

Context and Accidental Humour: The Import of the Sociolinguistic Situation in Linguistic Errors on Public Signage in Kenya

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ABSTRACT:

This paper analyses the distinctive context surrounding the erroneous signage in certain public notices in Kenya. More specifically, it seeks to determine how contextual cues go a long way in assisting the reader to comprehend the distinctive genre of humour under consideration in this paper. Ostensibly, the linguistic landscape of Kenya is ridden in plenteous of signage containing numerous translational errors, which eventually yield accidental humour. In order to achieve the above requires the application of the General Verbal Theory of Humour by Attardo and Raskin (1991) to context where language use is put into consideration. The data was collected from the field by photographing erroneous signage where ten public notices were aptly analysed for their specious nature, which eventually resulted into accidental humour. Specifically, their unique context was further scrutinised to identify the precise components within which the author operated and an attempt to recover the lost interpretation in order to understand the resultant humour. Data presentation involved use of tables to summarise and indicate relationship of crucial contextual components. The paper sheds light on the importance of context to understand humour, enriches translational linguistics and boosts pedagogy in relation to language performance. The study concluded that specific category of humour in the selected signage in this paper requires a complete understanding of the author's situational background. The study recommended that the types of linguistic incongruities as well as how they are resolved to produce accidental humour would go a long way in understanding this category of humour.

Key Terms: Context/ sociolinguistic situation, signage/public notices, translational errors/blunders

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INTRODUCTION

There are so many signage in all corners of the country purposed to inform or warn the reader. To clearly comprehend the messages in the notices, the reader requires to draw out other components apart from the text. Unfortunately, some of the notices placed in the public appear to contradict or communicate a totally different message away from what the author really intended. This is brought about by certain linguistic errors that exist within the texts that the author was not aware of. Consequently, there is a type of accidental humour which emanates from these wrong interpretations. To grasp what the author really meant requires the reader to place the signage in a particular context. Of importance is the sociolinguistic component which allows the readers to not only understand the entire messaging, but also appreciate the errors committed in the process.

To clearly understand and correctly interpret the exact meaning of what has been written down by an author requires a complete understanding of the context of situation, that is, the social and physical context, as well as the mental world including the roles of the people involved. Equally important is the linguistic context which impacts crucially on the intended meaning and how it may be interpreted by someone in either spoken or written discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Analysing the text and interpreting the context of authors of public notices gives a clearer picture of what elements surrounded his/her writing and subsequently appreciating the humour within. Similarly, and more significantly, it allows the readers to appreciate the source of humour in order to understand that it was obviously unintended from the author. The concepts of humour, text and context belong to very wide fields in their own right, and it was not the intention of this paper to conclusively tackle them here;

but only to highlight important components relevant for the current study. For this reason and by using Halliday and Hassan's (1990) explanation, this research considered text as what was written in the public notices and context to the environment that made the author to incur the errors in the public notices.

Accidental Humour and Context

Humour is a Latin origin of *humorem* which means fluid or liquid (Martin, 2007). Gáll (2010) divides humour into three categories of which accidental humour is one of them. Al-Kharabsheh (2008:17) considers accidental humour as a situation where the utterer "does not intentionally veer from bona fide speech". Bona fide (BF) speech refers to the expected and contemplated way of speaking. Just like Gáll (2010) above, Al-Kharabsheh (2008) categorises humour into two one of which is attributed to unintentional causes. He insists that it is the "intentional act" in humour that usually gives rise to laughter because the humour giver and humour recipient share something. However, he gives an argument that augurs very well with this paper when he stresses that in accidental humour, the humour object entirely lacks the purpose to amuse or to entertain. Consequently, he maintains that the hilarity occurs accidentally because of the non-bona fide (NBF) mode of communication which refers to the unexpected in speech. Farghal (2006:12) shares similar sentiments about accidental humour insisting that if the author has no intention of amusing, but still humour is inadvertently conveyed and mirth is produced, then that is unintentional humour.

Text, Script and Context in Humour

It would be impossible to understand humour in any text without putting it in a proper context; similarly, one cannot consider context without first considering the text, since text is a language that is functional (Halliday, & Hassan,

1990). This means that a text is a semantic unit that is made up of meanings that have to be expressed in structures of written words. The text is an output and product which possesses a semantic choice through different social exchanges of potential meanings in a certain context. Therefore, for this study, to understand the texts in public notices, needs a bigger understanding of the sociolinguistic context.

For that reason, to analyse a text critically involves structuring it into different elements and separately understanding their individual meanings, as well as, their combined meaning; then placing the text in its appropriate context (Halliday, & Hassan, 1990). Likewise, cohesion and coherence can really help to understand a text better (Stubbs, cited in Antaki, 2003). Generally, texts can have a public and private interpretation (Gilbert, & Mulkay, cited in Antaki, 2003). If the intention of the author in a text is to elicit humour, the humour recipient will identify the cues and understand. The errors made in the public notices, as explained earlier, were obviously, unintended. Therefore, their analyses were different.

The script is an important component in humour studies. Hence, according to Raskin (1985: 81), a script is “a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it”. When all is said and done, it is clear that a native speaker contains absolute knowledge about their language: the structure and use in any situation. During humour appreciation, “the punch-line triggers the switch from one script to the other by making the hearer backtrack and realize that a different interpretation was possible from the very beginning” (Attardo, & Raskin, 1991: 308).

Context in Unintentional Humour

The study of language involves the study of meaning which functions in a certain context. It is clearly known that

language constitutes human culture and is always understood in its relationship to social culture since it is the most important, comprehensive and all-embracing way of meaning (Halliday, & Hassan, 1990). So, Halliday and Hassan (1990) have analysed the context of situation into three components, corresponding to the three meta-functions of language: field, tenor and mode of discourse. The field of discourse includes the “play” i.e. the kind of activity, as recognized in culture, within which the language is playing some part. Secondly, the tenor of discourse involves the “players” i.e. the actors, or rather the interacting roles, which are involved in the creation of the text. Lastly, the mode of discourse encompasses the “parts” i.e. the particular functions that are assigned to language in this situation and the rhetorical channel that is, therefore, allotted to it. As far as public notices are concerned, tenor refers to the authors and readers of public notices, mode of discourse includes the function of the notice and field includes the whole process of writing, posting, reading and interpretation of the notices.

Thus, context includes the social, economic and institutional settings (Paltridge, 2006). The main components of context include education, sex, age, class, tradition, politics, trade/commerce, geography, history among others. Any one of the above components, or a combination of them, may really go a long way in contributing to the interpretation of a text: especially regarding the public notices. With reference to this study, the most important constituent would highlight the author’s level of education, social status and target language competence inter alia.

According to Hudson (cited in Antaki, 2003), this will elicit societal concerns which will be determined by several important language variation factors: nature of participants, their relationship; number of participants; role of participants; function of speech event; nature of

medium; genre of discourse and physical setting. It is through the above context that this research sought to consider the public notices and its authors, and subsequently their interrelationship with regard to the sociolinguistic context.

Since, sociolinguistics is a very wide subject, it is not the intention of this research to consider its entirety here. This research will be limited to the factors to be considered to the examination of the social and cultural context of a written text including the setting of the text, its focus and purpose, the intended audience and their role and purpose in reading the text and the relationship between the author and recipients of the text (Partridge, 2006).

FINDINGS

Table 1a below summarises the 10-signage identified for a discussion in this paper and Table 1b summarises the contextual aspects that were crucial in understanding the unique type of humour emanating from the erroneous notices.

Table 1a: Sample of Public Notices

	Public Notice
1.	<i>We deal with all kinds of car jacks</i>
2.	<i>We beat carjackers at their games!</i>
3.	<i>Ladies: you are requested not to have children in the bar</i>
4.	<i>Sony erection</i>
5.	<i>We do... man cure... penicure</i>
6.	<i>Male Girls High School</i>
7.	<i>Makende Water Project</i>
8.	<i>Senye Primary School</i>
9.	<i>Poko Hotel</i>
10.	<i>Strictly no children hallowed</i>

Table 1b: Summary of the Contextual Components

	Item	Form	Distribution
1.	Location	Contextual	10
2.	Targets	Readers	10
3.	Purpose	Intentional	10
4.	Nature of Participants	Provider/client	10
5.	Nature of Medium	Written	10
	TOTAL		10

DISCUSSION OF THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONTEXT

As can be seen in Table 1b above, the situational context was multi-faceted and contained various important components. The table above clearly showed that each of the components within the sociolinguistic situation were 100 per cent present and available in the public notices in this study. A further analysis and discussion about these components was discussed next.

Locational Context of Public Notices and Humour

Specifically, such information as regarding the immediate location of the notices was significant, because without placing a specific notice in its immediate context would lose the humour within it. In this study, the immediate context and location referred to the physical setting of the public notices, which included shops (1, 2 and 4), school (6 and 8), hotels (9) maternity wings/clinics (10), salon/beauty parlour (5) and bar (3) among others. It was only by considering the location where the public notice was sited against the scripts therein, that the unintended humour be well appreciated and appropriately analysed.

(1) *We deal with all kinds of car jacks*

(2) *We beat carjackers at their games!*

Notices (1) and (2) above appeared in a shop advertising the sale of spare parts of a vehicle. Without appreciating the immediate location as a spare-parts shop, a reader would definitely misinterpret the notices as advertisements advocating stealing of cars! This is further from the truth, thus the incongruity and subsequent ensuing humour. In fact in (1) above, the reader would be forgiven for mistaking the signage to be an acknowledgement of a crime syndicate fully recognised by the government. Either way, if the signage appeared at the vicinity of a police station, it would make a lot of sense. However, when it appeared at the front of a shop selling spare parts, it became highly suspicious and incongruous. It was a combination of the signage and this contextual cue that allowed the reader to arrive at the humour. As for (1), the reader expected the author either to be very bold and callous or totally daft and irresponsible. This appeared to be a direct ticket to prison since no sensible government would entertain such criminal activities to take place within its jurisdiction. Clearly, the locational context was not within the expected crime-busters precincts but a spare-parts shop allowing quite an absurd interpretation producing humour.

(3) *Ladies: you are requested not to have children in the bar*

Additionally, notice (3) above strictly forbade children from entering the bar for apparent reasons. Without the locational context, the reader would not have understood whether the “bar” referred to a place where alcohol was sold or whether it was where lawyers were admitted for practice, thus the ambiguity. Frankly, both these locations should undeniably be out of bounds for children. Morally, in a bar, alcoholic drinks were served and drunkards were bound to misbehave starting bar fights, as well as, engaging in adult-like activities. This ambiguity confused the reader as to whether the author was referring to an

entertainment spot or where a lawyer is called to serve as an advocate. It follows then that the reader needed to appreciate the locational context in order to understand the signage; otherwise, a contrary interpretation would be arrived at which would be humorous. Another quite amusing interpretation revolved around the function associated with the locational context. Thus, the phrase “having children” was supposed to be located in a “maternity wing” not a “bar” as the signage seemed to suggest eliciting a contradiction. To resolve this contradiction required placing the signage in the correct locational context and seeking an alternative reinterpretation to its message.

(4) *Sony erection*

(5) *We do... man cure... penicure*

Notices (4) and (5) above were incoherent without prior knowledge about their locational setting since they both appeared to address masculine issues. Interestingly, getting to know the locational settings, in relation to the scripts in the notices, was rather hilarious. It appeared as if the authors were advertising remedies for men-related complications i.e., “erection” (4) and “man cure” (5). However, this was further from the truth since (4) was located in a shop dealing with the sale of smart mobile phones of a certain brand whilst (5) was located from a salon involved with feminine-related beauty. Ironically, none of these two public notices dealt with anything to do with men problems as they purported to suggest when considered minus context. Without locational context, the reader would be confused as to the real intention of the author. It appeared as if these two signage were probably located in a “tradition medicine man” premises promising to “cure” men in in potency-related matters including but not limited to solving “erection”. However, the two signage were not located there, instead (4) was located in a shop while (5) was located in a saloon precipitating a humorous scenario.

(6) *Male Girls High School*

The proper noun namely *Male*, in the above signage as well as *Makende* (7), *Senye* (8) and *Poko* (9) below were not only peculiar but also funny without even placing them in any locational context. Specifically, signage (6) was located next to a school and the interpretation depended on the script emerging from the signage. A school could either be a girls' only or a boys' only or a mixture of both. An incongruity arose since the word "male" would elicit a contradictory script when it occurred in a syntagmatic relationship with "girls". Therefore, it should be understood that the location context resolved this incongruity since the name was then understood as a proper noun without which humour would have been produced.

(7) *Makende Water Project*

(8) *Senye Primary School*

(9) *Poko Hotel*

Whereas (6) appeared to be ludicrous on its own, notices (7), (8) and (9) contained words whose scripts elicited a sexual connotation in another language, specifically *Sheng* (a local youth pidgin). Of importance to note was that the humour elicited was as a result of a difference in language between the TL and a local language. Thus, in *Sheng*, "Makende" in (7) above had the sense of "testicles", "Senye" in (8) elicited "vagina" and "Poko" in (9) could mean "prostitute". It is only by understanding that "Male" (8), "Makende" (7), and "Senye" (8) were geographical names in the native language from the region where this signage was collected from when the notices appeared to make sense; otherwise, it would appear as if it was an insult using *Sheng* in (8) and (9) or as if they were involved in sexual trading in (9). Thus, the locational context allowed the reader to make sense of the signage without which it would appear ridiculous.

(10) *Strictly no children hallowed*

Similarly, in (10), children were disallowed inside maternity wings for obvious reasons since childbirth would have been a horrifying experience for them, thus the caution of the public notice. Ironically, whereas children were prohibited from entering the maternity wing, they were still supposed to be born inside these premises; therefore, forbidding them seemed incredulous thereby producing a humorous effect. However, when the notice was considered in totality, the message was recovered from the locational context. Humour was produced when the reader contemplated the logic of banning children from the specific place that they were expected to be born in: it was tantamount to banning police officers from police stations. Generally, majority of the public notices in this study required a locational context to arrive at their intended message, otherwise unintended humour was resultant.

Clearly from the above illustrations, to appreciate humour required a clear understanding of the components of location. Evidently, all the public notices were set in a particular location; specifically, next to or near the services or goods they purported to advertise or the information they intended or sought to portray. Nearly all the locations were usually physical locations clearly seen and easily accessible to and by the reader. Therefore, it should be very easy for the reader to associate the public notices with their presumed information, services or goods; hence understand the humour that arose thereof. Specifically, the locational component question aptly responded to the question "where?" Location also indicated the exact premises where the public notices were situated as portrayed by the table below.

Table 2: Locational Component of Situational Context

	Location/premises	Distribution
1.	Shop	2
2.	School	2
3.	Entertainment joints	1
4.	Hotel	2
6.	Hospital	1
9.	Saloon	1
10.	Project	1
	Total	10

Curiously, as clearly indicated in Table 2 above, most of the public notices (95%) were premised near or next to where the public notices existed, 5 per cent of the notices did not follow this norm. It was always easy for the reader to access the services and goods if they were nearby since they could just drop in on if they were desirous which explained the large distribution. With no specific location, the reader did not feel obligated to respond to the information on offer. Crucially, there was a diverse distribution of different premises where the majority was biased towards premises associated with the shops. Generally, shops appeared to be popular since they allowed different goods and services to be accessed by different readers who were the consumers. However, shops were of different types but this research did not find errors in general shops which were commonly found selling everyday foodstuffs. In fact, the shops in this research were unique and they specifically sold specific goods and services especially as regarded spare parts.

Focus, Purpose and Perspective of the Public Notice and Humour

Apart from the humour which results from a detachment in the physical setting, the focus and perspective of the public notice was equally important in appreciating humour from the context. When the signage erroneously missed the

focus, wrongly expressed the purpose or even mistakenly portrayed a perspective, there was a gap which produced humour. On one hand, focus would mostly refer to the author's target in terms of who the addressee was, for example whether it addressed students (6 and 8), patrons (3), visitors (11), customers (1 and 2) or other general consumers (4). On the other hand, perspective would be mostly interested in the approach the author took in delivering his/her message using the public notice: to persuade (1 and 2), caution (10), request (3), inform (5), instruct (6) or advertise (4 and 5). Significantly and related to perspective is the purpose and function of the public notice which should be put into consideration. Majority of the public notices were purposed for a similar role as their perspective: thus, advertising (1, 2, 4 and 5), caution (10) and request (3).

Nonetheless, if the purpose, focus and perspective of the public notice was defeated, it was bound to trigger some incongruity which eventually produced humour. For example, even though (10) was purposed to disallow children from entering the maternity wing, it spew irony and contradicted itself and confused the focus since children were originally supposed to be born from the same premises. Therefore, the idea of barring them defeated the sole purpose of their existence and gave an erroneous perspective which produced humour. Likewise, the services and goods advertised by the authors in some of the notices failed to be correctly identified since their description was lost with incorrect spelling (*man cure*, *penicure*,) in (5); faulty lexis choice (*sony erection*) in (4). The purpose of the public notice was not achieved since the incorrect spellings rendered the author's intention inadequate. Therefore, the focus and perspective of the public notice, as far as the author intended, were all lost thereby producing humour.

Obviously, the author intended to focus on a certain cadre of people whether individually or as a group. Apparently, the target should have been the immediate recipient of the goods and services as indicated by the various public notices. These targets should have been able to read the notices and realised the humour contained therein. Obviously, most of the targets were the clienteles and consumers of the goods and services on offer by the author. Of course, the targets were varied and diverse as indicated by Table 2 and the author attempted to catch their attention as much as possible, in the process creating some translation errors which were deemed humorous. To understand this humour required a complete understanding of the type of targets and the methods used to try to convince them about the appropriateness of the goods and services under offer, as well as warn them against certain things. Clearly, the shoppers and patrons seemed to contribute the majority of the targets for these notices.

Table 3: Target Component of Situational Context

	Target	Sub-target	Distribution
1.	Patrons		4
2.	Shoppers		1
3.	Pupils/students/parents		2
4.	Visitors		3
	Total		10

Interestingly, the target and the purpose of the public notice should correspond to each other since the latter could only be directed at a specific target. If the relationship and correspondence was not clear, translational errors were bound to arise which elicited humour. Definitely, there existed a purpose which was the intention of the author towards the public notice directed to the target and any conflict in the realisation of this

provoked humour. In effect, the author appeared to have decided to enlighten or warn the reader about the goods and services that were under his/her jurisdiction. Thus, the purpose of the majority of the public notices were either informative or cautionary as indicated in Table 4 below. When the public notices failed to either warn or inform; alternatively, if the information was distorted and realised wrongly especially as a result of errors of translation, humour arose.

Table 4: Purpose Component of Situational Context

	Purpose	Distribution
1.	Inform	9
2.	Warn	1
	Total	10

On one hand, the purpose to inform appeared to appeal to the majority of public notices since goods and services required specific information about their importance and viability. Presumably, many consumers did not have sufficient knowledge about the type of goods and services on offer; therefore, it was the sole responsibility of the authors to furnish their readers with adequate facts to allow them to make informed decisions. It was during this process that translational gaffes ensued creating unintended humour. Therefore, it was for this reason that informative notices were highly distributed at >70 per cent in this study. On the other hand, the rest of the public notices were cautionary (< 20%): simply, they warned the readers to refrain from partaking in certain undertakings which were deemed perilous by the authors. Notably, there were only a few such scenarios where certain risky engagements were prevalent and this explained the small presence of this purpose as far as this study was concerned.

Nature of Participants and Nature of Medium

In addition, the nature of participants, the nature of medium as well as the genre of discourse were important components in comprehending humour through the concept of context (Antaki, 2003). Essentially, the nature of the medium of discourse in this study was basically restricted to and only applied to the written form, which was quite limited here for any further analysis on humour. The reason being that all the notices were essentially written down without any other form to contrast it with.

Unfortunately, calligraphy which was employed in the public notices was not at the centre of this study; therefore, was not considered any further. There were many features of the public notice that were not analysed in this study including use of different colours in the writings, various colours of the notices, shaping of letters and the quality of the medium. The researcher felt that the unintended humour was not addressed fully by these components as far as this research was concerned.

Nonetheless, the subsequent encoding of the message by the author and its ensuing decoding by the targeted reader were crucial aspects in comprehending and appreciating the humour therein. In effect, the medium of writing gave an opportunity for the reader to literary read and comprehend the communicative purpose of the author and also allowed the researcher to have material to analyse. Crucially, it offered vital scripts, unlike any other medium, consisting of written texts necessary for humour analysis. Similarly, the nature of the medium illuminated to the researcher some of the contextual elements responsible for some of the translational errors. The researcher was made to understand issues of illiteracy and education standards which affected the authors of the signage. Most of these thematic aspects that directly affect the author and allow him/her to commit translational errors are discussed in the next sub-section.

Likewise, the number of participants was infinite since so many people interacted with the public notice on a daily basis. Nevertheless, their age, sex, class, ethnicity and economic status were fundamental concepts as far as the nature of participants was concerned and would be discussed later under thematic concerns. Significantly, the nature of the intended audience, their role and purpose in reading the text was a critical element in determining context. For the majority of the public notices in this study, the audience were generally the consumers: patrons (3), visitors (9), tourists (9), students (6 and 8) and other customers (4, 7 and 10). The purpose of the audience reading the text was generally to be informed of the presence of goods and services (1, 2 and 5), cautioned (3 and 10) and for general awareness purposes (4 and 7). Finally, the role and relationship between writers and readers of the public notice was also vital to understand the context of situation: teacher/student (6 and 8), seller/buyer (1 and 2) and proprietor/patron (4 and 9), consultant/client (5).

Therefore, it would be self-defeating, odd and uncharacteristic of the author to intentionally confuse the reader by being ambiguous (1-10), vague (10) or non-communicative (4 and 5) since it did not serve him any good and consequently reversed his main intention. It was anticipated that the author was observing the conversational maxims by being cooperative and sincere in his/ her communication which was in line with the cooperative principle (Grice, 1965); therefore, any diversion from the above was highly suspicious and totally contradictory. When the nature of the notice was put into the proper perspective, then these mistakes were considered as unintentional, which rendered them funny, because they did not convey the original view-point of the author.

The nature of participants was equally an important component of context as was shown by Table 4 above. Clearly, the main participants in this context involved the author and the reader. It was the author who produced translational faults and the reader who identified these errors as funny. However, the form of realisation of the author/reader was manifested in varied ways. The commonest nature was expressed in the form of proprietor/clientele manifestation. Interestingly, this component combined both the location and target components to come up with the complex nature of participants. As already mentioned earlier and as exhibited in Table 4 the majority of the targets were patrons; therefore, it went without saying that the sub-component of “clientele” was mainly occupied by patrons. This was then followed by the elements involving visitors, shoppers and pupils/student/parents.

Alternatively, the other sub-component of “proprietor” was a reflection of the locational component. Thus, again as reflected in Table 4, shop owners seemed to occupy the largest distribution and then followed closely by owners of entertainment joints. Other notable proprietors in this study included hoteliers and school administrators at around. There were also those proprietors that were realised at lesser percentage including hospital administrators, traditional medicine men/women, hoteliers and home/car/saloon owners among others.

The nature of medium in Table 4 above rounded up the major components that comprised the context of situation. There was nothing so much to analyse here since all of the public notices were realisable as texts specifically written down a certain flat surface. The styles of surfaces were

inconsequential as far as this research was concerned since they really did not contribute much to the analysis of humour. Similarly, the types of writing style or systems as well as calligraphy was beyond the scope of this study and was consequently disregarded. Correspondingly, ignoring all other aspects that did not specifically contribute to the humour within the notices, allowed us to restrict the nature of the medium to the written form. The advantage of written over other media could not be gainsaid; since it allowed appropriate analyses, especially concerning translational errors, which single-handedly form the foundation of this research and allowed the unintended humour to be undoubtedly identified.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions: To clearly understand a text or stretch of texts requires an overlook at some important components surrounding the text. Similarly, to appreciate any humour also requires an understanding of these surrounding items. Therefore, to appreciate this specific category of humour in the selected signage in this paper requires a complete understanding of the author’s situational background.

Recommendations: The study recommended that sociolinguistics is a wide subject and not all components were identified in this paper and further research can identify other important components not mentioned in this paper, some thematic concerns that appear to emerge from the sociolinguistic component of humour need further interrogation including how the different signage portray the society and finally the types of linguistic incongruities as well as how they are resolved to produce accidental humour would go a long way in understanding this category of humour.

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