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Humour and Sociolinguistic Innovation in Nigerian Social Media: A Study of Selected Whatsapp Messages

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Abstract: The increasing use of social media has transformed patterns of communication in Nigeria, creating digital spaces where humour has become an important medium for linguistic creativity, identity construction, and social interaction. Among these platforms, WhatsApp occupies a central position because it enables users to exchange humorous messages that reflect everyday experiences, cultural values, and contemporary social realities. Despite the growing body of research on digital discourse, limited scholarly attention has been given to the role of humour in promoting sociolinguistic innovation within Nigerian WhatsApp communication. This study therefore examined how humour contributes to sociolinguistic innovation in selected Nigerian WhatsApp messages. The study adopted a qualitative research design, drawing on a corpus of one hundred humorous WhatsApp messages, from which thirty representative excerpts were purposively selected for detailed analysis. Data were analysed thematically using Van Dijk's Sociocognitive Theory to explain the interaction between language, shared knowledge, and social context in the production and interpretation of humorous discourse. The findings reveal that humour stimulates code-switching, code-mixing, lexical innovation, semantic extension, figurative language, and multimodal communication through emojis and other digital resources. The study further establishes that humorous WhatsApp messages function as important vehicles for identity construction, cultural expression, social criticism, and the negotiation of everyday experiences within Nigeria's multilingual society. It concludes that WhatsApp has become a dynamic sociolinguistic environment where humour not only entertains but also accelerates language change and enriches contemporary digital communication. The study contributes to sociolinguistic scholarship by demonstrating that humour is a significant catalyst for linguistic innovation in Nigeria's rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Keywords: Humour, Sociolinguistic Innovation, WhatsApp Messages, Digital Discourse, Nigerian Social Media.

INTRODUCTION

Humour has long occupied a central position in human communication, serving functions that extend beyond entertainment to include social bonding, identity construction, cultural expression, and political commentary. In sociolinguistics, humour is increasingly viewed as a communicative strategy through which speakers negotiate meanings, reinforce group solidarity, challenge authority, and reflect shared cultural experiences. With the rapid

expansion of digital communication technologies, humorous discourse has migrated from face-to-face interaction to online environments where linguistic creativity flourishes. Recent studies observe that social media platforms have become fertile spaces for the emergence of innovative linguistic practices that continually reshape contemporary language use (Dynel, 2023; Zappavigna, 2024).

Nigeria presents a particularly rich environment for examining humour because of its multilingual and multicultural nature. With over 500 indigenous languages existing alongside English and Nigerian Pidgin, everyday communication is characterised by constant interaction among diverse linguistic resources. This multilingual ecology encourages speakers to employ code-switching, code-mixing, translanguaging, lexical borrowing, and other creative linguistic strategies to achieve communicative goals. Humour frequently draws upon these linguistic resources to create meanings that resonate with the cultural experiences of Nigerian audiences (Eze, 2026; Tanyi, Ekoro, Okpene, & Edung, 2025).

Among the numerous social media platforms available today, WhatsApp has become one of the most widely used communication applications in Nigeria. Its affordability, accessibility, and user-friendly features have made it an indispensable platform for interpersonal communication, family interactions, professional engagements, educational discussions, and public discourse. Every day, millions of Nigerians exchange humorous messages, memes, stickers, emojis, videos, and voice notes that not only entertain recipients but also communicate opinions about politics, religion, economic conditions, sports, and everyday social life. These interactions reveal the dynamic relationship between language, technology, and society (Oyebode, 2024; Agbedo et al., 2026).

Humorous WhatsApp messages in Nigeria demonstrate remarkable linguistic creativity. Users frequently manipulate English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other indigenous languages to produce expressions that are both culturally meaningful and socially relevant. Such creativity manifests through code-switching, lexical innovation, slang formation, metaphorical expressions, abbreviations, emoji combinations, internet acronyms, and multimodal communication. These emerging forms illustrate that language is constantly evolving in response to technological innovations and changing communicative needs (Anouk, 2026; Eze, 2026).

Sociolinguistic innovation refers to the development and diffusion of new linguistic forms arising from social interaction, technological advancement, and cultural transformation. Digital communication has accelerated this process by allowing language users to create, modify, and disseminate expressions almost instantaneously across large speech communities. Unlike traditional forms of language change that evolve gradually, social media facilitates rapid acceptance and circulation of innovative expressions that often-become part of everyday communication. Nigerian WhatsApp users have contributed significantly to this process by producing humorous expressions that later gain popularity across other digital platforms and offline interactions (Tanyi Ekoro, Okpene, & Edung, 2025).

Humour also functions as an important instrument of social commentary within Nigerian digital discourse. Rather than expressing criticism directly, WhatsApp users frequently employ satire, irony, parody, exaggeration, and wordplay to discuss governance, economic hardship, insecurity, corruption, religious practices, and interpersonal relationships. These humorous expressions enable users to communicate sensitive opinions while reducing the possibility of direct confrontation. Consequently, humour performs significant social functions by promoting critical reflection, strengthening communal identity, and facilitating public engagement with contemporary issues (Oyebode, 2024; Dynel, 2023).

Furthermore, the multimodal nature of WhatsApp communication has expanded the possibilities for linguistic innovation. Contemporary humorous messages rarely rely solely on written text but increasingly combine images, emojis, GIFs, voice notes, memes, and short videos to produce richer communicative effects. This integration of verbal and non-verbal

resources creates new forms of meaning-making that challenge traditional approaches to discourse analysis. Recent scholarship demonstrates that multimodal humour significantly influences how digital users interpret social events and negotiate interpersonal relationships (Oyebode, 2024).

Although studies on digital discourse, internet linguistics, and Nigerian English continue to expand, comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding humour as a catalyst for sociolinguistic innovation within WhatsApp communication. Existing studies have primarily concentrated on political discourse, memes, internet slang, misinformation, or general social media interaction, while the relationship between humorous discourse and language innovation remains insufficiently explored. This gap is particularly important considering that WhatsApp represents one of the most frequently used communication platforms in Nigeria, with millions of daily interactions contributing to the evolution of language (Tanyi, Ekoro, Okpene, & Edung 2025).

Contrary this background, the present study investigates humour and sociolinguistic innovation in selected Nigerian WhatsApp messages. Specifically, it explores how humorous discourse facilitates the emergence of new lexical items, discourse patterns, communicative strategies, and identity markers within Nigeria's multilingual environment. By analysing naturally occurring WhatsApp messages, the study contributes to contemporary scholarship on sociolinguistics, humour studies, digital discourse, and computer-mediated communication. It also provides empirical evidence on the ways digital technologies continue to reshape language practices in multilingual societies, thereby enriching current understanding of language change in twenty-first-century Nigeria (Oyebode, 2024).

Statement of the Study

The increasing use of WhatsApp has transformed patterns of communication in Nigeria, creating digital spaces where humour is frequently employed to entertain, criticize, persuade, educate, and strengthen social relationships. These humorous exchanges have also become important sites for the emergence of innovative linguistic forms that reflect Nigeria's multilingual and multicultural realities. However, despite the widespread circulation of humorous WhatsApp messages, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to examining their contribution to sociolinguistic innovation.

Most recent studies have focused on internet memes, political communication, digital pragmatics, or Nigerian English in general, with relatively little attention paid to how humour stimulates language creativity and linguistic innovation within WhatsApp interactions (Oyebode, 2024). Consequently, there remains insufficient empirical understanding of how humorous discourse contributes to lexical innovation, code-switching, identity construction, and evolving communicicative practices among Nigerian social media users. It is this knowledge gap that necessitates the present study. The objective of this study is to examine how humour promotes sociolinguistic innovation in selected Nigerian WhatsApp messages.

The study contributes to the growing scholarship on sociolinguistics, humour studies, digital discourse, and computer-mediated communication by providing empirical evidence on how humour facilitates language innovation within Nigerian WhatsApp communication. It will enrich existing literature on digital language practices, particularly within multilingual African societies, while providing useful insights for linguists, discourse analysts, communication scholars, educators, and researchers interested in language change and digital communication. Furthermore, the findings will demonstrate the important role of WhatsApp as a contemporary site for observing linguistic creativity and the evolution of Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages in digital contexts.

The study is restricted to select humorous WhatsApp messages generated and circulated within the Nigerian sociolinguistic environment. It specifically examines sociolinguistic innovations manifested through code-switching, code-mixing, lexical innovation, slang

formation, metaphorical expressions, emojis, memes, and other discourse strategies employed by WhatsApp users. The study does not cover humorous discourse on other social media platforms except where such references are necessary to provide contextual explanation.

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research design because it provides an appropriate framework for examining the linguistic and sociocultural meanings embedded in humorous WhatsApp messages. A qualitative approach enables the researcher to explore how humour functions as a vehicle for sociolinguistic innovation within naturally occurring digital interactions. The design is particularly suitable for analysing language use in context and for interpreting the social meanings conveyed through discourse (Fairclough, 2018; Dijk, 2022).

The population of the study comprised humorous WhatsApp messages circulated among Nigerian users across different WhatsApp groups, including family, educational, religious, professional, and social groups. From this population, 100 humorous WhatsApp messages were purposively selected based on their relevance to the objectives of the study. Purposive sampling was adopted because it enabled the researcher to select messages that clearly demonstrate humour and evidence of sociolinguistic innovation.

The primary instrument for data collection was documentary observation, whereby naturally occurring WhatsApp messages were compiled without altering their linguistic structures. Only messages that contained humorous expressions, linguistic creativity, code-switching, code-mixing, lexical innovations, slang, emojis, memes, or culturally significant expressions were included in the corpus. To ensure ethical compliance, all personal identifiers, including names, telephone numbers, photographs, and other confidential information, were removed to guarantee participants' anonymity and privacy.

Data was analysed using thematic discourse analysis. The analysis focused on identifying recurring sociolinguistic features such as lexical innovation, code-switching, code-mixing, semantic shifts, metaphorical expressions, emoji usage, multimodal communication, and pragmatic functions of humour. The interpretation of the data was guided by Teun A. van Dijk's Sociocognitive Theory of Discourse, which explains how shared knowledge, social cognition, and cultural context influence the production and interpretation of discourse. This analytical framework enabled the study to demonstrate how humorous WhatsApp messages contribute to sociolinguistic innovation within Nigeria's multilingual digital environment.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The analysis is based on thirty purposively selected WhatsApp messages (WCM01–WCM30) collected from Nigerian users. The corpus was examined thematically to identify recurring patterns of sociolinguistic innovation embedded in humorous digital discourse. Six major themes emerged from the analysis: code-switching, lexical innovation, multilingual creativity, multimodal communication, pragmatic humour, and identity construction. These themes demonstrate that humour functions as an important resource for linguistic creativity and social meaning-making within Nigerian WhatsApp interactions.

The first pattern is code-switching between English and Nigerian Pidgin. For example, WCM01 ("Fuel don cost again. My car don begins dey observe fasting") and WCM02 ("Salary enter yesterday, today we don’t travel without visa") creatively combine both languages to depict economic hardship through personification and exaggeration. Likewise, WCM05 ("Na data be the new fuel") humorously captures the growing importance of internet connectivity in contemporary Nigerian life. These expressions strengthen social solidarity because they draw on experiences shared by members of the speech community. Their interpretation aligns with Van Dijk's Sociocognitive Theory, which emphasizes the role of shared knowledge in meaning construction.

The second theme is lexical innovation and semantic creativity. Expressions such as "Adulting no get customer care" (WCM06), "Breakfast no be only food again" (WCM07), and "This economy is doing postgraduate studies on everybody" (WCM08) illustrate how familiar words acquire new meanings within digital communication. Similarly, WCM09 ("My account balance is observing social distancing from money") employs metaphor and hyperbole to express financial difficulty. These examples demonstrate how WhatsApp contributes to vocabulary expansion and semantic change.

The corpus also reveals remarkable multilingual creativity. WCM11 ("Ẹ jẹ ká rẹ̀rìn-ín, wahala ò tan"), WCM12 ("Omo! NEPA don remembers say we still dey alive"), and WCM14 ("Village people don upgrade to 5G") combine Yoruba, Nigerian Pidgin, and English to create humour that reflects both indigenous cultural knowledge and contemporary technological realities. The fluid movement across languages illustrates the role of translanguaging in Nigerian digital discourse.

Another significant finding is the use of multimodal communication. Messages such as WCM16 ("ATM receipt be like love letter these days"), WCM17 ("Battery 2%, confidence 100%"), and WCM18 ("Dear Monday, I have seen your message") integrate emojis with written text to reinforce emotional meaning and enhance humour. The visual symbols function as meaningful communicative resources rather than decorative additions. The corpus further shows that humour serves as a form of social commentary. WCM21 ("My landlord has become my fitness instructor") humorously reflects rising housing costs, while WCM22 ("Nigeria is the only country where your generator can have overtime") satirizes persistent electricity challenges. WCM24 ("Our salary now behaves like a visitor—it never stays long") similarly captures widespread economic frustration through metaphor. These messages illustrate how humour enables indirect criticism of social conditions.

Finally, the analysis highlights digital identity construction. WCM26 ("Before replying to my message, you first checked my status"), WCM27 ("Typing… typing… typing… Na only 'OK' you send?"), WCM29 ("Relationship now requires data subscription more than affection"), and WCM30 ("Every Nigerian is automatically awarded a PhD in patience") reflect everyday digital experiences that reinforce collective identity and shared cultural understanding. Consistent with Van Dijk's Sociocognitive Theory, the findings indicate that the humour embedded in these messages depends on common social experiences and shared cognitive frameworks, confirming WhatsApp as an important site of sociolinguistic innovation in contemporary Nigeria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of Findings

Documentarily this study demonstrate that humour plays a significant role in promoting sociolinguistic innovation within Nigerian WhatsApp communication. Analysis of the thirty selected WhatsApp messages revealed that humorous discourse extends beyond entertainment to serve as a medium through which users create new linguistic forms, negotiate social identities, and interpret contemporary realities. The corpus shows that language innovation in digital spaces is driven largely by users' ability to combine creativity with shared cultural experiences.

One of the major findings is the widespread use of code-switching and code-mixing involving English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous Nigerian languages. Rather than functioning merely as a reflection of multilingual competence, these linguistic practices enhance humour, strengthen group identity, and facilitate effective communication among users who share similar cultural backgrounds. The findings indicate that multilingualism remains a valuable linguistic resource for constructing humour in Nigeria's digital environment. The study also reveals that WhatsApp provides a fertile environment for lexical innovation. Participants continually coin new expressions, extend the meanings of existing

words, and adapt familiar vocabulary to describe emerging social and economic experiences. Several humorous expressions identified in the corpus illustrate how digital communication contributes to vocabulary expansion and semantic change. Many of these expressions have moved beyond online conversations and have become part of everyday spoken discourse, demonstrating the influence of social media on contemporary language development.

Another important finding is the increasing reliance on multimodal communication. The analysis shows that emojis, stickers, and other visual resources are not merely decorative features but integral components of meaning construction. These multimodal elements reinforce humour, clarify emotional intentions, and enrich message interpretation. Consequently, humour in WhatsApp communication is achieved through the interaction of both linguistic and visual resources. The findings further reveal that humorous WhatsApp messages function as subtle forms of social commentary. Rather than expressing criticism directly, users employ satire, irony, exaggeration, and metaphor to discuss issues such as inflation, unemployment, rising living costs, poor electricity supply, and other socioeconomic challenges. Humour therefore provides a socially acceptable means of expressing public concerns while strengthening solidarity among users with similar experiences.

Finally, the study confirms that humour contributes to identity construction within Nigerian digital communities. Through shared jokes, culturally familiar expressions, and multilingual practices, WhatsApp users reinforce collective identities and demonstrate their membership of specific linguistic and social groups. Overall, the findings establish that humour is an important driver of sociolinguistic innovation, illustrating the dynamic relationship between language, culture, and digital technology in contemporary Nigerian society.

Discussion of Findings

The study affirms that humour has become an important mechanism through which sociolinguistic innovation is produced and sustained within Nigerian WhatsApp communication. The analysis demonstrates that humorous messages are not simply exchanged for amusement but also function as sites of linguistic experimentation, cultural expression, and social interaction. This confirms the view that digital communication has transformed everyday language practices by creating environments in which users continually modify, negotiate, and circulate new linguistic forms.

A prominent finding of the study is the extensive use of code-switching and code-mixing involving English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous Nigerian languages. Rather than indicating linguistic deficiency, these practices reflect the multilingual competence of Nigerian WhatsApp users and their ability to select linguistic resources that best achieve humorous effects. By combining different languages within a single message, users construct meanings that are culturally familiar and socially engaging. This finding is consistent with the work of Tanyi et al. (2025), who argue that multilingual speakers strategically draw on their entire linguistic repertoire to strengthen interpersonal relationships and reinforce shared cultural identities. The findings therefore demonstrate that Nigeria's multilingual environment continues to stimulate linguistic creativity in digital communication.

The analysis shows that WhatsApp provides a productive environment for lexical innovation and semantic change. Expressions such as adulting, breakfast, and several metaphorical constructions illustrate how existing words acquire new meanings through repeated social use. Many of these expressions originated within digital interactions but have gradually entered everyday conversations and popular media. This finding supports the argument advanced by Anouk (2026) that social media has accelerated the creation and diffusion of new vocabulary by enabling users to share innovative expressions across large speech communities within a relatively short period. The findings therefore reinforce the sociolinguistic view that language evolves continuously in response to changing social and technological realities.

Another important finding concerns the increasing role of multimodal communication in humorous discourse. The analysis shows that emojis, stickers, symbols, and other visual resources complement written language in constructing meaning and communicating emotional intentions. Rather than functioning as decorative additions, these multimodal elements shape how humorous messages are interpreted by readers. This observation agrees with Unuabonah (2024), who maintains that meaning on WhatsApp is jointly created through the interaction of verbal and visual resources. The findings therefore suggest that contemporary digital discourse should be understood as a multimodal communicative practice in which linguistic and visual elements operate together to produce humour.

The analysis further demonstrates that humour functions as an indirect but powerful medium for social commentary. The humorous references to inflation, rising fuel prices, electricity shortages, unemployment, data costs, and economic hardship reveal how users transform difficult social experiences into relatable and entertaining narratives. Instead of confronting these issues directly, WhatsApp users rely on satire, irony, exaggeration, and metaphor to express frustration while maintaining social harmony. This observation supports the position of Dynel (2023), who argues that humour enables speakers to communicate criticism in socially acceptable ways while reducing the possibility of interpersonal conflict. Consequently, humour emerges not only as entertainment but also as a subtle form of public discourse through which social realities are interpreted and questioned.

The findings also provide empirical support for Van Dijk's Sociocognitive Theory, which underpins this study. The successful interpretation of the humorous WhatsApp messages depended largely on participants who shared cultural knowledge, collective experiences, and contextual understanding. References to fuel scarcity, electricity supply, inflation, "village people," or digital communication practices become humorous because members of the Nigerian speech community possess the cognitive and cultural knowledge required to interpret them. This confirms Van Dijk's argument that discourse is mediated by shared mental models through which individuals construct and interpret social reality. In other words, humour derives its communicative power not merely from linguistic forms but from the collective knowledge shared by members of the discourse community.

As a whole, the discussion demonstrates that humour has become a significant driver of sociolinguistic innovation in Nigerian digital communication. Through multilingual practices, lexical creativity, multimodal expression, and culturally grounded social commentary, WhatsApp users continually reshape language to reflect contemporary realities. The findings therefore highlight the dynamic relationship between language, society, culture, and technology, while contributing empirical evidence to the growing body of scholarship on digital discourse and sociolinguistics in multilingual African contexts.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the relationship between humour and sociolinguistic innovation in selected Nigerian WhatsApp messages. The analysis has shown that humorous digital interactions constitute more than casual exchanges among users; they represent important communicative events through which language is continually reshaped to reflect changing social, cultural, and technological realities. The humorous expressions identified in the corpus reveal the remarkable creativity of Nigerian social media users in adapting available linguistic resources to communicate shared experiences in engaging and meaningful ways.

The findings indicate that code-switching, code-mixing, lexical innovation, semantic extension, metaphorical expressions, multimodal communication, and pragmatic strategies have become defining characteristics of contemporary WhatsApp discourse. These linguistic practices not only enrich communication but also demonstrate the dynamic nature of language within Nigeria's multilingual environment. The study further establishes that humour provides

an effective means of discussing sensitive social issues, including economic hardship, governance, inflation, electricity shortages, and interpersonal relationships, without creating unnecessary confrontation. In this regard, humour functions simultaneously as entertainment, social commentary, and a catalyst for linguistic change.

The study also confirms the relevance of Van Dijk's Sociocognitive Theory in explaining the interpretation of humorous digital discourse. Understanding the selected WhatsApp messages depended largely on participants shared cultural knowledge, collective experiences, and contextual awareness. This reinforces the view that discourse derives its meaning not only from linguistic forms but also from the cognitive and social resources shared by members of a speech community.

Generally, this study demonstrates that WhatsApp has become an important sociolinguistic environment where language innovation occurs continuously through everyday interaction. As digital communication continues to shape patterns of language use, humour will remain a significant force in the development of new expressions and communicative practices. The study therefore contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving relationship between language, humour, culture, and technology in contemporary Nigerian society.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Future research should investigate humour and sociolinguistic innovation across other Nigerian social media platforms to provide a broader understanding of digital language practices.
2. Linguists and discourse analysts should continue documenting emerging digital expressions in order to preserve evidence of ongoing language change within Nigeria's multilingual society.
3. Language educators should incorporate examples of digital discourse into teaching to help learners appreciate contemporary patterns of language use, multilingualism, and linguistic creativity.
4. Communication scholars and media practitioners should encourage the responsible use of humour as a means of promoting social cohesion, cultural understanding, and constructive public engagement.
5. Further studies should employ larger datasets and mixed methods approaches to examine the long-term influence of humorous digital expressions on language development and communication in multilingual societies.

Contributions to Knowledge

This study makes an important contribution to the growing scholarship on sociolinguistics and digital discourse by providing empirical evidence that humour is a major catalyst for sociolinguistic innovation within Nigerian WhatsApp communication. While previous studies have examined humour, multilingualism, and digital discourse independently, this research demonstrates how these phenomena interact to produce innovative linguistic practices in everyday online communication. It further broadens the application of Van Dijk's Sociocognitive Theory by illustrating how shared cultural knowledge shapes the production and interpretation of humorous discourse in digital environments. In addition, the study enriches existing literature on Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, multilingual communication, and computer-mediated discourse by showing that digital humour is an important source of contemporary language change rather than merely a form of online entertainment.

The findings have important implications for sociolinguistics, digital communication, language education, and discourse studies. They suggest that digital platforms should be recognised as valuable sites for investigating contemporary language change and multilingual communication. The study also highlights the need for educators to acknowledge digital

humour as a legitimate aspect of language development capable of enriching learners' understanding of language variation and creativity. For discourse analysts and communication scholars, the findings demonstrate that humorous digital interactions provide valuable insights into identity construction, cultural expression, and public engagement with social issues. More broadly, the study reinforces the importance of integrating digital communication into contemporary sociolinguistic research.

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