

CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE AMONG STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study examines the use of conversational implicature among the students of Federal University Otuoke in Bayelsa State with a view to understanding how students apply conversational implicature in conveying meaning, to ascertain the functions of conversational implicature among students and to evaluate the comprehension level of participants in a discourse engaging the use of conversational implicature. The study employs a survey design with students of Federal University Otuoke as the population of the study using purposive sampling. Data were elicited through nonparticipant observation. This is suitable so that there will be no interference as the data represent the true state of things in a natural environment. Qualitative method was employed to analyze the data. Grice's (1975) maxim of implicature was applied as the theoretical framework that guided the study. It was found out amongst other things that students often use conversational implicature as a natural process in conversation. They use more of the particularized conversational implicature for amusement. They are also able to comprehend the implicatures used in different conversations. This shows that the use of conversational implicature is a natural process in language comprehension. The study recommends that students can engage in whichever form of conversation provided the interactants have background understanding of the topic of discourse.

KEYWORD: Implicature, comprehension, participants, conversation, natural process.

Introduction

Communication is the process of understanding and sharing meaning (Pearson and Nelson, 2000). It is a process of exchanging information between one person and another by using various technical and natural ways (Steinberg, 2007). When people communicate with each other, they are engaged in a conversation.

Conversation is an interpersonal communication between two or more people in which thoughts, feelings, and ideas are expressed, questions are asked and answered, or news and information are exchanged. A conversation is said to be successful when the speaker and the listener are able to understand what is intended from what is said in an utterance. Supporting this idea, Tupan and Natalia (2008) state that the purpose of communication can be achieved if the speakers can interpret each other's utterances. In order to understand someone's utterance and respond to it appropriately, participants in a discourse should not only understand based on the literal word that is uttered but what is derived from what the speaker overtly stated. This unstated shade of meaning is implied by the actual utterance. The ability for an interactant to understand the unstated meaning is generally referred to as pragmatic competence.

(Celce Murcia and Olshtain, 2000). Pragmatic competence requires the ability to use and interpret language in contexts (Bialystok, 1993).

Pragmatic competence is a crucial construct in language development in both children and adults. Farahian, et al. (2012) argue that pragmatic competence is necessary for communicative competence. According to Crystal (1997, as cited by Rose and Kasper, 2001), pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language have on the other participants in the conversation. It is the knowledge of communicative action and the ability to use language appropriately according to contextual factors.

The use of conversational implicatures is inevitable for effective communication. Conversational implicatures could be used to provide a variety of communicative purposes. Levinson (1983) supports this idea by declaring that conversational implicature is one of the most important ideas in pragmatics. The importance of conversational implicatures in expressing a message indirectly is well-established (Bouton, 1994). Grice (1975) states that in every conversational exchange, speakers could overtly or covertly imply meaning. The essence of implicature is to account for what the speaker could imply that is not necessarily stated in a conversation. According to Ndimele (2005), every conversation is guided by certain unwritten rules which influence the flow of conversational exchanges. Such rules are called conversational maxims. In a talk exchange, participants must cooperate in order not to flout the conversational maxims. The cooperative principles demand that the participants respect the maxims. Thus, in the conversation, you contribute only what is needed at the time of the conversation with the goal of holding a conversation. Grice notes that you make your conversational contribution such as is required at the stage at which it occurs by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. Leech (1983) expresses that in the cooperative principle, the speaker has to obey four maxims. Maxim is the principle that speakers have to obey in an interaction to make the process of communication well. Participants must obey the following maxims: Maxim of quality which says that we must state what we believe to be true and what we have evidence for. Maxim of quantity states that we should make our contribution as informative as is required for the particular purpose and not make it more or less informative than is necessary on the occasion required. Maxim of relevance states that we should make our contribution relevant to the interaction, or we should indicate in what way it is not by indicating a change of topic using conversational clues to indicate that the discussion has drifted to some irrelevant material and we want to get back to the subject at hand. Maxim of manner says we should be clear in what we say. That is, we should avoid ambiguity or obscurity and be brief and orderly in our contribution to the interaction (Yule, 1996). Thus, we expect a person's contribution to an interaction to be genuine, neither more nor less than is required and should be clear and appropriate to the interaction. Grice argues that we assume a speaker is following these maxims and combine this with our knowledge of the world to work out what they mean by what they say.

One of the main characteristics of conversational implicature is that its contribution to the meaning of the utterance is not truth conditional, if the implicature did not hold, it does not affect the truth of the statement. Again, the implicature is context-dependent. It means that the implicature varies according to the context in which it occurs Birner (2013). An utterance found in different occasions, might not give rise to an

implicature, or it might submit different implicatures. This is why conversational implicature is rooted in the context of the situation in which it is found. Thus, to be truly understood, the interpretation must be based on that context. Grice (1975), distinguishes two main types of conversational implicature which are generalized and particularized conversational implicatures. The generalized conversational implicatures are usually carried by certain words in the conversation whilst the particularized ones depend on the context of the conversation.

The essential idea of this theory is that the relationship between the utterances and their implicature is not an arbitrary one based on the intention and convention of the speaker, but that this relationship is a rational one that stands on general principles of cooperative behavior. Grice (1975) states that an implicature arises when an utterance is uncooperative, violating one or more maxims of cooperation. The presumption of cooperation is something essential to communication, that is why Grice argues that a speaker's utterance must be conveying an additional meaning and the speaker is referring to some implicated meaning rather than the literal one. This study thus, examine the use of conversational implicatures with a view to understanding how students apply conversational implicature in conveying meaning, to ascertain the functions of conversational implicature among students and to evaluate the comprehension level of participants in a discourse.

Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

This section presents the data used in analyzing this study and discusses the findings based on the qualitative method of data analysis.

Example 1:

Question: When is the test holding tomorrow?

Answer: I am heading there now.

Example 2:

Question: Will you be at the fellowship tonight?

Answer: Will you go with me to the club?

Example 3

Question: Has everybody bought the book now?

Answer: Yes, the course rep has.

Example 4:

Question: How many students passed the examination?

Answer: Half of the class are taking the course again.

Example 5:

Question: When is this meeting ending?

Answer: We are going to sleep here.

Example 6:

Question: How was your exam?

Answer: I gave the lecturer my marking guide so, it is in God's hands

Example 7:

Question: Will you join us to study for the exam tonight?

Answer: As far as I am concerned, there is no exam tomorrow.

Example 8:

Question: Can we chat on WhatsApp

Answer: Have you bought the data I requested from you?

Example 9:

Question: Are you in class now?



Answer: Only if I got here a minute earlier.

Example 10:

Question: Is the lecturer in class now?

Answer: You can make yourself a cup of tea before coming.

From the data presented above, it is clear how students apply the use of mostly particularized conversational implicature to convey their responses. From example 1, the speaker asks, *'When is the test holding tomorrow?'* Firstly, notice that the interactants share a background knowledge of a certain test that is supposed to hold the next day, thus, the context on which the discussion is built on is not strange to the person. In response to this question, the speaker here, flouts the maxim of quantity which states that contribution to a particular context should be appropriate not too much or less than is required. The response, *'I am heading there now'* has not given the necessary information required to the earlier question. Although the response does not directly say that the test must have been shifted to an earlier time but has covertly implied so. The person is then able to get the interpretation of the message that the test is holding at that point in time. Examples 4 and 9, the interactants also violate the maxim of quantity in the expressions by not giving adequate information that is required: Question: *How many students passed the examination?*

Answer: *Half of the class are taking the course again and;*

Question: *Are you in class now?*

Answer: *Only if I got here a minute earlier*

In Example 2, the speaker asks if the participant will be at the fellowship, the response, *'will you follow me to the club?'* is implicative of the fact that, she is not a church girl. She will rather prefer to be at the club than go to church fellowship. This suggests that the fellowship would be holding at same time hence she cannot afford to miss out the club time. This answer violates the maxim of relevance which states that the contribution to a context should be related to the topic of discourse. The maxim of relevance is also flouted in example 8. The speaker instead of responding that he cannot chat because she probably does not have data to connect online, accuses the interactant of not getting the data she requested. This response is not relevant to the particular request hence if she needed to remind him of the promise to subscribe for her, she should have done that by simply signalling the change of discourse using conversational clues that show that. Since the interactants are aware of the background of the conversation, the implicature was well observed by violating the maxim of relevance.

The maxim of manner is violated in examples 3, 6 and 10. The maxim of manner stipulates we should be clear in what we say. That is, we should avoid ambiguity or obscurity that might hamper the meaning of our contribution to the interaction and be orderly. The response to the question in example 3, *'Has everybody bought the book now?'* *'Yes, the course rep has'*.

does not convey a clear meaning of the question. That the course rep has does not indicate that everybody has because the course rep is not everybody. The interactant thus is able to get the implication which is signaled by the flouting of this maxim to mean that if only the course rep has, it means others have not got theirs. Foreexample 6, the other student knew that if what she wrote was her own marking guide and not that of the teacher, then it means that she would not have impressed the lecturer. Again,

there is an underlying information which could signal that the student in question is not very good at the course or has not shown adequate capacity on the course hence, using her marking guide signals failure. This is why she then expects God to help her. Although this interrupts the maxim of manner yet, the implicature is well comprehended. In a similar case, example 10 falls in place with the maxim of manner. The response, *'You can make yourself a cup of tea before coming'* to the question, *'Is the lecturer in class now?'* Clearly indicates the defilement of the maxim of manner. This is so because, the response is not clear as to when the lecturer will be in class. It is totally ambiguous and misleading. This response however, implicates that the lecturer was not in class and might not get there any time soon.

Examples 5 and 7 signify a violation of the principle of quality which says that we must state what we believe to be true and have evidence for. In 5, the speaker requested to know when the meeting will be over: *'When is this meeting ending?'* Answer: *'We are going to sleep here.'* From this response, it is clear that he meant the meeting will take a longer time but stating that they are going to sleep there nullifies the truth value of the sentence. This is because, the statement cannot be verified to be true since there is no proof from the host or convener that they will sleep there. By deliberately violating the maxim of quality, the interlocutor implicates the answer to the question posed by the speaker. The person in turn, decodes the meaning to the implicature. Again, in example 7, the response to the question, *'Will you join us to study for the exam tonight?'*

Answer: *'As far as I am concerned, there is no exam tomorrow'* A careful look at this expression shows that the student is very familiar with the course and so finds it very easy hence implying that since it will be a work over for him to write the exam, it is not considered to be an exam. The implication to the question is that there will be no need to study extra hard for the course. The speaker flouts the principle of quality because he cannot say for sure whether the questions would be as easy as he presumes to know the course yet the interlocutor in the discourse gets the implied meaning of the utterance.

From the discussions above, it is therefore clear that for every maxim that is flouted, the implied meaning of what is uttered is understood. Although not explicitly stated but the discussants can get that which is not stated from that which is stated within the context of the discussion. This is possible because in all of these instances, the participants share background knowledge in the topic of discourse. The participants do not have to struggle to interpret the meaning of what is said. The findings in this study are in line with Okumo (2012) that conversational implicature is a natural process in language processing that shows pragmatic competence and, Birner (2013), that implicature is context-dependent and that the application does not affect the truth of the statement.

Conclusion

The study concludes that students at the Federal University Otuoke employ the use of conversational implicature in their day-to-day speech. Students naturally preferred to use conversational implicature for amusement than speaking directly. From the analysis, it is clear that there is a high level of comprehension between participants in a conversation employing the use of conversational implicature. From the foregoing, we therefore conclude that the use of conversational implicature is a natural process in communication. Most often, participants in a conversation do not explicitly state their

words but imply them. This is done by either violating or flouting a maxim in order to send a message. This message is immediately decoded by the participants in the conversation if the speakers have shared experiences and knowledge in the conversation involved. The essence of implicature thus, is to account for what the speaker can imply that is entirely different from what he overtly says. Students show active cooperative contribution to meaning. They use conversational implicature when they are trying to avoid a conversation, say something sensitive, be defensive or for amusement. Students communicate more efficiently using implicatures than communicating explicitly.

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