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Mediation of the Black African identity through social media humour

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ABSTRACT

The paper engages the intersection between social media humour and the construction of toxic Black race identities through social media humour. Social media humour is a cultural text that offers discursive spaces for the construction of racial identities, amongst a plethora of other identities. It unpacks how viral social media humour is implicated in the construction, amplification and perpetuation of toxic racial attitudes at a time in which race issues are dominating global identity discourses. More so, in an unstable and combative social milieu marred by Afrophobia and other forms of ethnic violence. These attitudes are discursively constructed and perpetuated through a plethora of spaces, referred to as the battlefield of history, including on social networking sites. Humour is not an innocent text. It is critical to unpack the multiple ways in which viral race-based humour circulated through WhatsApp groups is implicated in shaping how black people conceptualise themselves vis-à-vis the white race. Its point of departure is that race identity, and its self-conceptualisation, is by no means natural. The race-related humour is, therefore, an entry point into African people's appreciation of what it feels to be African, vis-à-vis what is naturalised as the hegemonic white identity. In the process, the humour highlights the problematic of participation on social networking sites.

KEYWORDS:

Race, identity, social media, humour, social text.

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1. Introduction

The paper engages the nexus between social media humour and the discursive formation of toxic Black race identities through social media humour. Social media humour is a cultural text that offers discursive spaces for the construction of African black identities. Particular focus is placed on humour that refers to White identities, explicitly and/or implicitly. The paper unpacks how viral social media humour is implicated in the construction, amplification and perpetuation of toxic racial attitudes at a time in which race issues are dominating global race identity discourses. More so, in an unstable and combative social milieu marred by Afrophobia and other ethnic-related violence. These attitudes are discursively constructed and perpetuated through a plethora of spaces, referred to as the battlefield of history, including on social networking sites (SNSs).

Humour refers to anything that elicits amusement. On SNSs, this can appear in a variety of forms. These include, jokes, memes, videos and stickers, among others. In the context of the present research, a joke is a specific form of humour textual realisation of humour whereby words are employed "within a specific and well-defined narrative structure to elicit laughter" (www.askdifference.com/joke-vs-humour). Humour is, thus, not an innocent text. It is a social text that is shaped by the social milieu in which it is produced and shared.

Sinkeviciute (2019) argues that humour is crucial in the construction of identities, among its many other functions. More so, when these identities are indexed through ubiquitous verbal behaviour as humour. It is, thus, critical to unpack the multiple ways in which viral race-related humour shared through SNSs is implicated in shaping how black people conceptualise themselves vis-à-vis the white race. The article focuses on jokes that engage users' perceptions on racial differences between the Black and White identities.

The paper's point of departure is that race-identity, and its self-conceptualisation, is by no means natural. Race-related humour can, therefore, be used as a point of entry in the appreciation of what it 'feels' to be African, and how the Black African identity compares itself with what is perceived as the hegemonic White race identity. Couched on Gatsheni-Ndlovu and Chambati's (2013) theorisation of unequal racial power dynamics in the postcolonial neocolonised world, the predominantly self-deprecating race-related humour exhibits an inferiority complex and self-denigration tendencies. These emerge in humour that engages issues pertaining to the origins of the name Africa,

perceived technological ineptitude of African people as well as inferiority of local languages vis-à-vis the English language. The study is mainly based on purposively sampled humour that (in)directly juxtaposes black attitudes and/or behaviours with what is perceived to be a naturalised White ideal that Africans have to measure up to. In the process, the humour underscores what has been referred to as the problematic of participation in the engagement of identity on SNSs (Milner, 2012). Cast in the Pan-Africanist ideology, the humour also confirms concerns that Pan-Africanism is dwindling and, in the doldrums, (Falola & Essian, 2014; Mhaka, 2022).

Humour is an example of a social text that is, more often than not, taken for granted by users. It is an instance of social phenomena that are, at once, so pervasive in everyday interaction but, also at the same time, remain hidden from the lenses of both social scrutiny and academic inquiry (Jauregui, 1998). Milner (2012) emphasises how the ostensive banality of humour has reinforced perceptions of its lack of 'seriousness'. Milner (2012) proceeds to aptly observes the apparent initial mismatch of studying the high ideals of mediated cultural participation through an engagement of jokes, which are ostensibly perceived as silly interludes between more 'serious' activities such as work and commuting, among others. Huntington (2017) argues that it is relatively easy for humour to get overlooked in academic inquiry due to general perceptions of lack of substantive content. However, humour is an instance of 'everyday' social texts, that are critical in providing the raw materials in the construction of societal discourses (Milner, 2012).

This, therefore, makes humour an important social text whose significance in identity construction cannot be overemphasised. Humour is, thus, an important part of popular culture and is, thus, an important artefact that is worthy of assessing in so far as its contribution in the construction of public discourse and, in the process, identity. Kuipers (2005) argues that humour, whether mediated or not, is an important piece of pop culture public discourse. This is especially so given humour's typical anonymity, great variability and shareability. It is in this vein that the humour spreadability increases the potential for mobilisation (Mukhongo, 2020). This is particularly significant in an online media culture where virality is synonymous with value by users (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013; Wasik, 2009). After all, Bourdieu (1984) reminds us that seemingly mundane phenomena such as entertainment, fashion, and food are in actual fact critical in both the creation and dissemination of cultural capital. De Kosnik (2019) emphasises how such

practices are defined by relations, interactions, and encounters between co-participants. They, therefore, significantly contribute to public life itself.

Milner (2012) argues that, social texts, such as humour, are the artefacts by which cultural participants weave together their reality. In the process, ideological positions are negotiated. From this perspective, reality, in this case racial identities, are construed through these discursive artefacts. It is from this standpoint that Hanks (1989) social texts, like humour, are fundamentally a form of cultural capital in that they are instantiation of speech acts, modes of naturalising (or challenging) and familiarising specific social realities. Social texts are, therefore, instruments of authority, and the medium as well as the measure of 'political' debate in any given social milieu. participants use humour to contribute to public conversations about significant issues in their lives (Milner, 2012; Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2014). It is safe to argue that social texts, such as humour, provides diverse narratives on racial identity which then become the threads that participants use in the weaving of both the micro and the macro realities on their understanding of race (Milner, 2012). Thus, the discursivity of the humour in so far as the construction of racial identities cannot be overestimated.

There is no doubt that slavery, colonialisation, apartheid and neo-colonialism are processes that have led to the decimation of the Black African identity. It is from the perspective of these processes that Pan-Africanism came in to represent a reaction against the injustices suffered by Black people (Enoh, 2014). Appiah (1992) characterises it as an ideology or consciousness that calls for the unification of all Africans into a single African state to which even those in the African diaspora can return (reverse migrations).

Falola and Essien (2014) contend that people of African descent share similar experiences and, hence, have a common destiny. For Appiah, Pan Africanism challenges anti-black racism on two fronts. These are, racial domination in the diaspora and colonial domination, which almost invariably took a racial form in Africa. It emerges that globally, people of colour constitute a unit on which racial identity is a rallying point. For Enoh (2014), the Pan Africanist consciousness is aimed at the restoration, regeneration, rehabilitation, reinvigoration, reclamation and unification of the Africa and Black identity. Hence, the promoting a feeling of solidarity among the people of African descent across the globe.

Of particular interest to the present study is how Pan Africanism glorifies the African past and inculcates pride in African values. It, therefore, resonates with

Cabral's (1973) return to the source philosophy, exhorting Africans to urgently reclaim the lost pride in their own racial identity. The question to ask, however, is the extent to which the race-related humour construct Black identities that resonate with the Pan Africanist imperative that seeks to restore the African identity to its former glory.

The study interrogates the multiple ways in which narrative emerging from the humour glorify the White identity at the expense of their Black identity, which they effectively undermine, and index, as inferior. This is especially pertinent in the Zimbabwean context whereby *murungu* (White person) and *chirungu* (foreign language, western attitudes and behaviours) are constructed as what Africans should basically thrive for. Suffice to point out that this is a manifestation of the classical case of people striving to be like the oppressor, such that they are effectively black skins with white masks endeavouring to assimilate into the former coloniser's cultural practices and values (Fanon, 1952).

The social media is increasingly becoming a critical arena for the construction of racial identities in general. This is underscored by the proliferation of hashtag movements that directly speak to issues of race globally. Anderson (2016) reveals how, on Twitter's 10-year anniversary, two of the top three social justice hashtags on Twitter were directly related to issues of race. That is, #Fergison and #BlackLivesMatter which were first and third on the list, respectively. The #BlackLivesMatter, in particular, has been almost a permanent presence on Twitter since the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the tragic shooting of Trayvon Martin in July 2013 (Anderson, Toor, Olmstead, Rainie & Smith, 2018).

Developing organically, these hashtag movements promote conversations on and around issues of race (Anderson, 2016). Based on the realisation of the fact that the Black man is hated everywhere (Mhaka, 2022), these movements emphasise how the question of race is still unresolved, and is, therefore, unfinished business. Ncube (2021) shows that humour, ridicule and laughter language can be used towards self-liberation and self-rehabilitation. However, the question is whether it is always the case that the Black man loves themselves in the first place. If anything, Fanon (1952) and Freire (1968) warn us about the sad reality of the self-hate that Black have and their endeavour to assimilate into what is constructed as the hegemonic White identity.

The public sphere is an arena where society comes together to communicate (Habermas, 1991), and, in the process, discursively construct racial identity.

SNSs have brought with them new media logics that have brought about a participatory media culture in the digital public sphere (Huntington, 2017). Willems and Mano (2016) argue that increased access to the Internet, as well as the proliferation of mobile devices, has enabled citizens to create user-generated content, engage in online debates, and connect with others globally. Grossman (2006) emphasises how the 'ear of you' has amplified participants' voices and thereby making their contributions matter. Race-related humour is a case in point. Twitter has especially been identified as the perfect outlet for users to express their racial identities (Cumberbatch & Trujillo-Pagán, 2016).

For Zimbabwe, in particular, WhatsApp, has gained unparalleled significance as a site of participatory communication and generation of public debate. It is against this background that this paper sets out to explore and problematise how racial identities and their attendant struggles play out social media humour. Specific focus is placed on issues related to the origins of the name Africa, technological competence and issues related to linguistic imperialism. The paper is, thus, in line with Mangeya and Ngoshi's (2021, p. 3) observation that "race has always been problematic and social media conversations deal with the problematics of race among other issues."

Jakaza (2020) argues that, in the negotiation of identities, SNSs are generally spaces for either their construction or obfuscation. Cumberbatch and Trujillo-Pagán (2016) contend that SNSs provide virtual spaces to challenge, reframe, and reinscribe identities (Cumberbatch & Trujillo-Pagán, 2016). They are not merely spaces for self-presentation, but also for how people understand themselves and, in the process, form identities. The cultivation of a sense of inferiority or superiority is crucial for the choice of humour that they share on SNSs. When SNSs are used to construct toxic racial identities, it confirms Fishkin's (2009) fears of the trilemma of democracy on digital spaces whereby the new-found democratic participation does not necessarily translate to the construction of positive identity. Hence, Milner's (2012) characterisation of the phenomenon as the problematic of participation. The present study interrogates how the Black identity can be "indexed through the use of subversive humour that emphasises social boundaries and indicates how an individual does not fit into a particular group" (Sinkeviciute, 2019, p. 2).

2. Theoretical framework

The study is couched on Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Chambati's (2013) theorisation of unequal racial power dynamics in the postcolonial neocolonised world. Developing on Quijano's (2000) theorisation of coloniality, the theory argues that imposed racial and/or ethnic classification are the foundation of a pervasive model of power whose effects are felt at every level of sociocultural, economic and political life. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Chambati (2013), coloniality foregrounds the experiences of the subaltern in the postcolony by challenging the otherwise taken-for-granted hegemonic Western paradigms of racial and/or ethnic difference. The theory exposes historic unequal pervasive power relations, rooted in colonialism, that still persists in defining all facets of life in the postcolony. Following Mangeya and Ngoshi (2021, p. 4), the present study focuses on:

> the multiple ways in which the former colonial master's worldview continues not only to dominate life in the postcolony but is actually celebrated, overtly or otherwise, in their self-presentations in a plethora of spaces, such as the social media.

Although colonialism took place in many places across the globe, the research focuses on the specific ways in which African worldviews continue to be shaped by the colonial encounters, and its inherent unequal racial power dynamics. There are many ways in which these unequal power relations are mediated, particularly through collective identity construction. Khazraee and Novak (2018) posit that racial identity is constructed through symbols, language, culture and group experiences. From this perspective, images, symbols and statements in the public sphere cease to be innocent expressions of ideas as these can easily provoke racial debate. More specifically, the researchers use insights from the construct of coloniality of being. It raises critical questions pertaining to the former-colonised's subjectivity, self-pride and self-assertion. It is premised on the fact that, in the African context, the African's identity and self-confidence has been denigrated for so long that it has created an inferiority complex and self-denigration tendencies. These toxic self-representations are enacted in a wide variety of spaces, including the social media.

3. Methodology

The study descriptively analyses narratives on race identity emerging from humour shared on SNSs. The humour is typically produced and/or shared

amongst anonymous 'publics'. Conceptualising participants as 'publics' underscores how SNSs are effectively self-organised interactive spaces formed between strangers that are created by the reflexive circulation of online discourse featuring personal and impersonal narratives imagined or otherwise. by taking the view of (Warner 2002; Highfield, 2016). Specific attention is placed on humour shared over WhatsApp groups specifically formed for the sharing of jokes.

This platform was selected due to the fact that it is Zimbabwe's most popular social networking site (SNS), accounting for nearly half of the country's social media traffic (Karombo & Correspondent, 2017).

Data was generated through participant observation of race-related humour shared via the platform. Race-related humour collected was then categorised based on salient themes. These themes were then taken as representatives of the diversity of narratives emanating from the discourse of race-identity in Zimbabwe.

Three dominant narratives emerged from that data. These are, the origin of the name 'Africa', perceived technological ineptitude of Blacks and linguistic imperialism. Following Hoeber and Hoeber (2015), the value of using data generated from SNSs to study public opinion on a specific issue is twofold. That is, it is (1) open, accessible, and unfiltered; (2) there is usually a huge amount of data available for analysis.

4. Results

Three dominant narratives emerged from the race-related humour shared over the WhatsApp group platforms. These pertain to issues related to the origins of the name 'Africa', perceived technological incompetence of Blacks as well as issues related to linguistic imperialism. Taken together, the narratives weave together a racial discourse that suggests that Blacks suffer from an inferiority complex and self-denigration tendencies. This significant in so far as Pan African consciousness is concerned especially in the context of how the West constructed Africa as a dark, uncivilised and backward continent so as to justify the violence and inhumanity slavery and colonialism, amongst many other racial atrocities against Black people.

Origins of the name Africa

The name given to anything is not just an empty or innocent signifier. Whilst semiotics will argue that a name is nothing more than an arbitrary relationship subsisting between a signifier (the name) and its signified (the entity being named), this is not the case in most African cultures. Machaba (2002) argues that naming is a very important instrument used to convey certain messages, either to an individual, family members or a community. among various African cultures. The present study construes 'Africa' as a toponym (name given to a geographical place) that has great significance to Black people in Africa. Bishi, Mujere and Mamvura (2022, p. 58) argue that place naming is a political exercise that often reveals the power dynamics at play. In this case, racial power dynamics are at play. Two sub-narratives emerge from the data on the origin of the name Africa'. The first emerges in (1) below:

1. Hanzi varungu vakatanga kusvika mu continent ino vaiva vasingazivi zita rayo. *Vachifamba kudaro vakasvika pane mumwe musha. Vakawana pane harahwa nechembere vaiva vagere zvavo pachivanze. Mudhara wacho yaiva type iya inoti zvese ndoziva. Variko vanhu vakadaro. Umwe wevarungu ava akati* "What is the name of this continent?" *Harahwa nechembere zvakatarisana. Muchembere akati kumudhara "Kwahi kudii?" Mudhara nokuziva nhema ndokuti "Kwahi bvisai madzihwa". Muchembere akabva ati neseri kweruoko pamhino wee ndokudhonza ruoko kunosvika kunzeve ndokusiyana nazvo. Murungu uya akabvunzazve* "What is the name of this continent?" *Vakatarisana zvakare harahwa kwakuti "Imi ndakuudzai kuti kwahi bvisai madzihwa". Muchembere nehasha ikati "Afurika aa imi!!!" apa yaireva madzihwa. Murungu wakagutsuririra achiti* "Africa! Africa!" *Nanhasi ndozita re continent yedu*

   (It is said that the first Whites to arrive on this continent didn't know its name. As they were travelling, they arrived at a particular homestead. They found an old man and old woman seated on the yard. The old name was the I-know-it-all type. Such type of people are there. One of the White people asked, "What is the name of this continent?" The old couple looked at each other. The old woman asked the old man "What did they say?" Being a smart Alec, the old man said, "They said blow your nose". The old woman used the back of her hand to wipe the mucus pulling it all the way to her ear. The White person asked again, "What is the name of this continent?" The old couple looked at each other again and the old man then said "I already told you that they said blow your nose". In anger the old woman retorted "Afurika!" meaning that had successfully blown the mucus. The White man nodded "Africa! Africa!" It's our continent's name up until now).

The joke in (1) associates the continent's name with mucus blown out of an old woman's nose. The root for blowing one's nose '*-fura*' (/fura/) sounds more or less as the /fr/ in /afrika/. As such, the White man misheard '*afurika*'

(the mucus successfully blown) as 'Africa.' Hence, that became the continent's name. Given that Pan Africanism requires that Blacks have a sense of pride in both their continent as an integral part of their African identity, associating the name of the continent with the blowing of mucus from an old woman's nose. It is apparent that this is not something that any group of people can derive a sense of pride from enough to use it as a rallying point.

The second sub-narrative on the origin of the name emerges in (2) below:

2. Did you know? Zimbabwe is the reason why Africa is called Africa in fact according to my sources Zimbabwe *yaitombonzi* (was also called) Africa before *yakunzi* (being renamed) Rhodesia. The whitemen came here and were introduced to a fruit native to Zimbabwe called *Matohwe* (snort apple), *vakanakirwa nemuchero uyu zvekuti vakatakura imwe vakaenda nawo kunyika kwavo, pavakadzoka kechipira vakaona matohwe asati aita aive akavharika vakabva vati hatiende matohwe asati aibva. Kuseni kweumwe musi baba va*David Livingstone *vakamuka vakaona matohwe aibva sezvamunongoziva dohwe rikaibva rinovhurika, vakabva vashevedzera nemufaro kuti matohwe AVHURIKA asi nekusagona shona vainzwika vachiti AFURIKA AFURIKA, kusvika vapa nzvimbo iyoyo zita rekuti AFURIKA (AFRICA)*

   (… they found the fruit so delicious that they carried it back to their own country. When they came the second time, the fruit was not ripe and they were closed. They then vowed not to return to their own country before the fruit opened. On the morning of a particular day, David Livingstone's father woke up to find that the fruit had ripened).

The joke in (2) narrativises the origins of the name Africa as coming from the opening (*kuvhurika*) of the snort apple. Unlike in (1) above, the name derives from the White man's, David Livingstone's father, failure to pronounce the word *avhurika* (they are/have opened). In this case, the voiced labiodental fricative (/v/) in /avurika/ is pronounced as its voiceless counterpart (/f/). Hence, the apparent excitement related to the opening of the snort apple (/avurika/) is immortalised in the name of the continent.

In both cases, it is the perception of the initial encounter between the Black man and White man that is used to define the continent. The jokes in (1) and (2) allude to issues pertaining to mucus/snort. Whilst there is little to no disgust in (2), the association of the continent with mucus and snort, in snort apple, is telling. Interestingly, mucus can also be referred to as snort. Also, the fruit itself is linked with disgust specially when one exposes it to theirs whilst chewing it. Either way, the name Africa has connotations of disgust. This might mean that there is very little to be proud of.

Technological ineptitude

A dominant narrative in the discourse of Africa as a dark, uncivilised and backward continent (Bates, 2012) is its lack of technological advancement. From this perspective, the west has taken upon itself to 'modernise' the African continent so that it catches up with the rest of the 'developed' world. Access to technology is one of the many strategies the west used to 'civilise' the African continent. Whilst, the present does not intend to delve into the modernity vs development debate, suffice it point out that dominant western discourse view the availing of technology as a positive step towards bringing light to a dark continent. Thus, access to, as well as the ability to operate and use western technology is considered as evidence of embracing the new advanced culture. However, problems arise when one shows that that do not have the requisite competence to operate even the most basic of western gadgets. Such kind of people are generally referred to as a '*vakasara*' (backward) in anecdotal discourses. One's worthy is then judged on the extent to which they know the function of the technologies as well as operating them. The jokes in (3)-(8) below engage this narrative:

3. Kurarama kalife kechirungu nhasi ndatenga microwave izvezvi ndirikudya orange ririkupisa. (I'm living the modern/white man's life. I bought a microwave today. I'm eating a hot orange right now)

4. KaLife kechirungu so … ndabva kunotenga Microwave itsva nhasi kutaura kuno ndikutodya Orange rinopisa (The [beauty] of the white man's life … I've just bought a microwave today [and] as I'm speaking, I'm now eating a hot orange]

5. Those of you that don't have microwave at home How do u wash ur cloths [sic]??

6. Just asking though Kumba kwenyu munayowo here microwave kana kuty muchiri kungowacha nemaoko?? (Do you have a microwave at home or you're still handwashing your laundry)

7. Kuchitungwiza hakuna munhu ane microwave tese towachira mudhish nemaoko kkkkk. (There is no one with a microwave in Chitungwiza. We all handwash our laundry in dishes kkkkk).

8. Munhu wave ne 30years but hausati wakuziva kuti Microwave inoomesa pant nxaa.(You are now over 30 years but you still don't know that you a microwave can be used to dry a pant)

The correct use of the microwave is implicated in jokes (3) – (8) above. They reveal different dynamics pertaining to technological competence in the operation of the microwave. In the white man's world, the microwave can be viewed as a basic household appliance found in every home. Now that the Black man has managed to get a microwave, they want to prove that they can also live the life of the White man. That is, the first dynamic pertains to whether one knows the kind of food stuff, or other substances, that can be 'cooked' in a microwave. In the case of (3) and (4), the Blackman is being lampooned for not knowing that an orange cannot be heated first before eating and that there is, therefore, no need to heat it in a microwave before eating it. Jokes (5) – (6) adds another dimension to the narrative of technological ineptitude whereby the users, in a bid to show off that they are living the White man's life, they completely misuse the microwave. A microwave can never be used as a washing machine. Thus, (5) – (7) are aimed at lampooning Blacks based on the fact that they misuse western technologies due to ignorance. In this vein, (8) is also read as also another instance whereby the microwave is used to dry one's undergarment because of ignorance.

Needless to point out, is that, such humour implicating issues of technology to denigrate the Black race perpetuates dominant discourses that take technology as a cultural artefact that is used as a yardstick for a people's development, education and civilisation, among others. In this case, the level of technological advancement, as well as their competence to use these technologies appropriately, of a particular race can be used to as a matrix of comparing power relations with others. Also, of significance is how the Black person is discursively constructed as an upstart in so far as technology is concerned. They want to present themselves as of a high status on the basis of living a perceived *kalife kechirungu* (the white man's way of life) just on the sheer basis of having a microwave at home.

Linguistic imperialism

Language is the central and essential feature of culture mediates all areas of the social, economic and political lives of a people (Mejia-Martinez, 2017). It is an integral part of a people's identity. Whilst the African continent enjoys arguably the greatest linguistic diversity in the world, language was ironically an important tool in the White man's quest to establish cultural dominance in Africa. The west advanced an ideology of language imperialism in which

the coloniser's language was seen as more powerful over African languages. Phillipson (2009, p. 780) defines linguistic imperialism as,

> the notion that certain languages dominate … on others. It is the way nation-states privileged one language, and often sought actively to eradicate others, forcing their speakers to shift to the dominant language.

Agyekum (2018, p. 87) adds that linguistic imperialism is:

> a linguistic situation where the indigenous people are gradually conscientised to shun their indigenous languages and adopt foreign languages because of the benefits they expect to derive from them. They are made to believe that their languages cannot be used in any transaction in education, economics, science and technology but instead a foreign language is the best.

Whilst linguistics informs us that all languages have the same expressive power, the tragic reality is that the languages of the former colonial master still dominate the African linguistic economy. The linguistic landscape currently subsisting in Africa is such that indigenous varieties are still being marginalised. An enduring legacy of the colonial encounter in Africa is the former coloniser's language which is almost invariably still maintains the official language status that it enjoys in the colonial period. Mejia-Martinez (2017, p. 4) aptly observes how:

> Colonialism introduced a number of linguistic problems in Africa, including ethnocide and linguicism in the name of inferiority, which often resulted in the disruption of the use of local languages and the development of a linguistically alienated elite.

This explains why Wolff (2018) laments the irony of how, more than half a century after independence, the former coloniser's language still enjoys the official language status in most African countries. The former coloniser's language, however, still retains its dominance over indigenous languages in Africa. Agyekum (2018, p. 88) attributes this power inequity between the former coloniser's language and African languages to Africa's continued "economic reliance and dependence on the developed and industrial world."

Agyekum aptly observes how this "has culminated in linguistic and economic neo-colonialism" (Agyekum, 2018, p. 18).

The humour reveals a number of narratives on the hegemony of English over indigenous varieties in Zimbabwe.

Shona lacks expressive power

The humour constructs Shona as a language that does not have the same expressive power as English. This comes out in the (9) – (13) below:

9. *Saka* black tea *ndiyo yatinoti* tea *tsvuku*? (So black tea is what we call 'red' tea).

10. Shona *ndakazosiyana nayo ndaudzwa kuti* black tea *inonzi* tea *tsvuku* (I gave up on Shona after being told that black tea is called 'red tea').

11. Shona does not make any sense sometimes. Imagine *hanzi*, "*Amuka akafa*" "*Ndamuona asiko*" (… Imagine they say "He woke up dead" "I found him not there")

12. Guys sometimes shona [sic] doesn't make sense imagine *hanzi amuka akafa*; kkk *amuka akafa*???? *Saka haana kumukazve chinzwa futi hanzi ndamuona asiko*; *wamuona sei iye asiko chimwwee chishona soo*.

(… they say they woke up dead; kkk they woke up dead???? So, they actually didn't wake up. Now hear this, they say I found him not there; how could you find them not there? Some Shona expressions [are senseless/meaningless]).

13. "*Kana usingade zvekutaura neni taura*" (If you don't want to speak with me say so) Are you sure Shona is a language?

A language is useful to the extent that it enables its speakers to mediate their reality. Implied by (9) – (12) is that, ideally language is supposed to make 'sense'. In the case of (9)-(12) above, Shona is discursively constructed as lacking the expressive power to make it an effective tool for communication. In (9) and (10), the Shona language is unable to accurately represent black tea. It curiously represents it as 'red' (t*svuku*). This is seen as a gross misrepresentation. Hence, the speakers 'giving up on it', according to (10). In this same vein, the African language is also perceived as failing to mediate the most basic of expressions, dying and absence. The language is seen as tripping on its linguistic feet whereby it apparently contradicts itself by saying that someone can 'wake up dead' and 'be found absent' as shown in (11) and (12), respectively. Hence, such

contradictions necessitate questioning whether Shona is indeed a language, in (13).

In the same vein, the humour also suggests that Shona does not qualify to be used as an international language. This is based on what comes out a problem of pervasive homographs in the language. This comes out in (14), below,

14. REASONS WHY SHONA CAN NEVER BE USED AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

Gift – *chipo;* Present – *chipo;* Talent – *chipo;* Offering – *chipo*

Heaven – *denga;* Roof – *denga;* Sky – *denga;*

Pressure – *mweya;* Spirit – *mweya;* Smell – *mweya;*

Test – *miedzo;* Temptation – *miedzo;* Trials – *miedzo;* Tribulations – *miedzo*

Stand – *kumira;* Wait – *kumira;* Stop – *kumira*

Age – *makore;* Clouds – *makore;* Years – *makore*

The joke in (14) suggests that Shona is 'disqualified' from being an international language because it lacks the requisite expressive power to mediate what is seen as fundamentally different aspects of reality. Instead of having a separate word for these diverse phenomena, the language uses homographs. The homographs represent an average of three different concepts. For instance, *chipo* represents gift, present, talent and offering. *Denga* represents heaven, roof and sky. *Mweya* can mean pressure, spirit, and smell. Whilst *miedzo* means test, temptation, trials and tribulations. Implied in this joke is that Shona does not measure up to English because it does not have separate lexical items to represent the different phenomena bunched under the cited homographs. Resultantly, according to the humour, it is difficult to justify why anyone in their rightful mind would want to study Shona up to Advanced level. This comes out in (15) below,

15. Reason *yekuramba uchiita* Shona *kusvika ku* "A" Level *ndeyei, Ukuda kuzoita n'anga here*?

(What is the reason of studying Shona up to A'Level? Do you want to become a witchdoctor?).

Implied in (15) is the fact that there are no tangible benefits that accrue from studying Shona as an academic subject. Advanced level (A level) offers students the chance to study subjects that enable them entry into tertiary institutions,

such as university and colleges. Studying subjects at A school is to develop the requisite cultural capital that will ultimately afford people the socioeconomic mobility. (15), therefore, implies that there is nothing of value to be gained from studying Shona up to A level unless if one wants to 'qualify' as a witchdoctor, which, by implication, is not anything to aspire for.

The fact that Shona is not perceived as a legitimate language, the speakers are forced to use English in daily interactions. English is considered a superior language to African languages, like Shona. Low competence in English attracts derision from fellow Africans. This comes out in (16) – (19), below:

16. I can speak good English in my Heart, but if I open my mouth ehh I couldn't does it.

17. My English is perfect when I am speaking it silently, once I open my mouth … I didn't could. My English is perfect when I'm silent bt once I open my mouth I don't could not.

18. *Chirungu chonakidza uchitaurira mumoyo, kungoda kuvhura muromo chobva chaita* round off to the nearest mother tongue.

19. (English is exciting when speaking it in your mind, when you attempt to speak it rounds off to the nearest mother tongue).

The jokes in (16) – (19) underscore an apparent difficulty Africans have in developing high competence in English. (16) – (18) emphasise the gap between linguistic competence and performance in English. The jokes suggest high levels of frustration at how, in their minds (referred to as heart in (16)), English second language speakers think that they have the requisite levels but this does not translate to proficiency and/or fluency in performance. When they do speak, the first language (the mother tongue) interferes. Implied by this narrative is that the first language has no place in the speaking of the second language. In daily interactions, those who show levels of competence in English attract such derisive comments as '*chakauya nengarava*' (it [English] came by ship). This implies that the English language came a long way, by ship across the ocean, such that when it finally 'landed' in Zimbabwe, Africans could not fully master it. The gap in competence and performance in English is then perceived to put speakers under so much pressure that it can actually lead to mental issues. This comes out in (20), below:

20. *Hameno kuti chii chinoitika pandiri ndikatanga kutaura chirungu gotsi rangu roanga kupisa* (I don't know what happens to me when I start speaking in English, the back of my head starts to heat up).

Joke (20) suggests that Africans are so self-conscious of their inability to speak English fluently that it causes physiological discomfort. Presumably, it arises from the fear of being laughed at for low competence in the second language. More so, when this involves speaking to a White person in the presence of fellow Blacks, as suggested in (21) below.

21. *Kutaura nemurungu haisi* problem *asi kutaura nemurungu umwe munhu akateerera ndopane* problem.

(Speaking with a White person is not a problem but speaking with a White person when someone else is listening is the problem)

White people are seen as the 'owners' of English. Thus, one has to prove that they are competent enough to successfully speak with a White person without 'breaking' the language.

More importantly, English is seen as a language for socioeconomic mobility. Competence in the language is taken to guarantee one with high chances of being formally employed. This is crucial in a country bedevilled with high unemployment. This comes out in (22) – (2), below:

22. I once went for an interview and English decided to wait for me outside. My Shona ancestors took over.

23. Do you remember that moment when you enter the interview room and your English whispers "You will find me outside.

24. "Take your time and breath Samuel". *Ipapo ndange ndiri mu interview ndati*, (I was in an interview and said) "I'm thanks and fine am you, my name is yesterday."

The reference to 'Shona ancestors' in (22) is critical. Culturally, ancestors are an integral part of African people. In African Traditional Religion (ATR), ancestors' blessings determine a person's success in life. In the context of a job interview, where one seeks to secure employment to better their lives, the ancestors do not positively intervene after English decides to desert the Africans as they enter the interview room. The fact that English decides to 'wait' outside implies the loss of a massive employment opportunity on the African's part. Because English would have deserted the African as they enter the interview

room, they then fail to express something as simple as expressing a greeting and stating their name.

Emerging from the imperialism narrative is a strong hate of African language. The mother tongue is discursively constructed as inferior. As such, it lacks the requisite expressive power to qualify it as a legitimate, let alone that can be used as an international language. Africans are, therefore, forced to use second languages, like English, to acquire the cultural capital needed for upward mobility. This confirms O' Shannessy (2011, p. 83) observation of how Black people consciously decide to "… stop speaking the precontact language habitually and mostly speak the post-contact language, which comes to be the language of the next generation." In summation, Agyekum (2018, p. 88) sums up the problem of linguistic imperialism in Africa by noting

Linguistic imperialism has deepened in African countries to the extent that many families in the cities communicate with their children in English, French, Portuguese and Arabic, and the children cannot speak their mother tongue. People bear western names and have shelved their African names. Attitudes towards African languages in school and at home are very negative, and people are ashamed of speaking their languages.

In the process, this perpetuates maintenance of racial injustice and inequality through linguistic practices in commerce, science, international affairs, education, culture and the media (Phillipson, 2009).

5. Conclusion

The humour shared on SNSs underscores the problematic of participation in so far as race-related humour is concerned. Instead of appropriating digital spaces for redressing historic racial injustices that date as far back as the slave trade, participants use them to share humour that effectively perpetuate an African identity defined by self-hate and self-denigration tendencies. These emerge in the narratives related to the origins of the name 'Africa' itself, African people's technological ineptitude and linguistic imperialism. These narratives suggest that Africans hate their own identity. The African identity is not seen as good enough to be a rallying point. Suffice to point out that race pride is critical if at all the objectives of the Pan African consciousness are to be attained. The tragedy of it all is that it is the African themselves who are denigrating their own culture and identity.

The humour supports the observation that pan Africanism, as and ideology and consciousness, is dwindling and in the doldrums (Falola & Essian, 2014; Mhaka, 2022). The affected people are not exhibiting the Pan-African spirit that Malcolm, King (Mhaka, 2022), Garvey, and Nkrumah, among others. The race-related humour serves to emphasise the sad reality of the self-hate that Black Africans have and their endeavour to assimilate into what is constructed as the hegemonic White identity. Resultantly, the African identity is effectively dislocated in its own home.

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