

Explorations of the complementarity of pragmatic principles in Shoneyin's *the secret lives of Baba Segi's wives*

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Communication is a goal-oriented phenomenon which requires that participants make conscious choices that best convey their illocutionary goals and yield the desired utterance meaning. These choices often bring the pragmatic principles into conflict with each other. The paper examines the complementary interplay of the Gricean Cooperative Principle (CP) and Leech's Politeness Principle (PP) in the advancement of discourse goals. It reveals that the CP and the PP conflict with each other in utterances, leaving the speaker a choice to sacrifice one in favour of the other. This engenders a maxim "trade-off" relationship inter-principle and intra-principle. The choice of maxim precedence observed in the text is conditioned by the socio-cultural contexts of the communicators and the illocutionary goals of the utterances. The analyses show that neither the CP nor the PP is unilaterally adequate in all talk exchanges, but the two complement each other's social function. As both interact in the interpretation of indirectness, the use of an indirect speech act to preserve the PP often induces implicature failure on the part of the hearer.

Introduction

Leech views communication as being geared towards problem-solving, a notion that saddles both the speaker and the hearer with distinct, clear cut responsibilities that will make the interchange feasible (x). Thus, communication is not a passive phenomenon but requires that participants actively play their defined roles. While the speaker's role is to construct an utterance that conveys his illocutionary goal, the task of the interlocutor lies in working out the meaning of the utterance. Consequently, there is a fundamental, pragmatic assumption that participants in an exchange cooperate with each other to further their discourse goal. This gives rise to a set of principles that guide the conduct of conversation. Grice (1975) tags it the Cooperative Principle (CP) (Mey 72).

The principle comprises four sub principles or maxims which keenly compete with each other with the result that the choice of observing one may infringe the other in some contexts. Yet the situation warrants, in some circumstances, that a maxim be sacrificed to give priority to another more crucial maxim. However, this sacrifice does not in actual sense undermine the utterance meaning; rather, it yields a kind of inferential meaning called conversational implicature. Thus, if an utterance seems inadequate, untrue, irrelevant, prolix, or ambiguous, the assumption of cooperation is still being preserved paving the way for a search for a new meaning that observes the CP. In the words of Levinson, “It is only by making the assumption contrary to superficial indications that the inferences arise in the first place” (102).

Besides the CP, participants in a conversation employ another principle: the Politeness Principle (PP). This serves to maintain good social relationship which is crucial in interpersonal communication. With this second principle having a contrary social goal from the CP, the competition among maxims increases. Leech believes that “the PP is not just another principle to be added to the CP but an essential complement which rescues the CP from serious trouble” (80). This view is predicated by the fact that in strictly upholding the CP in a talk exchange one might be impolite to the hearer or even a third party. Thus, depending on the social context of the discourse, one may decide to infringe the CP by suppressing relevant information in order to preserve the PP or observe the CP at the expense of the PP.

To explore the foregoing, two selected extracts from *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* are analyzed pragmatically to highlight how the CP interacts with the PP, how the maxims within both principles complement one another to convey a speaker's illocutionary goal, how a maxim overrules another, and how the hearer/reader derive the illocutionary force of the utterance based on the assumption of cooperation, despite any infringement. As Leech captures it,

“When we try to work out the meaning of an utterance, this can be thought of as an attempt to reconstruct what act, considered as a goal-directed communication, was it a goal of the speaker to perform in producing the utterance. Thus the meaning of an utterance, in this sense, can be called its illocutionary force.” (14-5)

Interplay of the conversational principle and the politeness principle

Effective communication is a product of cooperation between participants with special consideration to the context of situation. Cooperation is therefore the driving force that fosters what is encoded and what is decoded in a concrete context in which both the speaker and the hearer have clearly defined collaborative roles that make communication feasible. Pragmatics is interested in this cooperativeness as it analyses the speaker's utterance and the hearer's interpretation of the utterance.

Pragmatics involves problem-solving both from s's and h's point of view. From s's point of view, the problem is that of planning: 'Given that I want the mental state of the hearer to change or to remain unchanged in such and such ways, how do I produce an utterance which will make that result. Given that s has said U, what is the most likely reason for s's saying U?' (Leech 36)

The Conversational Principle (CP) is a set of maxims that govern the conduct of conversation. Illocutionary goals are realized by observing the cooperative principle which as opposed to grammatical rules ensures that speakers do not give their interlocutors either an over- or an under-dose of information given that communicative principle operates in a concrete context, rather than in the abstract space of linguistic speculation (Mey 71). Grice's *co-operative principle* (370), which relies on speaker-listener cooperation in order to bridge, or at least reduce, the gap between semantic meaning and contextual meaning. The speaker follows a set of rules in order to express a concept and the listener follows a set of rules to interpret that concept, and these rules, which Grice refers to as maxims, are what facilitate communication. These rules make explicit the roles of the speaker and the listener. The maxims of the CP are as follows:

The maxim of quantity:

1. Make your contribution as informative as required;
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than required.

The maxim of quality:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false;
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The maxim of relation:

Make your contribution relevant.

The maxim of manner:

Be perspicuous, and specifically:

Avoid obscurity

Avoid ambiguity

Be brief

Be orderly. (Mey 72)

As Levinson puts it, “these maxims specify what participants have to do in order to converse in a maximally efficient, rational, cooperative way: they should speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly, while providing sufficient information (102).

However important the CP might be, certain circumstances may necessitate that it be given less priority in an exchange to avoid offending one’s conversational partner. The need to be polite to one’s interlocutor underscores the relevance of the Politeness Principle (PP) as an essential complement of the CP in pragmatic descriptions. Leech defines the social roles of each of the two principles, revealing their interface. The CP enables conversational partners to communicate on the assumption of cooperation by regulating what is said to ensure it contributes to some assumed illocutionary or discoursal goals while the PP performs a high regulative role of maintaining the social equilibrium and friendly relations that foster the cooperative assumption. The author reasons that “unless you are polite to your neighbor, the channel of communication between you will break down, and you will no longer be able to borrow his mower” (82).

It is against this backdrop that the complementarity of the two principles is predicated as one principle may be deliberately flouted to give room for the other to be observed. Some situations require that politeness take a back seat and give precedence to the CP and vice versa. This complementary relation is viewed as a “trade-off” (Leech 82). The rate at which this trade – off is executed is conditioned by societal factors especially as regards a particular culture or speech community. For instance, in the Nigerian context an adult male will naturally trade-off the PP in favour of the CP while talking to a woman owing to the stereotypical belief in the superiority of men to women. Conversely, a wife would trade-off the CP to uphold the PP while speaking to the husband. However, the degree at which this infringement is observed varies from one ethnic group to the other. For easy reference, the PP and its maxims are thus presented:

1. Tact Maxim: a. minimize cost to other b. Maximize benefit to other
2. Generosity Maxim: a. Minimize benefit to self b. Maximize cost to self

3. Approbation Maxim: a. minimize dispraise of other b. Maximize praise of other
4. Modesty Maxim: a. Minimize praise of self b. maximize dispraise of self
5. Agreement Maxim: a. Minimize disagreement between self and other b. Maximize agreement between self and other
6. Sympathy Maxim a. Minimize antipathy between self and other b. Maximize sympathy between self and other. (Leech 133)

Self refers to the speaker while *other* refers to the hearer or a third party.

The interaction between the CP and the PP is apparent in the interpretation of indirect illocutions. The CP favours the use of direct speech acts but in doing so one may impose one's will on another. Therefore, a speaker may decide to conceal his real intention by polite obliquity using indirectness believing that, if the assumption of being cooperative is preserved, the hearer will work out the implicature of the utterance and perform the speaker's desired action.

Pragmatic analysis of *the secret lives of Baba Segi's wives*

The analyses draw on Grice's theory of conversational implicature, which brings to communication the phenomenon of saying more than what a sentence semantically conveys. Thus, when a speaker makes an utterance, he may not mean exactly what is linguistically encoded and may expect the hearer to derive an alternative meaning by enriching the conventional meanings of the aggregate of words that constitute the utterance with background knowledge. The kind of meaning that results called implicature arises mostly from deliberately exploiting the maxims for communicative purposes while remaining underlyingly cooperative.

In making this pragmatic analysis of the text, three assumptions are hereby made:

- a. That the utterance *U* has a speaker (*s*), a hearer (*h*), and a third party (*o*).
- b. That *s* is observing the Cooperative Principle (CP) and the Politeness Principle (PP).
- c. That the observation of both principles is socio-culturally conditioned and context-sensitive.

Extract 1

For clear reference, the sentences in extract 1 are numbered sequentially:

1. "That night Baba Segi came to me. 2. He sat on my bed and grabbed my breasts. 3. I thought it was all quite amusing until he jumped between my legs and tried to force his

penis into me. 4. 'I'm still wearing my pants,' I told him. 5. He wasn't like Tunde at all. 6. There was no sucking, no licking, no muzzling, no moistening. 7. Baba Segi was heavy, everything about him was clumsy and awkward. 8. He heaved and hoed, poured his water into me and collapsed onto my breasts. 9. Tunde never did that. 10. He always shook his water unto my belly. 11. I looked forward to the day our paths would cross again at a junction. 11. I knew I would find Tunde when the time was right." (130)

Sentence 4 '*I'm still wearing my pants*', *I told him* flouts the Maxims of Quantity: make your contribution as informative as required. *S* has an ulterior illocutionary goal of making *h* aware that *s* needed *h* to gently prepare *s* for an action *a* instead of forcing his way through. However, rather than encode her displeasure explicitly in the imperative mood using a direct speech act, *s* hedges her displeasure by polite obliquity as a mitigating device. This is presumably employed because *h* is a person of more authoritative status than *s*. The violation of the CP Quantity Maxim was done on purpose to give priority to the PP Maxims of Approbation (minimize dispraise of other) and Tact (minimize cost to other). The indirectness is motivated by politeness as regards socio-cultural norms. *S*'s preferred speech act agrees with Leech's view that sometimes a maxim may take a backseat in other to give precedence to another maxim (82). This trade-off of the CP in favour of the PP is conditioned by societal factors that place a man as a lord over his wife with the result that his actions are often not challenged or questioned. Thus, by hedging her utterance, *s* weakens its illocutionary force in other to minimize dispraise of *h* and because it is costly to *h*. The implicature is derived based on the assumption that the speaker is observing the CP.

The above analysis brings to the fore Grice's conversational implicature: *S* believes that it is necessary to inform *h* of *s*'s unpreparedness for *a*. As *s* cooperatively conveys this, *s* expects that *h* should recognize that *s* has an illocutionary goal in making the utterance. However, because of the violation of the Quantity Maxim, *h* fails to draw the implicature that *s* was advocating a fore play. The failure of *h* to draw this implicature from the indirect speech act is inferred from sentences 5 to 12 which account for the perlocutionary effect of *s*'s utterance.

According to Saeed, "Knowing that their listener will flesh out their utterance with inference gives speakers the freedom to imply something rather than state it" (204). Although *h* did not respond to *s* by way of utterance, his subsequent actions fail to fulfill the illocutionary intention of *s* in uttering (4) as well as its pragmatic implicature. Grice avers that his CP applies

to both linguistic and non linguistic behavior with the result that a maxim may be violated not only in words but also by deeds. He says: “I expect a partner’s contribution to be appropriate to the immediate needs at each stage of the transaction; if I am mixing ingredients for a cake, I don’t expect to be handed a good book, or even an oven cloth.... (47)”

It should however be noted that the failure to fulfill the illocutionary force of (4) is as a result of maxim conflict and the resultant trade-off of the CP in favour of the PP, which necessitated the use of an indirect speech act. Searle defines indirect speech act as “a case in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another” (60). Ordinarily, speakers employ direct illocutions in conveying their intentions. As such, a throwing away of this direct course in preference of the indirect strategy is a clear indication that *s* wishes to achieve another illocutionary goal in addition. The additional goal in this case is preserving the PP so as to maintain good social relationship (Leech 39-40). The observed conflict between the CP and the PP ushers in indirectness as a mitigating device.

However, what is hedged in (4) is given expression in (5-12) presumably because *h* is not directly addressed by the utterances. Thus, politeness is traded off in favour of the CP. Again, there is a conflict within the maxims of the CP. *S* upholds the maxim of quality in expressing her true feelings, but doing this brings a conflict between the maxims of quality, quantity and manner. *S* observes Quality and breaks the Maxim of Quantity by giving overdose of information: ‘no sucking, no licking, no muzzling, no moistening’. This is done on purpose to reveal *s*’s total disenchantment with *h*’s action. Also, the Maxim of Approbation, minimize dispraise of other, is infringed by implicature rather than by direct statement. *H*’s action and that of a third party (*o*) are subtly juxtaposed to indirectly discredit the former. The utterance also flouts the Maxim of Manner by lacking brevity. Furthermore, sentence (7) breaches the PP Maxim of Approbation. *S* falls foul of this maxim by saying unpleasant things about *h*: ‘Baba Segi was heavy, everything about him was clumsy and awkward’.

In sentences 8 and 10, *s* avoids explicitness by employing a hedge: ‘pouring of water’ is used instead of ‘ejaculation of sperm’. However, the hedge does not constitute semantic vagueness because the context explicates it. Although the hedged utterance flouts two sub maxims of Manner: avoid obscurity and ambiguity, the flouting was done on purpose probably to achieve decency by avoiding taboo vocabulary. From these two modes of *pouring water* seen in sentences 8 and 10, an implicature may be derived. *H*’s mode implicates a marital sexual

relationship that welcomes without restriction the likely consequence of internal ejaculation: conception, while *o*'s mode implicates an illicit sexual relationship that cautiously guards against conception by avoiding internal ejaculation. Of these two, *s* by implicature enjoys the latter and still craves for it. This is evident from the two concluding sentences, 11 and 12.

Extract 2

“Segi looked up at me and wiped away tears that had not yet dropped to her cheeks. ‘Thank you, Aunty. It was a silly mistake. I have never been there before but this boy has taken over my mind. Sometimes I fear Mama will look at me and read my innermost thoughts.’

‘What is his name?’

‘Goke. He is eighteen. He is a student at Ibadan Polytechnic, studying to become a surveyor.’ She wanted me to be impressed....

‘Is he handsome?’

‘Well, you saw him, didn’t you? All the girls in my class are jealous of me.’

.... ‘Did you enjoy being there?’

‘Not particularly. His friends were telling very dirty jokes. I was just happy to be near him so I could look at his face.’

‘And have you looked at more than his face?’

‘Aunty!’ Segi covered her eyes with her fingers. ‘I swear I have not seen any more’”
(154)

The above talk exchange takes place between 13-year-old Segi (speaker *s*) and her father’s wife Bolanle (hearer *h*) when *s* thought that *h* had caught her with a boyfriend (*o*). It is observed that the CP and the PP also interact in the extract to advance conversational goals. *H*’s question *What is his name* is given a prolix answer that flouts the CP maxims of manner and quantity. However the exploitation is deliberately done to impress *h* and exculpate *s*’s misdemeanor. “... whenever I avoid some simple expression in favour of some more complex paraphrase, it may be assumed that I do not do so wantonly, but because the details are somehow relevant to the present enterprise” (Levinson 109). The lengthy answer is apparently given to observe the PP Agreement maxim. The PP is employed to meet two conditions: “standing features such as the social distance between participants interact with dynamic features such as the kind of illocutionary demand the speaker is making on the hearer... to produce a degree of

politeness appropriate to the situation” (Leech 12). In the above case, the CP is traded off to meet the first of the PP conditions.

The second question *Is he handsome* is faced with a similar challenge. The question merely requires a yes or no response if the CP maxim of quantity is observed. But doing so will portray *s* as impolitely blowing the trumpet about her ‘unholy’ conquest to a person of higher social status. Thus, *s* allows *h* to make the judgment using a tag question but at the same time *s* indirectly pursues her real illocutionary goal. As observed by Leech, “the avoidance of a direct-speech utterance can be one more example of a strategy of polite obliquity” (139). An implicature - he is handsome - is drawn from *s*’s utterance ...*all the girls in my class are jealous of me* which flouts the CP maxims of quantity (being underdose) and of relation (seeming irrelevant to the question). The CP is traded off to uphold the PP modesty maxim: minimize praise of self.

H’s third question *And have you looked at more than his face* flouts the CP maxim of Manner by being obscure. *H* conceals her real intention by observing the PP approbation maxim: minimize dispraise of other. The implicature is that *h* wants to know if *s* and a third party *o* have had carnal knowledge of each other. This implicature is supported by the perlocutionary effect of the utterance which makes *s* to cover her eyes with her fingers as a sign of shame or innocence. The subsequent response *I swear I have not seen anymore* is conveyed in a direct speech act, thereby upholding the CP at the expense of the PP. This preference is made in order not to undermine the illocutionary point of the utterance. It is necessary to give the PP a back seat to enable *s* to deny, in strong terms, the proposition entertained by *h*’s.

Conclusion

The meaning of utterances employed in a talk exchange is derived on a strong assumption of participants’ cooperativeness. Thus whether a speaker says more than is semantically coded or otherwise, meaning is expected to be intact. The only twist however is that the hearer is expected to look beyond the facade of linguistic symbols by fleshing out the proposition with background knowledge to derive the speaker’s actual intention. Communication is tendentious requiring that both the speaker and the hearer cooperate with each other in the advancement of illocutionary goals. This cooperation is achieved via the observation of the conversational principle.

The study however reveals that the CP is not observed unilaterally but is oftentimes relegated to the background to give priority to the PP and vice versa with the result that a maxim is observed at the expense of another. The complementarity engendered by relaxing one maxim for another to thrive is conditioned by the illocutionary goal of the speaker and the societal context of the utterance. This discovery lends credence to Leech's assertion that "the PP is not just another principle to be added to the CP but an essential complement which rescues the CP from serious trouble" (80). According to Leech, the CP and the PP operate variably in different cultures or language communities, in different social classes, etc." (10). The interaction of both principles in the text affects the nature of speech act adopted in making an utterance. However, the use of an indirect illocution, in observance of polite obliquity, can engender implicature failure as the hearer may not respond to the perlocutionary effect of the speaker's utterance.

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