

DISCOURSE IMPLICATURES: AN IGBO EXAMPLE

B.A. Okolo

University of Benin, Nigeria.

Linguists who work on discourse aspects of language have developed a number of theories which claim to be universal. This paper contests this claim in the case of one of Grice's maxims. With regard to Igbo, I shall argue that if one tests Gricean maxims cross-culturally one will find that they do not always hold. Differences between societies are more likely to be differences in specification of domains in which the maxims are expected to hold, and differences in the degree to which members are expected to conform to the maxims.

Les linguistes qui se consacrent à l'étude des aspects du discours dans le langage ont proposé un certain nombre de théories qu'ils considèrent universelles. L'objectif de notre communication, c'est de contester cette affirmation en ce qui concerne l'une des maximes de Grice. Ainsi, à propos de la langue Ibo, nous allons démontrer que si l'on soumet ces maximes de Grice à autres aires culturelles, elles ne sont pas entièrement valables. Les différences entre diverses sociétés doivent très probablement être déterminantes en ce qui concerne les domaines précis où s'appliquent ces maximes; et un autre critère distinctif est celui du degré de conformité des individus à ces maximes.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years the study of linguistic relationships has been extended beyond the sentence level (cf. Widdowson, 1979; Halliday, 1967; Crothers, 1978; and Chafe, 1970). Linguists interested in the interpretation of whole utterances and extended discourse have relied on a number of concepts and ideas developed by discourse analysts and philosophers - such as 'speech act', 'illocutionary force' and 'performative' etc. These concepts have been extended to the study of conversational organization. In particular, the ideas of Paul Grice as set forth in his 1975 lectures 'Logic and Conversation' have been heavily utilized. In advancing such notions, these linguists and philosophers probably looked at conversational conduct as it operates in their own society, yet the principles of conversational procedure as enunciated by them are presented as applying universally. Here, I am contesting the validity of the universal nature of these principles, focussing in particular on the Gricean notion of conversational maxims. I shall examine some of these notions in regard to Igbo.

2. GRICEAN NOTIONS

Grice presents the idea that certain inferences we make from utterances arise from our expectations concerning everyday conversational behaviour. In other words, participants in a conversation are expected to conform to certain 'conversational maxims' which, according to him, hold universally. Many of these maxims are discussed by him, but here I shall mention only two and restrict my subsequent discussion to only one of them.

One such maxim is 'Be relevant'. This maxim states that participants in a conversation should make their contributions relevant to the topic of discussion. That is to say, if A says something, B's response must be relevant to A's utterance, so that A, relying on or expecting B's response to be relevant, will be able to make certain inferences based on B's response. Suppose A makes this utterance:

1. Margaret Thatcher is the Prime Minister of England.

and B responds:

2. The country is going through an economic crisis.

A, expecting B's remark to be relevant to the topic, may interpret B's response as a disappointment over female rulership. In other words, the fact that Margaret Thatcher is the Prime Minister of England is responsible for the country's economic crisis. Such inferences based on our expectations that participants conduct themselves appropriately in a conversational exchange is referred to by Grice as 'conversational implicatures'.

Let us look at another Gricean maxim - 'Be informative'. By this maxim, Grice suggests that all participants in a conversational exchange are required to make their contributions as informative 'as required by the exchange'. As it stands, the maxim is unconstrained because a participant can make a contribution with the intention to deceive or to mislead, or may even decide not to make any contribution at all. All these are justifiably in line with the definition because in either case, the speaker will be conforming with the requirements of the maxim depending on the way he views the world around him, and depending on his cultural background. In fact, either way the speaker will not be said to violate the maxim.

Grice, however, in the same lectures later restricts this definition by stating that contributors should provide all the information he knows. Suppose, for example, that speaker A asks B:

3. Who is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Benin?

and B replies:

4. Professor Grace Alele-Williams.

B has 'cooperated' by providing the needed information. But let us assume instead that B's reply was:

5. Either Professor Grace Alele-Williams or Professor Pius Sada.

The implication of this response is that B does not know which of the two people mentioned is the Vice-Chancellor. But if it turns out that B does know who the Vice-Chancellor is, then B is misleading A and has violated the cooperative principle.

In the discussions that follow I shall assume that the maxim 'Be relevant' holds in all the examples cited. I shall therefore restrict my discussions to the maxim 'Be informative'.

3. CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES IN IGBO DISCOURSE

In Igbo discourse one can provide innumerable examples where participants in a conversation do not adhere to the maxim 'Be informative'. For example, one does not conform to the maxim if to do so would invoke the displeasure of others or jeopardize his interests. I am not implying that the maxim holds in some societies but never holds in others, because it is difficult to imagine a society where being informative would be regarded as a misnomer. The point is just that the differences between societies that adhere to the maxim and those that don't will be limited only to the differences in specifying the domains in which the maxim may hold, and also to the differences in the degree to which participants will abide by the maxim. For example, in some societies, to 'cooperate' in speech might be the normal and the expected, while in others, being un-informative might be the normal and the expected in certain cases.

In Ibo society, participants in a conversation are expected to supply all the informational needs of their partners. The willingness to abide by this maxim depends on a number of factors, among which are: the nature of the information to be supplied, and the implication arising from supplying the information.

3.1 THE NATURE OF THE INFORMATION

Information in Igbo discourse can be categorized into three: trivial/happy information, essential information, and critical information.

By trivial/happy information, I mean such information, the release of which may not be seen as implicating or committing the speaker in any way, and does not deserve any secrecy. In this case, the conversational partner will be willing to cooperate and supply all the information he/she has access to. Take, for example, this simple exchange:

6. A: Where is your mother?

7. B: She's in the maternity ward. She just had a new baby.

In this example B has supplied all the informational needs of A. Under normal circumstances, the fact that B's mother just had a baby is not the type of information one shouldn't divulge. Apart from its being happy information (at least for B), its release to the requester is not seen by B as committing or implicating himself. Furthermore, such information is not the type that one can withhold indefinitely.

Another example of happy, non-committing information conversational partners are willing to release can be seen in the following dialogue:

8. A: What will you be doing after the vacation?

9. B: I'll be getting into the University.

The fact that B will be going to study in the University is not something he would want to hide. Apart from the fact that it is happy information, its release no doubt enhances B's prestige, for being admitted to a university is no mean achievement. Information that is uplifting and prestigious is among that which can be willingly released.

Essential information varies in degree. It ranges from information which is committing, information which is implicating thereby resulting in unpleasant consequences, to information which could militate against one's future plans or progress. In any of these cases, the person making the utterance is cautious, for fear that 'cooperating' sufficiently would result in undesirable consequences. Take a simple case where an accident has just occurred. The policeman walks up to a passerby and the following dialogue takes place:

10. Policeman: What do you know about the accident?

11. Passerby: I know nothing. I wasn't even at the scene.

It may well be that the passerby wasn't at the scene when the accident occurred, in which case he is cooperating sufficiently. But it could be that he actually witnessed the accident, and therefore his response should not necessarily be taken to imply that he knew nothing about the accident. The implicature is not made because this is one of the situations where the resposdee does not easily supply the informational needs of his conversational partner. The primary reason for the uncooperative attitude is the fear of committing himself, and thereby being held as an eye-witness. In such situations, it is common among the Ibos to feign ignorance for fear that providing useful information will not only inconvenience the cooperator, but involve him to an extent he did not bargain for. I am not saying that one cannot find a situation where the attitude of the resposdee is the opposite (for example, where he is in one way or another affected), but in the majority of cases, he would rather withhold information than be held responsible for the consequences of his statements.

Even in less serious cases, individuals always avoid making explicit statements although they may have access to all the necessary information. Let's look at this example:

12. Teacher: Who spilled water on the floor?

13. John: I don't know.

Although John may be in the classroom at the time the water was spilled, and therefore knows the student who spilled it, he will still not openly point at the student responsible for the mess,

unless, of course, he bears him some grudge. He would probably rather opt for mass punishment (if the teacher decides to punish the whole class) than reveal the identity of the culprit. The reason for this is simply the fear of being held responsible for such information which may bring about some unpleasant consequences. Although one can rightly style John a liar in this situation since he knows the culprit, the point being made here is that it is usual to avoid directly dishonouring the culprit. Of course John can go about the identification of the culprit indirectly by saying, for example, 'I was not in the class at the time, but Chidi and Obi were, so you could ask them.'

This reluctance to commit oneself to certain information or to make explicit statements can be taken a little further. In certain cases of advising or issuing instructions, one is wary of committing oneself to a strong statement especially when reference is made to a future event. Since the speaker cannot guarantee that things will go as advised or instructed, he has to be cautious or else he will be held responsible for any unpleasant consequences. He thus goes about the advice or instruction in a roundabout fashion.

In the majority of cases where 'cooperating' in speech is going to be detrimental to the speaker, the expectation that he will supply the needed information is not the basic norm. If, for example, a businessman, A, asks another, B,:

14. Where did you buy this shoe from?

it is less likely that B will be willing to divulge the source of purchase since that may, in one way or another, affect his business. Take another example where an unfamiliar person, say a policeman, asks a child:

15. Where is your father?

A well-trained child would say something like: 'He is not at home, he travelled', though, in actual fact, the father may be in the bedroom sleeping. In all these cases, the conversational partner is not expected to cooperate fully by supplying all the needed information, and the inquirer knows this.

One area where Ibos (and, in fact, most Nigerians) frequently do not 'cooperate' is in relation to age. Take for example this segment:

16. John: How old are you?

17. Nkechi: I'm 20.

Considering that the majority of Nigerians declare different ages at different times depending on the circumstances and context, it will be surprising if Nkechi's age is actually as given above. Revelation of age is one of the areas where correct information is often not obtained from conversational partners, and the inquirer, if he is a Nigerian, knows this. Whether the inquirer is requesting the information out of curiosity or for any other reason, if he is not a close relation or friend who may have access to the

true age, the respondee will still give the wrong information. The reason for the non-cooperation lies in the fact that cooperating fully might result in consequences detrimental to the individual. Nkechi, for example, might think that supplying the correct information would make John consider her as being too old or that John might recommend her for retirement etc. In such cases, releasing the information will not be to Nkechi's benefit, and she would do everything to guard against its release.

Critical information includes information that is sensitive and highly sought. Release of such information may be detrimental to one's security and well-being, and as a result, such information is highly guarded. The range of this type of information varies according to the degree of importance attached to it by individuals. Governments, for example, deal ruthlessly with anybody who releases classified information, and individuals almost always avoid letting their enemies know what they are doing. In these cases, cooperating in speech as expected will mitigate against one's security and plans.

3.2 THE IMPLICATON OF THE INFORMATION

Ibos, more often than not, avoid releasing any information that will implicate them directly or indirectly, or information that will implicate members of their family or friends in one way or another. It is highly improbable that an individual will give himself up as a thief, or be willing to supply any information leading to the arrest of a member of his family or a friend who engages in drug-pushing, unless of course, the individual bears the culprit a grudge. I am not implying that it is impossible to find cases where individuals would cooperate fully in the above examples, but to assume that such cooperation is the norm, would be inappropriate.

There are situations in Ibo society where being informative would be regarded as unethical, 'untrained', or 'impolite'. In such cases, cooperating in speech clashes with societal expectations. It will be unethical, for example, for an initiated member of a masquerade cult to reveal the identity of a masquerade or the secrets of the cult. Such revelations are not taken lightly, and the consequences for the culprit and his family are usually very serious. A child will be regarded as 'untrained' if he goes about passing on information about his family to strangers. An individual who directly points accusing fingers on his elders is considered impolite. Thus it could be seen that in some situations the demands of the society affect the extent to which one can cooperate fully in conversational interaction.

4. CONSTRAINTS ON INFORMATION RELEASE

It would be wrong to conclude that the Gricean 'cooperative principle' does not operate at all among the Ibos. The fulfillment of the cooperative principle by conversational partners varies according to the nature of the information, the situation, and the individual encountered. As mentioned above, a speaker is more likely to release trivial/happy information than essential or

critical information. Information that has no implications, or that could easily be obtained is less likely to be withheld. For example, the cost of a Peugeot 504 car could be verified by anyone interested in buying one. In such cases, the maxim 'Be informative' will be maintained, and a direct and cooperative response provided. On the other hand, information which is highly sought, or to which others do not have easy access, or which is committing, is usually withheld. In such cases the maxim is not maintained.

Another factor that controls the release of information is the extent to which the participants in a conversation are familiar with each other. It would be easier for a conversational partner to supply the informational needs of a close friend or a relation than those of a mere acquaintance or total stranger. This is because one feels more secure talking to somebody with whom one is familiar than with a total stranger. It is therefore expected that in such situations the conversational partners will supply more straightforward information to one another. Added to this is the fact that participants may belong to the same social group or club where they may be obligated to one another in a way that requires the full cooperation of one another. In such a situation withholding of information may be viewed as going against the norms of the group.

Another factor that affects the extent to which individuals cooperate in speech is the nature and the sex of the individual concerned. In most societies, it is always easy to identify people who open their mouth too wide. Such individuals are more likely to supply all the information they have access to. To them the implications of their utterances are immaterial. Other members of the society are more likely to isolate such individuals for fear that whatever information gets to them will be thrown to the wind.

Included in this class of individuals are women. In a majority of instances, women are more likely to meet the informational needs of requesters than men, and are therefore more likely to adhere to the Gricean maxim than men. Women are generally regarded as 'gossips', and as a result are not good custodians of important information. The Igbo adage: **Onye agwala nwayi obi/uche ya** 'Do not reveal your mind to a woman' attests to this belief. The unreservedness of women in communicating information has far-reaching implications: they are less cautious in speech, and so are more likely to commit themselves or implicate others; they are more likely to point accusing fingers at a culprit in order to humiliate the culprit or as a weapon for criticism or gossip; and they are more likely to bring dishonour to their families by their utterances. Thus women are usually excluded from gatherings where important decisions are to be made. An utterance could have different conversational implicatures depending on whether it is said by a woman or a man. For an illustration let us look at this exchange:

18. A: When are you going to the bank?

19. B: I don't know; probably this afternoon or tomorrow.

If B is a woman, there is every likelihood that the statement implies that she does not know specifically when she will go, and therefore is not withholding any information to which she has access. But it may be wrong to assume the same implicature if B were a man, unless A is one with whom B is familiar.

5. CONCLUSION

In this short paper I have tried to show that Grice's 'cooperative principle' does not always hold. Factors that militate against its maintenance range from the nature of the information to be imparted, the individual releasing the information, the way the particular society views the world, to the context of situation. These factors differ from society to society, and for the maxim to be universally applicable, there is need to specify the domains in which the maxim may hold.

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