present research.

The two works reviewed so far do not consider Nigerian sitcoms from the angle of characters' interactions. The closest to this present study is Bamgbose (2019) which considers the linguistic and pragmatic strategies of humour with a view to identifying different categories of humour and accounting for the linguistic complexity of humour creation in characters' dialogues. The study reports the use of phonological, lexical, syntactic and discourse features; and pragmatic strategies such as Layering and relating concepts, implicature and audience's responsibility, assumptions and stereotyped cultural representations as the humour strategies employed in the analysis of *Jenifa's Diary* and *Professor John Bull*. The study had as its primary focus the realisation of humour in the series which made it different from the present work.

Palmer (2019) studies the conversational structure and implicature in a Nigerian sitcom, *Professor John Bull*. The study analyses how cooperative maxims are flouted in the conversational turns of characters in the series. The finding of the study shows that the four cooperative maxims are flouted with varying frequencies in the interactions of characters. Palmer's work which is from the angle of conversation analysis fails to discuss the thematic foci of the analysed excerpts and relate them to the host country of the sitcom. This makes it different from this research. Ologun (2017) studies the linguistic representation of discursive events and social actions and how these social actions are used to construct ideologies in *Jenifa's Diary*. Using Halliday's (1994) transitivity system, van Leeuwen's (2005) social action network and Fairclough's (2003) sociocultural approach to critical discourse analysis, the researcher reports the progressions of social actions in the series which reveal the beliefs, orientations, conventions, norms and social ills in the society. Ologun's work is the closest to the present work because of the choice of sitcom, *Jenifa's Diary*. However, the work tilts towards ideologies with little attention to societal issues in Nigeria. Also while Ologun's work is situated within critical discourse analysis, the present study is carried out within the ambit of pragmatics.

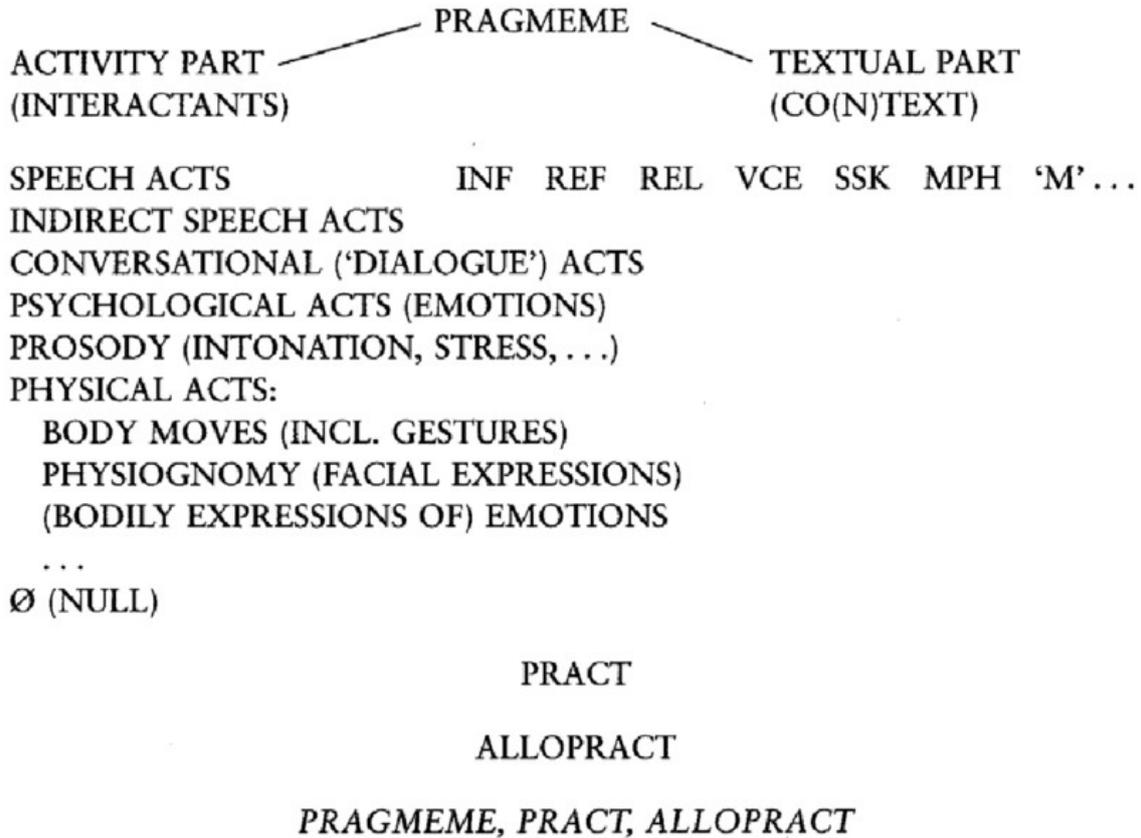
The review of these studies has established the gap on the dearth of research on sitcoms generally in Nigeria and *Jenifa's Diary* in particular. Also, adequate scholarly attention has not been paid to the interrogation of societal issues in Nigeria as entrenched in sitcoms, especially within linguistic and pragmatic studies. This study, therefore, serves as an intervention in this regard.

### 3 Theoretical Framework

The analysis of this study is anchored on an eclectic use of Jacob Mey's pragmatic acts theory and John Meyer's (2000) functions of humour in communication. Pragmatic acts theory, a socio-cultural interactional view on pragmatics, was proposed by Mey in 2001. According to Mey (2001: 221), the pragmatic acts theory deals with "the environment in which both speaker and hearer find their affordances, such that the entire situation is brought to bear on what can be said in the situation, as well as what is actually being said". The underlying principle of pragmatic acts is that for a speech act to be effective, it has to be situated (ibid.: 219). The theory is based on the premise that the speech act theory (an earlier pragmatic theory premised on how speeches are made to act in language use) lacks action, which means that the seeming action in speech act stems from the individual's intentions and the strategies s/he employs in achieving them. As such, pragmatic acts theory promotes "the priority of socio-cultural and societal factors in meaning construction and comprehension" (Kecskes 2010: 1) and focuses heavily "on the interactional situation in which both speakers and hearers realize their aims" (Mey 2001: 751). As a theory which builds on the shortcomings of the speech act theory, Mey (2001) argues that speech act subsumes under pragmeme and it is not compulsory that a pragmatic act should be a speech act but speech act may be one of various ways to realise pragmatic acts.

The focus of the the pragmatic acts theory on the environment in which both speaker and hearer find their affordances and communicative common ground is expressed as a pragmeme. A pragmatic act is realised realised by a pragmeme. What determines a pract (pragmatic act) is solely discourse participants' knowledge of interactional situation.

There are two parts to a pragmeme: activity part, meant for interactants and textual part, referring to the context within which the pragmeme operates. To communicate, the interactants draw on such speech act types as indirect speech acts, conversational ("dialogue") acts, psychological acts, prosodic acts and physical acts. These are engaged in contexts on the textual part with the following: INF representing "inference"; REF, "relevance"; VCE, "voice"; SSK, "shared situation knowledge"; MPH, "metaphor"; and M "metapragmatic joker", Mey (2001), Odebunmi (2006). These parts are diagrammatically depicted as given below.



**Diagram 1: Jacob Mey's Pragmatic Act Model**

The elements of the activity parts of the theory are used to categorise the different verbal and nonverbal acts of the characters while the textual elements are used to foreground the pragmatic imports of such verbal and nonverbal acts.

Meyer (2000) discusses how rhetors use humour when constructing messages. These uses, according to him, split into two basic functions called unification and division. These two basic functions are said to break down into four theories of use or functions of humour which are: identification, clarification, enforcement and differentiation. Meyer (2000) holds that an audience highly sympathetic to and quite familiar with a topic of humour may experience identification with the user of humor in which case humour strengthens commonalities and existing shared meanings between communicators. This is the crux of the identification function of humour. Humour can also be used to seek clarification, especially when the audience has lower degree of agreement and familiarity. Humour allows a communicator to enforce norms delicately by levelling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification with an audience (Graham/Papa/Brooks 1992). Humour teaches and enforces social norms and that is the preoccupation of the enforcement function of humour. Finally, the differentiation function of communication plays out when people use language in creating a contrast between themselves and their opponents, their views with those of others and their own association with others'. Humorous acts are used to create alliances and distinctions. This study accounts for instances of enforcement and differentiation in the characters' interactions in *Jenifa's Diary*.

## 4 Methodology

The data for this study were couched from the first three seasons of the sitcom, *Jenifa's Diary*. The series were downloaded from YouTube and SceneOne TV. The choice of *Jenifa's Diary* was informed by the availability of the series and its high depiction of the societal realities of Nigeria which makes it serve a purpose beyond creating amusement. Although there have been earlier comedic series such as *Papa Ajasco* and *Fuji House of Commotion*, *Jenifa's Diary* was preferred given its relative popularity and contemporariness. A total of 8 excerpts were purposively extracted and subjected to pragmatic analysis.

## 5 Data Analysis

The forms and functions of conversational humour are context dependent. Since comedy is a subtle way of presenting serious issues, comedic discourses, such as situation comedies, address societal issues implicitly or explicitly. The selected sitcom for this study has been found to reveal two broad pragmatic functions of utterances that are relevant to Nigeria; namely: social issues and moral issues. These issues are discursively unraveled through elements of pragmatic acts and communication functions.

### 5.1 Social function of utterances

The interactions in the sitcom are found to highlight social issues which are peculiar to the Nigerian society. The issues discussed are such that can be oriented towards by anyone who shares the societal happenings in the country. The social function of utterances addresses issues relating to civilities as expected by the citizens and domestic violence. These are shown through the practs of warning and informing. The excerpts below are examples of the social issues in the data.

#### 5.1.1 Civil responsibilities of the citizens

Civility concerns the act or manner of behaving which conforms to social conventions of propriety. The excerpts below highlight some of the uncivil attitudes of Nigerians as found in *Jenifa's Diary*.

Excerpt 1

- |            |   |   |
|------------|---|---|
| Jenifa:    | Why you are no climbing bridge?<br>'Why are you not using the bridge?'  | 1 |
| Old Woman: | I don't have energy to climb with all the loads   |   |
| Jenifa:    | Power?  |   |
| Old Woman: | Ehn power.<br>'Yes power.'  | 5 |
| Jenifa:    | Sorry ehn. I go help you I go carry the bag.<br>If you come and cross <i>titi</i> ('highway') now make car no jam you.<br>Wey your shildrens?<br>'Sorry. I will help you with the bag.'<br>'If you cross the road you could be hit by a car.'<br>'Where are your children?' |   |

- Old Woman: Dem dey house. 10  
 'They are at home.'
- Jenifa: Make them no begin dey cry.  
 Mummy have die o.  
 'So they don't get to mourn your death.'
- JD S1 E1 6mins
- Excerpt 2
- Toyosi: He is not picking. 1  
 I think I will just take a bike.
- Jenifa: Ah, me I no sure of the bike people for this area o.  
 Dem no dey wear helmet and you know say helmet dey very im- 5  
 portant  
 Make person no go nack head for ground.  
 'I don't have confidence in the bike men around here.'  
 'They don't wear helmet and you know helmet is very important so  
 that one doesn't hit one's head on the ground'.

The excerpts above revolve around civil expectations of the citizens of a country. Excerpt 1 addresses the act of crossing the highway, instead of using the pedestrian bridge. The shared situation knowledge of the Nigerian viewers on this uncivil attitude which is common among Nigerians at the time this series was produced helps foreground this exchange as an attempt by the script writer of the sitcom to acquaint the viewers with the inherent danger in crossing the highway rather than using the pedestrian bridge. Jenifa's utterance in line 8 *If you come and cross titi now make car no jam you* ('If you cross the road you could be hit by a car'), is an instance of an indirect speech act with the pragmatic import of warning the other character at the micro level and the viewers at the macro level, on the inherent danger in crossing the highway rather than using the pedestrian. The prosodic and physiognomic acts with which Jenifer utters her last line: *Make them no begin dey cry mummy have die o* ('So they don't get to mourn your death') helps to foreground the relevance and cogency of the pragmatic import of warning against road crossing and also casts the character's and the viewers' minds to the grave consequence of such act, especially as will be felt by the families of anyone who loses her or his life to such act.

Excerpt 2 addresses another civil issue which involves the use of a helmet when on a motorcycle. The excerpt is relevant to the Nigerian society given the shared social knowledge of the law which mandates tricycle riders and their passengers to wear helmets always as promulgated by the government of most states of the country. This order, to a large extent, has not been taken seriously by Nigerians as hardly will one find a commercial tricycle rider wearing helmet. Jenifa uses the pronominal reference, *dem*, in line 4 to refer to tricycle riders and to foreground their civil disobedience. One can infer from the expression, *make person no go nack head for ground*, ('so that one doesn't hit one's head on the ground') an implicit pract of warning against the civil disobedience of not using a helmet and this utterance also shows the relevance of using the helmet in one's own interest as contrary to the popular situation of wearing the helmet only when a law enforcement agent is sighted. This excerpt too is an ex-

ample of an indirect speech act which implicitly warns against an uncivil social norm in the Nigerian society.

Both excerpts reveal the textual element of relevance as they directly address an awful social situation in the host country of the sitcom. The excerpts are, therefore, in line with the function of humour as a rhetorical tool for enforcement. Humor allows a communicator to enforce norms delicately by leveling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification with an audience (Graham/Papa/Brooks 1992). It is seen in both excerpts that the eponymous character, Jenifa, tries to correct the other characters in the season while still appearing concerned; thereby saving the relationship and strengthening the association while also “building group cohesiveness” (Graham/Papa/Brooks 1992).

### 5.1.2 Domestic violence

Domestic violence is an abuse by one person against another in a domestic setting, such as in marriage or co-habitation. It is described as intimate partner violence when committed by a spouse or partner in an intimate relationship. In the words of Aihie (2009: 1), domestic violence is the intentional and persistent abuse of anyone in the home in a way that causes pain, distress or injury. It refers to any abusive treatment of one family member by another, consequently violating the law of basic human rights. This phenomenon has remained an ugly and popular one in Nigeria and it is highlighted for correctional purpose in the selected sitcom as seen in the excerpt below:

#### Excerpt 3

Speaker 1:	She is still crying?	1
Speaker 2:	Yes, she is still crying. Her boyfriend hit her so bad.	
Speaker 1:	Why would a man beat a woman? It's only a coward that will hit a woman.	

#### Excerpt 4

Speaker 1:	(Sobbing) He is always beating me. He will be hitting my head against the wall and then. He will tell me that he is sorry. I'm tired o. I'm tired.	1
Speaker 2:	I know you are in pain right now. You just have to let go. You have to forgive him; he is still your man.	5
Jenifa:	Excuse me o. Sorry that I bag ('badge') into you people o. Your boyfriend beat you, e dey nack your head gbosagbosa Man he come and domestic violence you and you come and do eheheheh. Any man that domestic violence me, Make we see na. 'He hits your head so hard and he come and beg you that you should forgave' 'A man abuses you and you are crying.' 'If a man ever abuses me,' 'let's see how it goes.'	10

JD S1 E12 17mins

The excerpts above address the issue of domestic violence against women in relationships and perform the dual function of warning against this act and also informing women on the need to resist domestic violence in their relationships. In excerpt 3, Speaker 2 confirms that a lady was hit hard by her boyfriend. This line is an indication of the presence of domestic violence in Nigeria since sitcoms are a humorous projection of actual societal happenings. In his reaction, Speaker 1 uses the interrogative sentence *Why would a man hit a woman?* rhetorically as a psychological act to propel reflection in the viewers in order to implicitly criticise the act of domestic violence against women. The character adopts the interrogative speech act as a way of challenging everyone, especially those who engage in this act to personally rationalise their action. Again, the noun, *coward*, is used by Speaker 1 as a reference to anyone who hits a woman in a bid to show the pragmatic import of warning/cautioning against brutality.

In excerpt 4, Speaker 2's line is specifically significant to the discussion of domestic violence, given the shared situation knowledge of what obtains in Africa in terms of the societal expectation of women to bear the excesses of men in order to keep their family. Amobi (2013) observes that, even after four world conferences on women, Nigerian women continue to experience marginalisation in every sphere of human endeavour. There is the African conventional notion that it is the duty of the woman to do everything she can to sustain her marriage and this makes many women subject themselves to tyrants as husbands and keep silence in the face of abuse to forcibly make a marriage work. The metapragmatic joker, *just*, as used by Speaker 2 in the expression, *you just have to let go*, in line 5 paints it as a point of duty for women to bear their partners' shortcomings to sustain marriages. This societal expectation has made many women perpetually suffer in silence until some eventually get weird and do the worst by killing their spouses in or by committing suicide or living a miserable life. To the cultural convention established by Speaker 2, Jenifa evokes an opposing view by mocking the abused lady through the physical and physiognomic acts of gesticulation and facial expression as she mimicks the abused person through imitation. The expression, *Any man that domestic violence me, make we see na*, in lines 10 and 11 is an implicit call to conscientise women, through an elliptical sentence, on the need to rise against domestic abuse and also a warning to men against such dastardly act.

In excerpts 3 and 4, it can also be argued that the sitcom, *Jenifa's Diary*, performs both the enforcement and differentiation rhetorical functions. The enforcement function of humour allows for stress on the violation of norms, which, although engendering mirth, requires correction indicated by laughing at the person responsible for the humorous violation (Meyer 2000: 321). The physical act of mockery by Jenifa towards the character being abused in line 9 of excerpt 4 is an aggressive way of revolting against what she considers a societal vice. The differentiation function of humour is explained by Meyer (2000) as a group "contrasting themselves with their opponents, their views with an opponent's views, their own social group with others, and so on". One finds in the excerpts above that Jenifer tries to oppose and differentiate her stance from the perceived archaic position that a woman must bear whatever a man does just to sustain marriage. Rather, she feels women deserve to be respected too in romantic relationships and should be able to stand for their rights when violated.

## 5.2 Moral function of utterances in *Jenifa's Diary*

Morality, among many definitions, means a set of social rules, customs, traditions, beliefs or practices which specify proper, acceptable forms of conduct. Morality is a virtue that is held in high regards among Africans. Some of these moral issues have been embedded into the proverbs and adages of many African nations. Sitcoms serve as a tool for foregrounding moral values as seen in the selected excerpts for this study. Three areas of morality namely etiquette, lying and indecent dressing have been identified for analysis in the data. These aspects of morality are found to reveal the pragmatic import of enculturating and advising, respectively.

### 5.2.1 Instances of etiquette in *Jenifa's Diary*

Etiquette means the forms required by good breeding, or prescribed by authority, to be observed in social or official life; observance of the proprieties of rank and occasion; conventional decorum; ceremonial code of polite behaviour. Among the different Nigerian tribes, there are expected decorum and code of polite behaviour which are brought to the fore as seen in the excerpts below.

#### Excerpt 5

- |         |   |    |
|---------|---|----|
| Toyosi: | (Hisses) This girl just annoys me.  | 1  |
| Jenifa: | Who e that? Boda Femi Femo wife?<br>'Who's that? Do you mean Uncle Femi's wife?'  |    |
| Toyosi: | Wife ke? Who will allow him to marry her?<br>'Wife? Who will allow him to marry her?'   |    |
| Jenifa: | Why na? Shebi boda Femi Femo love her?<br>'But why? Uncle Femi loves her.'  |    |
| Toyosi: | And so what? She is so spoilt and rude.<br>Can you imagine she is out there receiving calls.<br>Laughing and watching television.<br>Isn't she supposed to be assisting us?                                     | 5  |
| Jenifa: | It is true you talk.<br>A shild that they are train very well is supposed to enter kitchen to<br>help person to cook<br>'You are right.'<br>'A well-trained child would have joined us in the kitchen to cook.' | 10 |

JD S2 E1 18mins

#### Excerpt 6

- |               |   |   |
|---------------|---|---|
| Toyosi's mum: | Anny, Anny, come  | 1 |
| Anny:         | Yes   |   |
| Toyosi's mum: | When an elderly person calls you, you say 'yes ma'.             |   |
| Anny:         | Yes ma.   |   |
| Toyosi's mum: | Better. Now, go to the fridge and get us more bottles of wines. | 5 |
| Anny:         | Okay.   |   |

Toyosi's mum: Ma.  
 Anny: Okay ma.

The excerpts above address issues of etiquette in the Yoruba culture. It is crucial to say that the series is essentially grounded in the Yoruba socio-cultural worldview; thereby making the Yoruba culture the analytical template for the issues depicted in the series. The Yoruba background of the sitcom is foregrounded by the characters' names and names of settings in the series. The excerpts conscientise the viewers on expected standards of behaviour as upheld by members of the culture in focus. In excerpt 5, two cultural issues peculiar to the Yoruba are subtly highlighted to the viewers. The first is captured in line 3 where Toyosi throws a rhetorical question to Jenifer, *Wife ke? Who will allow him to marry her?* The pronoun *her* in that line refers to Anny, Toyosi's brother's girlfriend. The utterance by Toyosi helps the viewers infer the presupposition that among the Yoruba people, marriage is not just the affair of the couple as the culture expects the consent of the family members. The interrogative question posed by Toyosi to Jenifa is, therefore, a psychological act which helps establish the relevance of family members in marital affairs among Yoruba. Again in the excerpt, Toyosi wonders in line 6 if her brother's girlfriend who has come to felicitate them on their mum's birthday is not supposed to assist her, Toyosi, with the cooking. This is also geared towards acquainting the viewers with some cultural expectations of a potential wife among the Yoruba. Jenifa, in the following line, reveals the practice of enculturating by making it clear that a cultured lady, in the Yoruba worldview, will be expected to assist with chores and other activities when she visits the families of her boyfriend, fiancé or husband. Excerpt 7 is an interaction between Anny and her boyfriend's mum. The latter calls the former from afar and she simply answers with a *yes* and the older woman cautions Anny to subsequently add the honorific marker, *ma*, when she answers an elderly person. The repetition of the honorific marker afterwards by Anny becomes a metapragmatic joker which is used to foreground the importance of verbal honour among the Yoruba; hence, enculturating Anny into the culture and creating a cultural awareness to the viewers.

The excerpts here are seen to perform the association function as the film maker, through characters' utterances, try to orient the viewers with the Yoruba culture. As posited by Meyer (2000), humour that reduces tensions or makes a speaker seem a part of the group serves to identify the audience with the communicator, as they may laugh together at some relief of tension. The insistence on the use of "ma" by the older Yoruba woman as repeatedly seen in excerpt 6 shows that although, such act might appear comic or absurd at the level of art, it is a deliberate attempt by the producer to leave the Yoruba cultural footprint in the viewers.

### 5.2.2 Lying in *Jenifa's Diary*

Lying is a bad trait which is universally frowned on in all cultures. One disadvantage of telling lies is the difficulty that comes with sustaining it sometimes due to forgetfulness. The sitcom under study reveals how characters are unable to sustain their lies and implicitly convey the pragmatic import of advising viewers against telling lies; a habit which is always difficult to sustain. The excerpts below reveal this.

Excerpt 7

Kiki: Hello girls!

1

- Toyosi: Hey! What took you so long?  
I thought you will come earlier to help us out in the kitchen.
- Kiki: I know. I'm sorry.  
I had a few errands to run from my mum and then the traffic was mad. 5  
I really wanted to be here on time. I'm sorry.
- Mercy: Happy anniversary to your parents.
- Toyosi: Mercy, what are you doing here?  
I thought you said you were going to Dubai.
- Mercy: Actually I missed my flight. 10
- Kiki: I thought you said your flight was cancelled?
- Mercy: Erm, Actually I missed my flight and when I got to the airport I realised it was cancelled.
- Jenifa: Hmmmm, Amara fun ra e! oniro aye! 15  
'Amara herself! The world class liar!'

S2 E1 24mins

The excerpt above captures lie telling by one of the characters, Mercy, and reveals the practice of warning against the immoral act. Excerpt 7 reveals Mercy's inability to sustain a lie. In line 11 of the excerpt, Kiki challenges her about saying something contrary to what she had earlier said and the physical act of fidgeting and prosodic act of stammering as illustrated with the utterance *erm* reveal a state of confusion born out of a lie told. The sound, *Hmmmm*, made by Jenifa in line 13 is a metapragmatic joker which is to say that they know Mercy is lying. Jenifa caps it by referring to her metaphorically as a world class liar; hence, implicitly advising the viewers against the dishonourable act of telling lies. This is also an instance of the enforcement function of humour as the excerpt tends to warn against a moral habit which makes one an element of ridicule.

### 5.2.3 Indecent dressing

Indecent dressing means a deliberate exposure of one's body. Indecent dressing has become a social malady in Nigeria; a phenomenon considered to be alien and *anti-omolúàbí*; 'an attitude against the expected values of a cultured Yoruba person' (cf. Ajayi/Bamgbose 2018). The act of indecent dressing does not conform to the norms and values of the African society and this is why the selected sitcoms inform the viewers of its consequences and warn against it in the excerpts below.

Excerpt 8

- Jenifa: Shee you will enter bike with this *sokotopenpe* is a knicker that you wear? 1  
'Would you take a bike with this short dress of yours?'
- Toyosi: Yes na, it's not too short. I will manage it.
- Tout: *Eeeeees*  
(Calling Toyosi from a distance.)
- Jenifa: Is it me? 5
- Lout: No that pretty girl
- Jenifa: They are calling you.
- Toyosi: Is my name *eeees*?

Jenifa: But you are dressed like *eeees* na.  
 That is why they are *eeesing* you 10  
 JD S2 E5 17mins

Excerpt 8 depicts indecent dressing among females and how such practice determines how they are addressed in the public. In line 1 of excerpt 7, Jenifer uses the noun *sokotopempe*, a Yoruba expression which literally means short knickers and which is metaphorically used to refer to any short dress, as a reference to the short gown that Toyosi was putting on. In line 8, Toyosi asks Jenifa if her name were *eees* (a sort of sound often used to call out to a person when their name is not known or for deliberate putdown) as a way of justifying why she was not answering the lout who calls her from afar; and to this, Jenifa activates a nominal reference to the sound, *eeees*. The sound, *eees*, is nominalised by Jenifa as a reference to anyone who dresses improperly. The expression, *you are dressed like eeees na. That is why they are eeeking you*, in lines 9 and 10 creates the shared situation knowledge that anyone who is improperly dressed is bound to be improperly addressed in the public. The viewers can, therefore, draw the inference of the pragmatic import of warning against indecent dressing and being informed on its possible consequence. This excerpt also serves the clarification function of humour by subtly correcting indecent dressing and calling attention to how it affects how one is perceived in the society.

## 6 Conclusion

This study has investigated the pragmatic and rhetorical functions of characters' utterances in *Jenifa's Diary*. The study shows that beyond the primary function of entertainment, sitcoms equally address societal issues; thereby conscientising the viewers on virtues and vices in the society. The study adopts Jacob Mey's pragmatic act to tease out social and moral issues embedded in the series. It is found that the social issues of incivility and domestic violence in the Nigerian society are subtly addressed and the moral issues of etiquette, lying and indecent dressing are also touched in the series; generating the pragmatic acts of warning and informing for the social issues and the pragmatic act of conscientising and advising for the moral issues. These issues are demystified through the activity elements of indirect speech act, physical act, prosody and physiognomy and the textual elements of reference, inference, metaphor, metapragmatic joker and shared situation knowledge.

Characters' utterances are seen to serve the rhetorical function of association to acclimatise viewers with certain worldviews such as the Yoruba culture and perceived societal vices and anomalies are corrected through the deployment of the enforcement function of humour. The study has discussed the usefulness of sitcoms beyond its function of amusement. It therefore corroborates the assertion of Esan (2005) that since the situations (in sitcoms) revolve around the domestic or personal spaces, sitcoms bring to the fore social challenges which may otherwise be invisible, but no less consequential when the cumulative impact on the society is considered. One can then argue that sitcoms are important in the consideration and maintenance of the collective consciousness that informs the individual and social aspirations. Further studies may juxtapose the thematic foci of two or more Nigerian sitcoms to further generalise the conclusions in this paper and can also consider ideological issues in Nigerian sitcoms.

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